

# A short film about Serial Killing



Alex Radcliffe

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Alex Radcliffe

'Intelligent, perceptive, persuasive'

Fay Weldon

'A vivid and scarifying novel.  
I defy you to put it down until you've reached the end.'

Nicci Gerrard

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EPILOGUE

## Prologue

*She had the dream again. When she woke up, sweaty and dry-mouthed in the opaque winter dawn she was still in its suffocating grip, threatening deep blues and greens – watercolours - swirling around her.*

*It was different every time, sometimes she was in a cell awaiting execution, sometimes her mother was talking to her - a last visit, sometimes she was being captured in a dark place, sometimes she was lying to save herself. The overwhelming fear and horror were always the same. All she knew for certain was that she had killed somebody.*

*This time, she seemed to be explaining to a listener - a policeman - a lawyer - that it was all a terrible mistake, she was innocent, caught up in a web others had woven. Her lips were still moving as her eyes opened - it took several moments to realise she was in the familiar room. She wanted her little cat to be stirring in the crook of her arm. If he was there she could cuddle him close - a talisman, a touchstone, a creature warm and real to bring her round – to help her wait out the remaining hours till she could legitimately rise and set the day going.*

# Chapter One

It was a wet, cold morning, and as Anna Wyatt, Queen's Counsel hurried towards the Old Bailey, she didn't at all relish the task ahead. There was a queue at the Costa Coffee stand near the main entrance, but she joined it anyway and waited impatiently for her regular skinny Latte to be served. She shifted from foot to foot, her black pumps - high-heeled for extra inches, important in court - were already pinching and her ankles were splashed with muddy rainwater. She'd be uncomfortable all day, damn it.

In the lift, she applied lipstick with a practised hand - so used to last minute preparations for the drama ahead she could draw a perfect bow without a mirror. One or two punters watched her curiously, as they juddered between floors, thinking no doubt, how odd the sight of a woman barrister in wig and gown, with kohl rimmed eyes and a startling bright red 'O' for a mouth.

Court Four she knew would be hot with anticipation of the revelations to come. The press bench particularly would be packed with crime correspondents, some laconic, cynical smirks at the ready, others, usually the women, eager beaver beady - leaning forward to catch every syllable, jotting at cartoon speed.

On day three the prosecution was still churning relentlessly through its case. Considering the ghastly testimony of a string of forensic witnesses, Sir Anthony Farrow QC's delivery of what he called, 'the indisputable facts' had a perverse dullness. The defendant could almost be forgiven for slumping with her eyes closed behind her moon glasses, as if the endless list of accusations bored her.

Anna wasn't fooled. She knew Farrow's game was to lull the jury into a false sense of security where he, and only he, was the safe pair of hands. Anything she, an untrustworthy woman (in lipstick), brought into play as conflicting evidence would seem flighty. Hormonal. Dangerous.

She'd visited Ruth in the Old Bailey cells the previous night. Her client looked drawn - the stress was beginning to tell. It wasn't every day you faced multiple murder charges - and not just murder, but the sexual abuse and torture of, amongst many, your own children. If she was innocent - and frankly, Anna didn't want to go there - it was unimaginable how she was coping. Worse still if she wasn't.

Ruth was as usual, unemotional and uncommunicative. She often faced down questions with a blank stare reminiscent of patients Anna had reason over the years to visit in Broadmoor. Was she a psychopath? The forensic profilers had said not. There again, they were all men who didn't believe there was any such thing as a full-blown female psychopath. The most women could manage, in their diagnoses, was borderline personality disorder - women, they insisted almost patronisingly, were not natural born killers. Anna disagreed, but in this case said nothing. Her client didn't want to plead insanity, in fact, had been adamant to the point of frothing at the corners of her mouth - a sign perhaps that she was insane, but certainly a cue for Anna to cease her argument.

The Court went quiet as Anna took her place, nodding to the bench of opposing counsel. She was an attractive woman - her high forehead, with just a scrap of glossy dark hair visible, unusually enhanced by the formal wig. With her tall, spare figure, modulated voice and smart clothes she cut a dashing and noticeable figure in court - a fact not lost on her adversaries. She leaned over to say a quiet word to her own junior, Dan, an anxious looking young man, with fashionable tufty hair and round glasses, and Ruth's solicitor, the bluff and heavy set Roly, whose face betrayed another night spent with the Burgundy. Hardly a surprise. When their post Court meetings ended - often late in the evening - Roly was left on his own, in a hotel room in a strange city. This case was taking a toll on them all.

Anna glanced up at the press bench. She could see a few familiar faces, including that of Cate Harrison, the documentary filmmaker who was following the case. She'd got a place right at the front - as she leaned forward, her long blond hair almost overhung the Dock. Trust her. She pursued crime stories avidly - the more bizarre the better. On the grounds of past defences Anna had mounted, especially for women, Cate had asked her many times for interviews - so far Anna had resisted.

Ruth was escorted into the Dock, looking her habitual impassive self. She was wearing black again. Anna suppressed a frown. She'd mentioned the clumpy, threatening costumes more than once, but Ruth it seemed, was content for her family

to dress her as the classic movie villainess - the Wicked Witch of the West. She didn't have the broomstick or pointed hat, but in all other respects her appearance was just what the prosecution wanted. The Jury members were seated, shuffling their papers and looking uncomfortable. They stared at Anna as though shocked she'd taken on this kind of case – such a slender, pretty, fragile-seeming woman. Judge Solomons climbed to his Chair and peered at the Court over his half glasses. It was so risibly Dickensian a picture Anna herself almost smiled. How was the public supposed to take this rigmorale seriously? A respectful silence fell however, as Judge Solomons tapped his gavel and opened the proceedings.

In the lunch break, Cate left her place - being careful to place a sweater and scarf on her chair, she had no intention of taking to a back seat for the afternoon - and went out to a local bistro. It was one well used by journalists, having a pleasant bar, and one could often pick up stories, tips about the trial - or at least the day's zeitgeist. She acknowledged one or two greetings as she slipped into an empty booth and looked at the menu. Cate had no objection to the liquid-lunchers who frequented the place, but preferred her own calories in food form. She knew the menu well and after a quick glance ordered her favourite, a mushroom vol-au-vent with cream sauce and a glass of Sauvignon. A few moments later, Ethan Castle slid into the booth beside her.

“Hi. Saw you come in. How you doing?”

“Okay.” Nodded Cate. “You?”

Ethan pulled a face. “It's a bit grisly isn't it? Not sure how much more I can take. What a monster!”

“You're assuming she's guilty, then?” Cate said, dryly.

“Well, yeah. I mean, the evidence against her is overwhelming.”

“Is it?”

“Surely...” Ethan's attractive face had a puzzled frown, “you can't think she's innocent?”

“Till proven guilty.” Said Cate. “I don't think she has been, yet.”

“Bet you wouldn't be saying that if she was a man!”

“Bet you wouldn't be saying that unless she was a woman!”

Ethan gave her a hard look, then grinned.

“I’m not getting drawn into one of your ‘male versus female’ games,” he said. “It’s just a wind up.”

Cate laughed. “Ok. But honestly you should hear - well I suppose you do hear - what some of your ‘esteemed colleagues’ are saying about the wretched woman. They openly call her a witch. One of them - Marcus Dowd from The Express, I think it was - told me, the other day when he came in late she put the evil eye on him.”

“I wish.” Said Ethan. “She probably took exception to that awful check pullover he wears.”

“Don’t you get drawn into that either,” said Cate, sternly. For some reason it mattered to her that Ethan kept an open mind. “I know you boys stick together, but you don’t have to go that route just because the other dopes are.

“Are you calling me a dope?” said Ethan. “Thanks. Pity ‘cos I was going to offer to buy you a drink.”

“I’ve already ordered one,” said Cate.

“Not here.” Ethan’s tone was scornful. “A real drink. Out.”

“D’you mean a date?” Cate arched her brows at him. They both enjoyed this banter, suspecting that it would one day lead to a bed.

“If you want to call it that.”

“I don’t. I’m sure it would be all over the press gallery in minutes.”

“Suit yourself.”

The waitress arrived with Cate’s order. Ethan stood.

“See you later, then.”

“Yep.”

Ethan hovered passing a hand over his springy black hair, loath to leave without a resolution.

“Tell you what,” offered Cate, “I’ll have that drink if you tell me what you’ve found out from your legal snitches, and what line your paper’s going to take?”

“You drive a hard bargain.”

“Take it or leave it.”

“Done. I’ll meet you by the main entrance at end of play... There’s a nice little bar in Fleet Street.”

The afternoon was entirely taken up with evidence from one of Ruth's alleged victims who had, in her own words, "Escaped death, yeah, but not the fate that's worse than it."

According to her testimony, she'd been lured into the Webb's household as a baby sitter. Things in her own home had not been happy, she had an abusive stepfather and indifferent mother, had several times run away and eventually been put in the care of the local authority and placed in a home for adolescents, near where the Webbs lived. A friend, another girl from the home, had introduced her to the Webb's household, and she, Shireen, had been much taken with its freewheeling style, the hippie, boho atmosphere where free sex and soft drugs were taken for granted. She had viewed Ruth, she claimed, as a sort of 'older sister'; someone who would be sympathetic to girl troubles, be they with period pains or boyfriends. Yes, that was right - a shoulder to cry on. Little had prepared her for the assault she claimed to have suffered at the hands of this 'older sister' and her husband.

Shireen, who broke down several times in the witness box, and was even granted a brief time out when she was overcome with sobs, was alone one night babysitting for the Webbs who'd gone, she thought, 'to the pub'.

Eddie Webb had come home early and alone. He said Ruth was chatting up some bloke in the bar and he'd had enough and left her there. Shireen felt sorry for him - Ruth was a known flirt - and made him a cup of tea. Tea was not what Eddie wanted though, and when she'd re-entered with the cup, he'd pulled her onto his knee. She'd remonstrated with him - at first gently, she thought he was just fooling around and didn't want to offend someone she thought of as a... a... "benefactor?" finished Anthony Farrow for her.

"Yes," she nodded - "a benefactor".

"But you didn't 'fancy' him?" Pressed Farrow.

"No. Not at all. Anyway, he was married. And to a woman I thought was my friend."

"Quite." said Farrow - viewing the jury to make sure they'd taken in this point on her vulnerability. "So, what happened next?"

"Well, he... he... put his hand up my skirt and started, you know..."

"I'm afraid I *don't* know." Farrow shook his head. "And neither do the jury. I'm very sorry, but you will have to tell us. What exactly was he doing?"

"Feeling around. Getting his hand inside my... er... pants."

Anthony Farrow pursed his lips. "And what happened next?"

Shireen looked very uncomfortable. She brushed her hand over her face and began,

"He asked me to have sex with him, and I said no and pushed his hand away. He was very insistent and somehow got me on the floor. Well, he tipped me up and I lost my balance and fell off of his knee, and then he was, like, on top of me, and pulling my skirt up. I struggled. I didn't want to shout because of the kids, and, I don't know, I still sort of thought he was fooling."

"But he wasn't" said Farrow, narrowing his eyes.

"No."

"So...?"

"So, he tore my pants. Tore them down. He pinned my arms behind my head with one hand - he was very strong and then he..."

"Yes..?"

"He got inside me."

"He raped you."

There was a silence.

"Is that correct, Miss Johnson? He raped you?"

"I suppose so."

"And what did you do?"

"I screamed. I mean, I tried to scream but he put a hand over my mouth."

"He had one hand over your mouth and the other holding your arms, is that correct?"

"That's correct."

"And you were completely immobilised by him."

"He was very strong, like I said, and heavy. He worked on the roads. With electric drills and that..."

"Alright. What happened then?"

"He was very excited, moaning and that, and I was still looking for escape when I saw the door open..."

"The door to the living room?"

"Yes. That's right. And Ruth, Mrs Webb, she came in."

"You're saying, he was raping you and his wife walked in on this scene?"

"That's what happened."

“Very well. What did she do?”

“She joined in.”

Shireen agreed, during Anna’s cross questioning, that she’d had sex with several lodgers in the house...

“But they were young. Like, my age... it was just a bit of fun...”

“Even the group orgies?” Queried Anna.

“The what?”

“Orgies. Occasions when three or more people were involved in group sex. What would you call them?”

Shireen was silent.

“You do agree there were often more than two people present?”

“Now and then,” said Shireen, sulkily.

“And you had told Ruth Webb, in her capacity as your ‘older sister’, about these sessions?”

“Well, yes, but...”

“So how was she supposed to know this wasn’t just another? That you were willingly having sex with her husband and she was free to, as you put it, ‘join in’”

“It was obvious. I was struggling!”

“You might have been acting. I put it to you, that you might have been doing it on instruction? Increasing Eddie’s pleasure?”

“I wasn’t!”

“I’m not saying you were. I’m asking whether, under the circumstances, she might have believed you were. You had, after all, confided your other sexual adventures to her.”

It was at this point that Shireen had broken down and sobbed without restraint. Judge Solomons had given Anna a tough look, but she was only doing her job.

When the court adjourned at 4.30, the atmosphere was heavy with shame and excitement. As though, thought Anna, they’d been watching a porn movie, or been party to some kind of grim fairy tale. The detail was something you might have viewed on the internet. Gaffa tape, manacles, dildos, all manner of suburban nasties. Some of the observers, especially the journalists, were definitely getting off on it.

The legal team had a brief interview in the cells with Ruth, Anna trying her best to get some response to Shireen's evidence, Dan staring at the bars, Roly making the odd interjection or correction. Ruth sat staring blankly and nodding her head in that slow regular way she had. It was nothing to do with agreement or apparent thought of any kind, just a mechanical reflex, a stress reaction, or perhaps childhood coping mechanism. It became quite hypnotic to watch and Anna had to shake herself alert more than once. Ruth had never admitted to assaulting Shireen, though she did agree she'd known her.

"That girl," she said, "was just a bit of flotsam. She 'ad no home and we give her one. An' this is what I get for it!"

She seemed angry, but in her usual dully passive way. The swaying, in some ways, told more of the story. Anna exchanged a glance with Roly, who gave a slight, resigned shrug. It wasn't as though they hadn't tried. He'd pushed as far as he could with Ruth, but at a certain point she'd just block off and not answer questions.

Anna outlined what she believed would happen the next day and, as Ruth was collected and cuffed to be taken back to Holloway, they left the bowels of the Bailey and caught a cab through the sleety, early evening darkness to chambers.

## Chapter Two

Anna arrived home after seven. Harry still wasn't back, but Jake was in the lower ground floor kitchen, starting dinner. Anna had left a list of instructions pinned to the notice board.

“Hello darling,” Anna touched his shoulder lightly as she passed to hang up her coat. Jake had arrived at the age when he hated to be kissed, or acknowledged with affection of any kind.

Anna hung her Burberry on a row of hooks near the back door, checking her other children’s hats and scarves were present.

“Daddy rung?”

“Nope.”

“Fed the cat?”

“Yep.”

“Where are the others?”

“Deia’s doing her homework and Marnie’s practicing.” He cocked an ear; there was no sound of agonised piano chords. “Well, she was. She’s probably watching telly.”

Anna put on an apron and started to fill the dishwasher. It was calming to do these ordinary, domestic chores. Normalising. She often got her best ideas at the sink. It was currently in use - Jake was peeling potatoes.

“Do plenty, Vincent is coming to dinner. And maybe his latest girlfriend.”

Jake looked up. Girls were newly engaging to him.

“Who is she?”

“Well, I don’t know. I haven’t met her, have I? She’s Parisienne, and her name is Muriel, I believe.”

Deia came sloping downstairs, a worried look on her beautiful face. “Hi Mum. D’you know anything about the Sino-Japanese war?”

“Absolutely nothing Darling, but Daddy will, I’m sure.” Anna wasn’t at all sure. The Sino-Japanese war wasn’t a subject she and Harry ever discussed. “Or you can ask Uncle George - he’s coming to dinner. He knows everything.”

They all laughed.

The door to the basement banged open and Harry’s bike came through preceding a hard-hatted Harry. His handsome face was red and wet from the exertion of riding through the wintry night and traffic. He parked the bike with the children’s in the long corridor and came through to the kitchen, shouting hello and un-strapping his helmet.

Anna lifted her face from the sink for his quick brush on her cheek.

“You’re late. How was the Caesarian?”

“Totally bloody. Court?”

“The same.”

“Not as literally, I hope?”

“Sweeney Todd enough details to make you feel so.”

“Later.”

They didn't, on the whole, discuss the more disturbing elements of their work in front of the children. Though Harry, as Chief Obstetrician at a troubled East End hospital, could sometimes be heard describing tricky procedures to his youngest - she wanted to be a doctor, after all, and was practising having a cool head. Harry found it a useful way to unload.

He took off his soaking Parka and hung it by the radiator, then went to the fridge for a nicely chilled bottle of Sauvignon and poured two glasses.

“Nearly Friday.” He toasted.

Anna laughed. “Idiot.”

It was a daily joke from Monday on, but it still lifted the spirits. Anna took her drink upstairs. Now, the vegetables were prepared and the rack of lamb in the oven, she could have a shower and change.

Roly Baring stared into his second glass of red wine as if expecting revelation. The Fleet Street wine bar close to Middle Temple had become something of a home to him. His small Holborn hotel was functional, but cheerless - so much for legal aid. He'd called his actual home from Anna's chambers and spoken briefly to his wife. She sounded harassed, which was hardly surprising. She was pregnant with their fifth child and managing the big, battered house and four young children on her own was becoming an issue. Roly missed them terribly - this was the longest he'd had to be away for years. If only he hadn't been duty solicitor on that fateful night...

Julia, in fact, had taken the call. She was up late with Gabriel, who was teething. Could Roly present at the police station ASAP - there was a woman in custody who was being charged and needed representation.

“What's the charge?” Julia had asked, automatically.

“Murder”.

Little had they known where it would lead.

Roly glanced up as the revolving doors spat a laughing couple into the room. They looked familiar. It took him a moment to place them, out of context, as two faces from the press gallery at the Bailey. They sat at in a candlelit corner, talking animatedly. He couldn't hear what they were saying but it was bound to be about the trial. What else were Court journos discussing?

Feeling even more excluded, Roly topped up his glass with a silent sigh. He'd call Julia again later when the kids were in bed and she was snoozing in front of CSI – despite everything, still her favourite programme.

The candlelight flattered Cate's animated face, as she talked about her film. She was a passionate girl - well, woman really, Ethan supposed, wondering as he watched, how old she actually was?

"I've interviewed everyone who ever saw Eddie Webb dig a hole," she was saying, her grey eyes sparkling with delight in the chase. "And anyone who knew Ruth as a child, teenager, young mother... of course they all wanted money..."

"Did you give it to them?"

Cate ignored the question.

"Now I've got to get to the police and the legal team. I've been trying for years to pin down Anna Wyatt. So far she's always said no. But very politely."

"She won't give you anything while the Trial's going on. Solicitor might be a better place to start..." He jerked his head towards Roly whom, with a journalist's practised eye, he'd noticed as they sat down.

"Mm. Seems a bit out of his depth."

"Miserable." Ethan lowered his voice. "Poor sod. And don't look now, but he's sitting a couple of tables behind you."

Cate immediately turned round. She caught Roly's eye and nodded and smiled at him.

"Can't hurt." She said, in answer to Ethan's rueful grimace.

It was how she got her results. Being straightforward. Or appearing to be.

Ethan poured them another drink and handed Cate the menu.

"Shall we eat, before we get too wasted? It is a school night after all."

Anna served up the rack of lamb, perfectly done, crisp on the outside and pink in the middle, for Harry to carve. He was telling George Karlsson some joke about his anaesthetist's little habit with ether. Fortunately, the younger children had gone to bed - only Jake, who'd heard much worse, remained at the table. Vincent and Muriel hadn't yet arrived - their plane from Paris was delayed, so Harry had said they must start without them.

"The lamb will be nuked otherwise. Can't have that - too bloody expensive, came from Borough market."

Jake put mashed potatoes, snow peas and courgettes on the table while Anna ladled a mustard and redcurrant jus into a boat.

Uncle George fell upon the meat like a Neolithic hunter, making truffling noises of appreciation. Anna wondered what he ate at home - he was a good cook she knew, but always seemed ravenous when he came to visit. His curly ginger-haired head was practically on the plate, and his hazel eyes sparkled with a gourmand's delight.

Between bites he talked about his latest psychiatric cases. He called his work 'dicing with psychos'.

"There's something in men and, come to that, in men's estimate of other men, that allows them to be perfectly comfortable with violent, anti-social behaviour." As a Forensic Psychiatrist, George had assessed many killers, some of the serial persuasion.

"What about the women?" Anna asked.

"Ah, women. Well, for the women it's as though they're really screwed up."

"Bit sexist." said Jake. He was currently studying Gender Issues at GCSE-level.

"No, really. Women don't like behaving badly. They like boundaries. It takes a lot for them to cross them." George paused for a moment.

"Course when they do, they're just as bad. No difference at all. Just as violent, just as cruel..."

"Have you got any female killer clients at the moment?" Anna wanted to swing the conversation round to Ruth without mentioning her by name.

"Oh, I'm not talking about my patients; I'm talking about my co-workers."

They all laughed.

The doorbell rang as Anna was clearing the plates. Harry opened the door to a cold and cross Vincent, young woman in tow. After hugs, Gallic kisses and glasses of

wine had been bestowed, rather shy Muriel introduced and the, “Orreeble journey,” explained, they sat down again to excellent Camembert - also from Borough market - and pears poached in cinnamon and wine.

The moment for discussing Anna’s case, however obliquely, had passed and she made a note to call George and book a private briefing with him.

“So what set you off on this pilgrimage?” Ethan asked Cate when she’d exhausted the stories of her interviews with killers. “Something in your own background?”

“Was I abused as a child, you mean?”

“Well, not exactly. You might have had a rellie who went to the bad, or seen your grandad in a coffin and developed an over-riding fascination with death...”

“Nothing like that.” Cate said lightly, looking away. “No weird impulses to kill - except my younger sister, but that’s normal isn’t it? Didn’t experiment on my pets. Never cut up a guinea pig in my life.”

“Frog in biology put me off that!” Ethan agreed.

“Did love Grimm’s fairy tales, though. In fact, being frightened generally. Kids do.”

Cate laughed, relaxed again now she’d steered the question into the realm of the Gothic general.

“So why doesn’t everyone make films about serial killing - if we’re all so fascinated?”

“You can talk. What made you a crime reporter? Don’t tell me you don’t love it?”

“Touché.”

“Seriously...” Cate, turned to check if Roly was still behind them, but he had gone. “It’s the extremes of the human condition that attract, isn’t it?”

I mean, everything I do as a filmmaker is about the human condition - looking at it with my eyes, my moral beliefs and passions. Dealing with this subject is a way of judging the parameters. How far will we go as a kind? And in what circumstances? Could you, or I - given the chance - behave this badly?”

Ethan leaned across the table and looked into her eyes. "I'm thinking of behaving quite badly."

Cate laughed. "Dream on. I've got an early start. Filming an interview before Court even starts tomorrow."

"Damn." said Ethan. "Who's the lucky killer?"

"Not a killer. Relative of a survivor - so she says."

"So, I have to be endangered to get face time with you?"

"Or endangering."

"That can be arranged."

Cate drained her glass and gathered her coat and bag.

"Not tonight it can't. I'm getting a cab home. Hasta la vista."

"Yeah." Ethan picked up the tab. "Baby".

Back in her cell at HMP Holloway, Ruth lay face down on the bed in tears. Her shoulders heaved up and down, though her sobs were all but silent. It didn't do to show weakness. Give them a chance to attack. But still, they knew how to get to her. When she'd been led in from the police transport, Gill, the only warder she considered a friend, had come to take her back to the wing. Gill said she'd got some bad news. One of the children, Ruth immediately thought. But no, it was Peter, her pet rabbit. He'd been found in his hutch with his throat cut. Ruth was stunned. People were so cruel. Wicked. How could anyone do that to such a defenceless little creature? He was all she had left, after a household filled with kids and pets. Once in her cell, she'd collapsed with grief. Gill checked regularly through the barred door. Ruth was on suicide watch.

*The dream came at dawn, as usual.*

## Chapter Three

It was hard finding the cul-de-sac in the half-light of 7.30 am. Cate had directions from the Harrow road and she got as far as the main turning easily enough, but she wasn't prepared for the warren of intersecting walkways and bike tracks in the 70s council development. Marie Williams opened the front door of the maisonette to her, cigarette in hand.

"Sorry, I'm a bit late." Cate heaved her camera equipment inside.

"S'alright. Want a cuppa?"

"Love one. Tea, please. One sugar."

While Marie was in the kitchen, Cate surveyed her living room looking for the best angles. The room was small with busy, flowered wallpaper and clashing carpet, large sofa and enormous flat-screen TV. Domestic was good for background, though. It made the information all the more shocking. Much of her filming had been done in beauty spots. It was hard to imagine the glorious Yorkshire Moors, for example, covered in, 'Police. Do not cross' tape. Now Cate found it hard to think of it otherwise.

Marie entered with a tray bearing teacups and a plate of biscuits.

"Sit down duck, make yourself at home."

"Thanks." It's really good of you to put up with me so early."

"No bother. I don't sleep late, anyway."

"It won't take long. I have to be in Court by 10.30."

"Oh, yeah. They let you in like that, then?"

Marie was obviously a little affronted by her denim and Parka, thought Cate. Perhaps she was expecting a smart trouser suit and styled hair rather than the rough ponytail hers was scragged back into this morning.

"In the press gallery, yes. You should see some of the costumes my compadres turn up in!"

"How's the trial going?"

Cate shook her head. "Gruelling. Listening day after day to such hideous revelations."

“Tell me about it. When our Christine first got out of hospital, she couldn’t stop talking about it.”

“Hospital?” Cate knew the girl’s injuries had been grave.

“Nut house. She were in an’ out for ages.”

“Right.”

That made sense. The victim of an abduction, multiple rape and near death experience, probably would need psychiatric help.

“Okay Marie, could you sit over here, on the sofa...?”

“Ooh, just a minute! I ’aven’t done my hair, or owt.” Marie patted a few wisps, though she’d spent some time doing her face judging by the makeup.

“That’s fine,” said Cate. “I just want to try the position for light and sound, then I’ll give you time to prepare.”

In ten minutes they were off - Marie halting at first, but once into her flow no stopping her. People did love to talk about themselves, thank goodness. It made Cate’s job a lot easier. She’d once interviewed a battered Asian woman who’d run away from her husband. The woman had burst into tears during the tale of marital abuse, drunkenness, daily threats and beatings. Cate had apologised for her intrusion but the woman said, no, no, it wasn’t that she minded talking about her troubles - she was just upset that no one had ever asked her before.

In this case, Marie’s claim to attention was one of privileged access. The victim who’d escaped a notorious, multiple murderer some years before, was her niece, Christine. Christine, Marie had explained on the phone, wasn’t well enough to speak for herself - she’d had nothing but health problems since the attack. Cate only half believed her.

Marie’s story, told in court at the time, was that Christine had been taken from a bus stop by a man and woman, who’d inveigled her into their van on the pretext of helping them look for a lost dog. She knew them - at least, by sight - more importantly, she knew their dog, Max, a friendly animal, which often played in her street. She was a soft-hearted girl and couldn’t bear to think of Maxie missing, perhaps run over, or wandering, hungry on the Moors. She sat in the back of the van and overheard some sort of argument between the man and woman. She couldn’t make out what was being said, but the woman seemed upset, or angry and eventually the van stopped and let her out. She didn’t invite Christine to go with her, and the passenger door was locked. The van drove off again with Christine rather worried now. She asked the man - who’d

said his name was Paul - where they were going. He didn't answer, but accelerated out of town towards the hilly horizon. He'd stopped at an isolated and long-disused sheep bothy, taken Christine inside, taped her mouth, tied her up and proceeded to rape her vaginally and anally for several days. She lost consciousness many times - he'd bring her round with a slap or splash of water in the face. He wanted her to experience her ordeal, fully. In the end he'd given her a savage beating with a tyre iron he apparently kept for that very purpose in his van, and left her for dead. She was found by a hill walker taking shelter from a rain squall, alive but barely breathing. Paul Sutton had been more thorough with his other victims.

Cate was familiar with the story - it had been well documented in the press during Paul Sutton's trial, he was arrested by chance a year later on a motoring offence - but there were certain details that were new. The effect on the family for one - which had never been properly investigated or reported. Christine's mother had a nervous breakdown and eventually split from her husband - who had, apparently as a result of the stress, become an alcoholic. The girl herself had a string of broken relationships and had turned to drink and self-harming. She was currently in a low-security mental facility. This was all excellent material - the devil was, after all, in the detail.

Once into her flow, Marie only halted to light more cigarettes. Christine's friends, she said, had shunned her after the event, probably too embarrassed to deal with it. There was a sense of judgement in their small, tight community - so much so, that Christine's parents had moved away before separating.

"I said to them at the time, why are you goin'? You 'aven't done anythin' wrong. But they were, you know..? They like, felt guilty? Like it were their fault? It definitely led to them splitting."

Cate nodded, thinking there might be more than one reason for that, but she was familiar with this syndrome from other cases. The victims were ostracised, as if they were part of the problem. Even Social Services seemed unable to cope with the enormity of their situation.

"An' the police!" Marie was particularly explosive on this point. "They was an absolute disgrace. They got her to go to court, though she still couldn't 'ardly walk, an' then when it were all over, they just dropped her!"

This was another common complaint. Cate offered, "Of course, they didn't get the counselling themselves in those days."

"Counselling!" Marie's scorn was as rich as if the trial was barely over.

“What the bloody ’ell do they need counselling for? It’s their job. They just don’t do it right. They’ve got no respect for what us lot ’ave to go through!”

“Well,” began Cate, “to be fair, they are trying to improve their way of handling people, dealing with the traumas... I think it’s very shocking for them, too.”

“Whatever.” Marie gave her a disbelieving glance and lit another cigarette.

“Our family’s been ruined by it. We’re not a family no more. We’re too ’shamed to be.”

Cate was often struck with the almost poetic eloquence of her subjects.

At nine o’clock she said she must leave, or she’d be late for court. Marie was reluctant to let her go - there was lots more she kept saying, she could tell Cate. They made a date to meet again, though privately Cate thought she’d had the best of her.

The press gallerists noted that Ruth looked unhappy in court, that day. Her face was swollen and her eyes watery behind her glasses. It was the first time she’d shown any emotion, and her state was duly scribbled down. In the breaks they swapped ideas on what had upset her. It was almost as though they owned her, thought Cate, as she listened to their ribald conjectures - vying with each other for how close a relationship with her they had. Her girlfriend had dumped her, her husband’s ghost had warned her more bodies were buried, hahaha, her broomstick had been stolen by a wannabe Harry Potter. Disgusted, Cate turned away to buy a Cappuccino in the canteen. Ethan was in the queue before her.

“Hi. How’d your interview go?”

“Good. Yes. She was very forthcoming.”

“It’s the way you tell ‘em. When’s this masterpiece going to hit the screen?”

“I didn’t say it was a masterpiece.” Cate said, sharply.

“Sorry.” There was a pause. The queue shuffled forward.

“What did you make of this morning?” Ethan’s tone was conciliatory.

“Ruth’s appearance, you mean? She certainly looked troubled.”

“They’ve called her mother this afternoon. But get this - for the Prosecution. Maybe she’s distressed about that?”

“That’s kinder than the conclusions of your colleagues.”

“Look,” said Ethan. “We seem to have got off on the wrong foot. I’m not the enemy.”

“Sorry.” Cate picked up a Danish and put it down again. “I guess I’m not as tough as I think - sometimes this job does get to me.”

“Would dinner help, later?”

Cate laughed. “This is becoming a habit. People will talk.”

“Beats the usual conversation in the press room.”

“Okay,” said Cate. “But on Friday - I’m not filming this weekend.”

“Good. It’s nearly Friday.”

Anna knew very well why Ruth was upset. In the cells that morning, she’d told her about Peter rabbit. The weeping woman seemed almost as pathetic a creature as her pet (yes, but was she? Wasn’t this all a manipulative act?) Roly gave Ruth an awkward pat on the shoulder. Anna gave her tissues. She and Roly exchanged a glance - it wasn’t bad to have Ruth looking broken hearted in court.

When Ruth calmed down, Anna tried to prepare her for her mother’s testimony - it was hard to know what she made of it. When the prosecution had announced Dorothy Little’s appearance Anna and Roly had been devastated, but Ruth had, as ever, said nothing. Clearly, there was bad history.

Mrs Little was a small, chubby woman, with a round face, which might once have been pretty and glasses almost as large as her daughter’s. She took the stairs to the stand in a belligerent stomp, her whole body indicating that this was a terrible affront. She didn’t look towards her daughter at all, though Ruth kept her eyes fixed on her mother as if expecting at least an acknowledgement. This too was noted by the journalists - usually Ruth hardly glanced at the witness, often playing with her buttons or chewing through the packets of sweets she somehow got into court, when she wasn’t, apparently, snoozing. Dorothy Little put her hand on the bible and swore in a firm voice with a strong trace of fenland accent, to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Ruth stared at her mother, as though in disbelief and as her evidence progressed, looked more and more anxious for her attention. Any psychologists in court would have recognised the needy child in the middle-aged woman.

Anthony Farrow began by taking Dorothy through the family background - 'A history of violence' as he called it. Dorothy truculently admitted that her husband had been an abusive drinker, who thought nothing of, "knocking her into next week," when in his cups - visiting the same upon the five children, of whom Ruth was the youngest.

"She got away lightly." Mrs Little sounded aggrieved at her daughter's easy passage. "She was the apple of Bob's eye. Couldn't do no wrong. I don't know that she's had anything to complain of."

She shot her daughter a malevolent glance though it was so swift most people didn't register it.

"Was your husband abusive in other ways?" Asked Farrow.

"He used to spend all my housekeeping on the 'orses."

"He was a gambler?"

"Oh yeah. He'd put his shirt on a tortoise."

"Very well. So he kept you - short shall we say... of money?"

"I managed. The children never wanted for nothing, no matter what anyone says." She sent Ruth another poisonous dart, seemingly outraged that her daughter had forced her into this exposure.

"I'm sure," nodded the QC . "But what I really mean is, was he abusive - sexually - to you, or the children?"

Mrs Little dropped her head and was silent.

"I appreciate this is difficult," said Farrow in his most emollient tone,

"But please, could you try to answer the question?"

"He was... demandin'. He considered... relations... 'is right."

"Many men do," agreed Farrow.

"Yeah , but Bob. Well, he could turn nasty if he was, you know, denied."

"You mean if you were tired, or busy."

"Well, with five kids..."

"Of course. Very understandable. And when he, 'turned nasty', what form would that, 'nastiness', take?"

Dorothy Little's voice wobbled. "He might 'it me, threaten me. Say he'd go... elsewhere..."

"I see. And what did you understand him to mean by, 'elsewhere'?"

There was another silence. Farrow repeated the question.

"He 'ad various people he went to. Some I knew, some I didn't."

“Do you mean prostitutes?”

“He wouldn’t say so. But I know what I know.”

“You thought they were prostitute women - that he was paying for sex?”

Mrs Little frowned. “That was another drain on my money. They’d get what I was owed.”

“And, naturally enough, that made you angry?”

“There wasn’t nothin’ I could do about it. He was an ’ard man.”

“A cruel man?”

“You could say so.” Dorothy Little acceded.

It was easy to see where this was going. Ruth, the product of an abusive and cruel home, would inevitably end up being abusive and cruel herself. Given her father’s extreme behaviour, it might even be a genetic disposition. Her behaviour to the victims could be seen as exacting revenge for her own bitter childhood, and, of course, would lead to her being a willing accomplice and participant in the alleged crimes.

When Anna came to cross-question she went back to this scenario.

“Mrs little. You’ve said your husband was sexually abusive to you and your children..”

“I never said that!” Dorothy was explosive.

“I beg your pardon.” Anna consulted her notes, well aware that she’d planted the seed in the Jury’s consciousness.

“You’re quite correct, in fact, it was a question you chose to evade. So I ask you now, was your husband sexually abusive towards his own children?”

Dorothy’s indignation seemed to swell her face to twice its normal size.

“I don’t know what you’re suggesting’!”

“I think you know very well. Your husband, Bob, had, ‘various people he went to’, you said. Wasn’t one of those people his daughter, Ruth?”

There was an intense silence. Judge Solomons turned his face slowly to the witness stand.

“Mrs Little, please answer the question.”

“No. I mean no, he never interfered with Ruth.”

“I would remind you, Mrs Little, that you are under oath.” Judge Solomons’ interest was engaged now.

Dorothy Little huffed a sigh. “She said he did...”

A rustle went through the court.

“But I never believed her. She just wanted to make herself important. I would have known. A Mother knows those things.”

There was the sound of a loud sob at this point. All eyes turned to Ruth - she had her face buried in her scarf from which painful cries were escaping.

The Judge called a short recess.

Beneath the court in her holding cell, Ruth was crying her heart out. Anna wanted to comfort her. Was an arm round the shoulders appropriate? On previous occasions any attempt at a friendly gesture had been shrugged away by her client, who seemed to have almost an aversion to being touched. Now, however she allowed Roly to pat her back - and eventually took the tissues Anna offered, for a second time that day. Dan stood by the door looking supremely uncomfortable. He didn’t do emotion.

“Ruth,” Anna began when the crying had died down, “you need to promise us your mother is lying.”

Ruth stared at her dumbly.

“I know it’s painful...” Anna prompted.

“She’d never believe me.” Muttered Ruth at last. “She gave me an ’iding more an once for sayin’ it.”

“So all those years you say he was having sexual relations with you, she never noticed, or...”

“She noticed orl right!” Ruth spat. “She knew full well - she just woun’ admit it. Blamed me. Wuz allus calling me a slut and a tart.”

Anna and Roly gave each other a knowing look. This was par for the course in abuse situations.

“So can you give me some more specific incidents? Times? Places? Then I can try to discredit her evidence.”

“I told you!” Ruth was shouting now. “I told you my dad was a sick, sick man. He never left me alone since I was a toddler. In my bedroom! In the shed! In his van! Wherever!

“Try to tell us the details of just one of the events.” Said Roly in a calm voice. They had of course asked these questions before. Ruth answered only in the vague generic. If she answered at all.

There was a short silence, then Ruth said slowly. “There was one time my Mum was out and I come home from school early. Dad was there, he was doin’ the horses, watching telly you know..? When I come in the kitchen, he ’eard me and come straight out there. I was making a jam sandwich. Strawberry. He got hold the bread-knife and pushed me up against the back door, he ’ad the knife at me throat. He pulls me skirt up and leans on me hard so he can pull me knickers down. I was struggling a bit, but ee’s got the knife like right on me neck. He undoes his flies with his other hand and he, you know, gets ’is thing out and shoves it in me. We’re there like that, him goin’ at it leaning on the door, and it opens and there’s me Mam outside with the shopping. I fell backwards and me dad fell on top of me. But he makes out like we wuz ’avin a laff like. Messin’ about. She just gives us a look and pushes past us into the kitchen. I carn’ believe she don’t see his flies undone and my skirt all rucked up! But she don’ say nothin’. That’s ’ow it allus was...”

Anna nodded. Women saw what they wanted to see. Needed to see. Their collusion was embedded. But what Ruth had given them was enough to mount a challenge.

*She was suffocating. There was something covering her face. Her mouth. A pillow? A hand? No, not flesh, it was fibrous and dusty smelling - cloth of some kind. She thrashed around, fighting, heaving to get to the surface for breath. Eventually, before she died of the lack of oxygen, she would wake up still gasping. Usually the duvet was over her head. This was how it was, always. It seemed so real, but it was just a dream.*

*This time she was with a man. A powerful, frightening man. He was doing ugly things to her. That was why she couldn’t breath, he had her nose pinched between finger and thumb and when she opened her mouth for air, he thrust his*

*prick into it. Now he had her gripped between his thighs - his fingers were entering her, shoving her legs apart. She tried to twist away knowing she couldn't scream, but he was much bigger, stronger, he covered her small body and thrust into it, not caring how much pain he caused. More than once he had split her. She'd even had to have stitches. He told the hospital she'd fallen on the crossbar of his bicycle. She'd tried to tell. Why didn't somebody understand? Save her?*

*But nobody did, ever.*

## Chapter Four

At last, it was indeed Friday and Anna was incredibly relieved. This first week in court had been more than usually stressful. It was the avid and all-consuming press attention, as much as anything. Anna wasn't used to the intrusion - the daily demands for press conferences that were, 'In the public interest'. The feral faces of journalists in pursuit of their horror story - every disgusting little detail - plagued her waking moments. And her dreams.

Harry and she had agreed they'd go to the cottage this weekend. She'd been reluctant at first, saying she'd need to work, but he'd pointed out she could just as easily do that in loamy Oxfordshire - and he could get on with pointing the leaking gable. If the children came - they often didn't now, only Marnie was still too young to be left to her own social whirl - Harry promised he'd cook. More likely it would be takeaway.

Having showered and changed into comfortable weekend clothes, they left late on Friday evening. It was a quicker drive if you went after rush hour and Anna liked arriving at night. It had something special and secretive about it. Driving quietly up the lane, turning into the rutted, highly-hedged approach to their hideaway and pulling up in front of its charming bow-windowed front, with the dark shapes of the surrounding bushes and trees and shadows cast by the overhanging thatch. Mrs

Thompson would have been in to leave milk and bread and turn on the heating and some lights, so there'd be a welcoming sepia glow from the downstairs windows.

Anna drove their Honda SUV. Harry had pointed out she must be tired, but a different kind of concentration was needed and like other ordinary domestic chores, it lulled her. Besides, she liked to be in control. Harry sat in the back with Marnie, who'd accompanied them reluctantly, saying she'd been invited to two birthday teas and a 'Twilight' party. Anna considered leaving the ten year old behind - it seemed mean to snatch her from her own vivid pastimes, God these days children had a lot more fun than adults - but in the end couldn't quite bring herself to leave her youngest in the care of her sixteen and seventeen year old siblings, no matter how responsibly they'd been raised. Soon things would have to change. Marnie wouldn't take no for an answer.

The weather had taken a turn for the better and as Anna eased the car up the slip road from the M40, it was dry and bright with a startling number of stars. That was another thing she loved about being in the country. In half an hour they'd be drinking tea by the Aga in the cosy flagged kitchen of Eave Cottage, and she'd be able to relax completely. At least for one night.

The restaurant Ethan had picked for their 'date' was a surprise to Cate. She hadn't had him down as a foodie. She was glad she'd made an effort to scrub up, wearing her little black designer frock and high heels. It turned out he knew the owner, Zac Aspinall, who'd just gone solo having trained with the Roux brothers and more recently - and briefly - Gordon Ramsey. Ethan and Zac had been at school together - where? wondered Cate, she'd find out later - and Ethan was being supportive to his old friend.

"I hope it's going to be okay", he said, running a hand through his springy curls, as she'd noticed he did when nervous. "He's trying out his own brand of fusion."

"Hey. I'm not that hard to please." She was smiling. "If I wasn't here, it would be fish & chips in front of the telly."

"Not a cook, then?"

"I wouldn't say that - just not on Friday night, when I've had a tough week."

"You can say that again. It was bloody hard going."

“It’s going to get worse.” Cate popped an ‘amuse bouche’ into her mouth.

“Oh, wow, this is delicious - what is it?”

Ethan tasted his and pronounced it to be, ‘some kind of crab’. He looked visibly relieved at Cate’s enjoyment.

By the time they were on to the main course - roast sea-bass for him, skate wings with black butter and capers for her - they’d found out a surprising amount about each other. Being journalists, they knew very well how to extract maximum information - though Ethan had given his up remarkably quickly. The only son of a wealthy Jewish property developer, he’d had been at Sherborne with Zac, leaving well-blued, on a Rugby scholarship to Trinity Dublin where he’d taken a course in law to please his dad, swapping to media studies after a year to please himself. His parents were still around and lived in Dorset - when they weren’t doing good works in Israel. His two older sisters were both married with young children, one family in London the other in the US. He wasn’t married. In fact, he didn’t even have a serious girlfriend. So he said. Cate wondered what he meant by serious.

Cate was harder to crack, if only because she loved to tease and being a little older - she was thirty-four to his thirty-one, he discovered - she had more history. Middleclass teacher mother from Liverpool, father not mentioned, one brother, older, running an outdoor activity centre. Huyten Convent, followed by Leeds university where she read English and appeared in student drama productions. Modelled for a while straight out of uni, “I was really pretty, then” - she was very pretty still, Ethan assured her - after which she’d got a job on a Bradford paper, moving into Yorkshire TV’s factual department after meeting a helpful producer. She had been married. No, she laughed, not to the helpful producer. She wouldn’t be drawn any more on that, saying only that they’d been way too young, had no children and were long divorced. She made her films now through her own company, ‘Provocative Pictures’ and that was quite enough to deal with, thank you! She wasn’t looking for anything serious. Ethan wondered what she meant by serious.

After chocolate Bavarois with crème fraiche and double espressos, they sat back and Ethan gave a profound sigh.

“Phew. That’s better.”

“Yes,” agreed Cate. “Proper Friday night food. I wonder what Ruth Webb got for her Shabat dinner?”

“Slops with spit, be-artch!” Most probably, said Ethan, “She isn’t exactly popular by all accounts. No one who molests children ever is.”

“If she did,” Cate said warningly.

“Of course. If she did.”

The talk inevitably turned to the case. Cate wanted to know what line his broadsheet would be taking this Sunday. Ethan was evasive, pleading he’d filed his copy early enough to leave for their dinner and really had no idea what his editor would include.

“But what did you say?” Pressed Cate.

Partly she wanted to find out where the Sundays saw the case going - partly, she wanted to hear Ethan’s views for her own amusement.

“I said it was too early to tell. That there is an unfair - in my opinion (he smiled cheekily, here) - groundswell against Ruth Webb and that may be down to pure sexism. That as yet, there’s no proof she was involved in the murders and perhaps we as a society just want a scapegoat. We have to pin the blame on someone. God forbid we should be in any way responsible ourselves.”

Cate gave him a straight look. “Well. I’m impressed.”

“You thought I’d be following the line of the other dorks, did you? That she’s a modern day witch who deserves hanging, drawing and perhaps quartering?”

Cate smiled. “Not quite. But it’s hard to go against the pack. They won’t thank you for calling them misogynist pigs.”

“What about your film?” Riposted Ethan. “That’ll present similar challenging ideas, I imagine?”

“Ah, but I’m a woman”, laughed Cate. “I’m entitled to say it. I can get away with pointing out some sections of our society haven’t moved on from the dark ages.”

“Yes, if you don’t mind being labelled a ‘feminist’.”

“I don’t.” Said Cate. “I long ago realised if I betrayed any attitude other than total submission or any ambition beyond doing exemplary housework, I’d be landed with the F-word.”

Ethan laughed. “I’m looking forward to that, then. “He flagged down a waiter. “Two Remy Martins, please.”

“Hey,” said Cate. “I never said I wanted more drink.”

“Uhuh.” He raised a warning finger. “Total submission.”

Cate had to admit he was entertaining. And sexy.

Friday night was usually a pleasant affair for Detective Chief Inspector Richard Andrews. Now he was close to retirement, he and his wife Pamela often took off for the weekend in their caravan, parking up in one of the not too distant camping spots the local countryside had to offer, and enjoying a nice bottle of Beaujolais before turning in for the night. This weekend was different. DCI Andrews was dreading Monday morning. He was due to testify at the trial of Ruth Webb and wasn't looking forward to reliving the ordeal the case had become for him as the Senior Investigating Officer. He'd already warned Pamela, who, poor woman, had endured more than enough of this case already, that he would need to go over his files for the umpteenth time and prepare himself for what he knew would be a gruelling cross examination.

Dick Andrews sat in his study (a converted bedroom, now their kids had long left home) and stared morosely at the huge pile of documents. Pamela had just brought him in a cup of tea and said in her special long suffering voice, "It's alright Dick, don't worry about me. I'm just going to finish the ironing while I'm watching, "Come Dine with Me." She went out shutting the door with practised care and he heard her march downstairs. No doubt she'd be considering dining elsewhere, if he didn't retire soon.

He took up the top file and flicked it open - piles of background information on the case. How the Webb's evil acts had managed to go undetected so long was a mystery. And one of which he wasn't proud. He closed his eyes and unbidden came a memory of the first body. It had been discovered, barely hidden in bracken in a hillside copse - a celebrated beauty spot - by a man walking his dog.

DCI Andrews had been called out on that summer evening two years ago, to find the forensic tent already being erected over the young woman's body. Girl, really - she'd looked no more than seventeen, lying, apparently unmarked, with her eyes closed as though peacefully sleeping. He recalled kneeling by her and staring at her face. She was pretty in a slightly common way - large, full mouth, long lashes sweeping delicately on to high cheekbones, her skin pale not from death but from nature - as was evident from her exposed limbs. They were long and shapely, clad in a short denim skirt and white ruffled blouse - open-necked to show the top of plump breasts, one tattoo of a Gothic heart just visible. On her feet were unlaced Doc Martins. Spread

out invitingly in this sheltered glade, surrounded by rich greenery and wild flowers, she could be awaiting a lover. Some handsome farm lad, with whom she had agreed a tryst. A midsummer night's dream.

It never failed to astonish Dick Andrews how many corpses were left in beautiful surroundings. It was almost as though the killers wanted to excuse what they'd done - felt some need to give their victim a decent send off. Or perhaps wanted to make their evil mark, sully the glory of the spot - leave it everlastingly corrupted. Dick believed in evil. In his book humans were all potentially bad, never needing a reason for their badness - whatever people said about nature versus nurture and abusive beginnings.

Dick opened his eyes and took a sip of his tea. Such philosophical digressions wouldn't help. He must get to grip with the facts. Concentrate.

As it was Friday, Anna and Harry went to bed late and made love with ritual pleasure. They needed the respite of pure physical sensation after a week of gruelling mind games. Anna came rather loudly - Harry actually told her to 'shush'. Eave Cottage was much smaller than their London home and their bedroom wall abutted Marnie's.

"For goodness sake," said Anna, crossly pulling away. "D'you really think she doesn't know? These days ten year old kids are into everything. You do know what 'Twilight's' about?"

It was true. Some of the costumes Marnie begged to be allowed to wear made her look like a jailbait Lolita. She'd been overheard to say she didn't approve of her peer group's idol, Cara Delevingne, because she took drugs - and even to explain to one such friend, exactly what cocaine was and the potential effects of it.

"Of course I do," said Harry. "But there's the world of difference between knowing and hearing your parents at it. Ee -uw! I'd rather have eaten worms."

"Well, with your parents, I agree," said Anna, rudely. "They were hardly an attractive role model."

Satisfied with the sex and proportionately generous, Harry good-humouredly agreed. They read for ten minutes then Harry fell asleep with his mouth open and snored gently.

Anna stayed awake much longer. She couldn't concentrate on her book, a new, much-praised novel about a so-called 'sympathetic' killer, but didn't want to close her eyes either. Sleep held other terrors.

She was, she acknowledged to herself, thoroughly rattled by Harry's comments and turned restlessly, shaking out her pillow several times. Was she a bad mother? The case was certainly throwing her own practices into relief. How could parents be so oblivious, so uncaring, of their children's needs? Was she? Her own early life had hardly been a good role model. She turned over again, not wanting to go there. But still the warring thoughts persisted. A mother must protect her child, sexually as in every other way and Anna, as a defence lawyer, must above anyone be beyond reproach - Caesar's wife and all that. Eventually, cold and wide-awake she slid quietly out of the bed and tiptoed towards Marnie's room. The door was slightly ajar and she peered into the darkness, seeing a still, cosily wrapped form in the bed. Moving closer she heard the regular breathing of deep sleep and was overcome with relief - and love. She touched Marnie's head, brushing aside a lock of fringe and sat in the wicker bedside chair. There she dozed, mercifully dreamless for once, watching over Marnie until the dawn light began filtering through the lace curtains and the blackbird began her cheerful chirruping.

The taxi stopped outside the Art Deco entrance to Cate's block of flats, and the taxi driver tapped the steering wheel while he waited for his passengers to finish what they were doing. Ethan and Cate were tongue kissing with fervour and Ethan's hand had found its way between the clasps of Cate's jacket and into the welcoming depth of her cleavage. Cate drew back and pushing his hand away, laughed. "Phew! Easy tiger." Ethan laughed too - a laugh of excited expectation.

"I must go," said Cate. "Thanks for a lovely evening".

"My pleasure," said Ethan, aware he'd picked up the large tab - being friends with the five-star proprietor only took you so far. "Any chance of a nightcap?"

"Past my bedtime," said Cate, lightly. "Another time." Then seeing his obvious dismay, she added, "I promise."

She adjusted her clothes and after brushing her lips past Ethan's cheek, got out and raising her hand briefly, went up the steps. He was disappointed of course, but

that was alright. She liked him fine, fancied him even, but it was early days and they had to work together - in a manner of speaking. It never did any harm to make a man wait. Besides, she wanted time alone, wanted to feed and cuddle her cat, watch a late night movie on Film Four - might even pleasure herself, remembering the deep-throated tonguing, to the image of George Clooney.

At three-thirty am, Dick Andrews turned off the light in his office and shutting the door as quietly as he could manage, made his way through the silent house to the spare bedroom. Years ago a tacit arrangement had been reached that on nights he worked late he would sleep on his own, so as not to disturb Pamela. He hated to be without the warmth and comfort her still trim body provided, but he could see it made sense. Particularly when his head was full of murder and violence. Tomorrow night, he promised himself, they'd be in bed by ten with a good video. Something funny.

## Chapter Five

### TWO YEARS EARLIER

The white plastic glinted in the early sunlight, at a distance looking translucent and enticing as Dick Andrews approached the forensic set up. He'd been home to try and grab a couple of hours sleep - but he'd managed only a fitful doze, the bed in the spare room was hard, and the pillows lumpy. He thought, for the umpteenth time, that he must ask Pamela to change them.

"Morning Guv". The round face of Sgt Jimmy Bland glowed pink in the morning light. Though he'd been there since the discovery, the Sgt's youth protected him from

fatigue. He lit up a fag though, to show he was now officially on his breakfast break. A small village of portacabins had sprung up around the copse overnight and one was dispensing tea and bacon sandwiches. The capacity of his teams to eat in these circumstances never ceased to amaze DCI Andrews. They smelt good, though. He might have one.

“So, what’s the SP Jimmy?”

The Sgt rubbed the light gingery bristles on his chin. “Arthur says death around 24 hours from when she was found last night. Probably suffocation. Wants us to get her to the lab ASAP.”

The forensic pathology lab was in town, close to the police station.

“How far through the scene examination?”

“On course Guv - they’ve been at it non-stop since you left. I think we can get the body moved in the next hour.”

DCI Andrews walked towards the forensic tent, a couple of white-clad officers came out as he reached the entrance. In their all-encompassing boilersuits they looked like Wellsian aliens, or Sci-Fi space travellers, lacking only gas masks. They saluted him briefly as he sat to put on the polythene bootees.

Inside, the tent smelled of crushed grass and dewy dampness. The girl’s body had barely been disturbed by Arthur’s preliminary examination, but she looked less alive now, her skin had taken on a faintly lavender lividity. The supervising officer assured Dick every blade of grass, every frond of fern, had been scrutinised, every footstep monitored. There had been one or two finds - a chewing gum wrapper, and a rollup butt-end. Of course, they could have been left by anybody. The spot was one popular with picnickers - having dappled shade and nearby wooden tables with benches.

“Bins?”

“Yes, Guv - sandwich wrappers, coke bottles, plastic bags, burnt out instant barbeques, more butt-ends...”

Dick Andrews nodded. This wasn’t going to be easy. But how cunning to pick a place so frequented that the police would have to hunt through dozens of false trails for a potential DNA lead. It was important to get inside the killer’s mind. A dangerous place for the seeker, with its own consequences.

“ID?”

“Not yet, Guv. No bag or anything.”

“Theories?”

“No dragging, no signs of struggle. Arthur thinks she knew her attacker. He’ll know more when he’s done a proper PM.”

Dick nodded, and began his own thoughtful circle of the space. His beady eye took in every detail from a couple of fallen leaves, to the just visible black lace at the top of the girl’s bra’. A love affair gone wrong? A domestic? Child abuse? She was, after all, little more than a child.

Back at the path lab at lunchtime, he got the latest from Arthur Rowbotham’s post mortem.

“Time of death between ten and twelve, night before last. Suffocation.”

“Place?”

“We reckon where she was found. If she was moved, it was with practised care. Not a trace so far. One thing...”

“Yes?”

“She’d had recent sex.”

“Sperm?”

“No. Must have used a condom.”

“Consensual?”

“Looks like it was. No tearing, no bruising, no foreign bodies.”

“Drugs?”

“Nothing showing up on the tox screen. She’d had alcohol, but not enough to make her out of control.”

“I saw we’ve still no ID.”

“No. Nothing at all in her clothing, and no bag found yet.”

“I’ve been through Misper. No matches. How old? ”

“No more than seventeen.”

“Poor kid.” Sometimes, thought Dick, random fate was just too much.

“Runaway? Are we trying children’s homes? Borstals?”

“We’re onto the DHS. Got the photo emailed round.”

“We’re still going through the clothes for trace... there’s always something could’ve been missed.”

DCI Andrews knew that was optimistic and meant to cheer. Arthur's work was famously thorough. "Oh, one thing more - she was pregnant."

"Now you tell me!"

"Sorry, thought I'd said before. About three months."

"That definitely points to someone she knew, then."

"I'd say so - a boyfriend? "

"Maybe he didn't want the baby."

"Killing her's going a bit far - could have arranged an abortion."

"Perhaps she wouldn't agree to one."

"Maybe - and if he was married..."

They both thought about the ramifications of Arthur's possible scenario.

Dick slowly shook his head, as if the sum of human perversity defeated him.

"Okay Arthur. Anything else at all, let me know asap."

"ASAP, Dick."

His favourite café was emptying of the lunchtime crowd, so Dick Andrews went in and sat at a window table. Margie the waitress, a woman of a certain age with a sardonic take on life, came to take his order.

"You look cheerful."

Dick sighed. "It's been a tough 24 hours, Margie."

"Tell me about it. I sometimes think your job and mine's sim'lar. On our feet all hours, always listening to people's 'ard luck stories. Dealin' with drunks, druggies, hoodies, violence." She nudged him, flirtily. "There was blood all over the lavatory this mornin".

Dick cocked an eye. "Anything I should know about?"

Margie grinned. "One of the staff. Comes under the headin' of too much information."

Dick took the forensic photographer's snap of the dead girl out of his pocket. It wasn't something he would normally show around, but Margie was a hardnut. "Ever seen this girl, Margie?"

Margie took the picture and stared at it. "Oh dear. Oh dear, dear, dear. What happened?"

“That’s what I’d like to know. She was found murdered last night.”

“Poor little sausage.”

She gave the photo a closer look. “She does look a bit familiar. Mind you with the haircuts and make up they get from them celeb mags, they all look alike these days, don’t they?” She frowned. “I think maybe she’s come in with a gang from that place up the London road.”

“What place would that be?”

“Oh, you know, that residential ’ome. The one for difficult kids, truants, vandals, ASBOs type of thing.

“Chester House?”

“Yeh, that’s the one. I can’t swear to it, like, but I think she might ’ave.”

She returned the photo. “So what’ll it be? The liver and bacon’s lovely today.”

“That’s alright, Margie. Save me some, I’ll come back later.” He’d shrugged his jacket on and was out of the door before she’d got her pad poised.

Chester House was a large redbrick Edwardian villa, on the outskirts of town. Its front said it meant business, but inside, as Dick Andrews well knew, it was a hotchpotch of crammed rooms, stairs and passages with little left of the original features. It was meant to house, at any one time, up to thirty transgressors, but with the rise of gun and knife crime in the area, it was often more like fifty. The Staff were pleasant enough - at least on the surface - but stretched and harassed. Over-crowding and the attendant lack of inflation-linked funds were constant problems. Dick knew the Principal well - they were members of the same Masonic Lodge - and he asked the young woman who came to reception on the third ring of the buzzer, for John Terry.

He was shown into John’s office - one of the better rooms in the establishment with a bay-windowed view of the drive, flanked by chestnut trees and rhododendron bushes.

“Dick.” John came forward with his hand outstretched. “Take a seat. Cup of something?”

“Thanks, but not right now, John.”

John Terry sat back behind his desk. “What can I do for you?”

“I’m looking for an ID,” said Dick, bringing out the photo. “This girl. As you can see, unfortunately she’s been found dead.”

John glanced at the photo. Then gave a sharper look. “That’s Carrie. Carrie Redmond. At least, I think it is.” He pressed his intercom. “Claire can you find Jamie Martin and ask him to come up here, please.”

He took the photo from Dick and held it up. “Yes, I’m pretty sure. She was here for a while last year. She kept absconding. Is it murder?”

“I’m afraid so.” Said Dick. “Her body was discovered last night.”

“I’m very sorry.” There was a pause, while John Terry collected himself. It must be hard, thought Dick. You would feel a failure.

“She hadn’t lived with us in months. When she did, she’d disappear for days and we’d search and then she’d turn up without any explanation or apology. She was quite an awkward client to fathom. It was almost as though she had a secret life.”

“Any friends here? Boyfriend?”

“Well, Jamie knew her best, that’s why I’ve asked him to come up - I’m not sure if they were actually in a relationship. We don’t encourage it.”

“Quite. What about her family?”

John was up and riffling through a drawer in a large filing cabinet. Not all on computer yet, Dick was almost amused to see. Costs again, he supposed. John took out a folder and opened it. “Let’s see.” He ran his finger down a page. “Mother’s dead. Died when Carrie was fourteen. Father, no - stepfather, put her into care. Said she was unmanageable. She’d had a few warnings for truanting, shoplifting, breaking the neighbour’s windows... Ah, here we are... she was implicated in an arson attack. ”

He stopped at an item and handed the folder to Dick, who read that Carrie was seen to be with a gang who’d set fire to a local hairdresser’s shop. A photo of the girl was attached to the page. She was giving a sulky pout to camera, but there was a hint of vulnerability in the eyes. Bright blue, Dick noticed. There was no doubt it was the dead girl.

“It was treated as a hate crime. The hairdresser was gay, apparently. The case never proved she’d had anything to do with the fire. She said she came along later and just grabbed a long, black wig she saw in the window. She was into her Goth period. Anyway, it was after that the stepfather got social services to send her to us.”

There was a knock at the door. "Come." Said John. The door opened to reveal a tall, skinny boy with spiky locks and kohl-rimmed eyes. Another Goth, thought Dick Andrews.

"Come in Jamie." John Terry's tone was kind. He pointed Jamie to a chair.

"There's some bad news, I'm very sorry to have to tell you."

Jamie said nothing. He had the air of someone who received bad news as a matter of course.

"It's about Carrie."

A slight grimace passed over Jamie's face. "She's not back again, is she?" he muttered.

"Sadly not. She won't be coming back. She has been killed. Murdered."

Jamie jerked on the chair. "Oh, crap..." he whispered.

Indeed. Can you tell us anything about her recent whereabouts? When did you last see her?"

Jamie returned a blank stare. He looked stricken.

"It's alright Jamie," prompted John. "You're not under suspicion."

Like hell he isn't, thought Dick Andrews.

Jamie rubbed his eyes, spreading kohl over his bony cheeks and eventually said, "I think it were a couple of month ago. We met up in town, went for a coffee."

"You weren't still 'seeing' each other in any other way? You were very close when she lived here."

Jamie shook his head vehemently. "It were never like that with us. We wuz just really good mates. She totally got it that I don't do sex."

"Okay," Dick took up, "so where did you go with her last time you met?"

"That bloody Starbucks as uz opened on Market Street. She said she wanted to try it - see what the fuss wuz about, like."

"Did she tell you anything about what she was up to? Where she was living?"

Jamie looked down and shuffled his feet - clad, Dick saw, in the ubiquitous Doc Martins.

"Not much. She never did. Mentioned some student bloke she wuz seeing. Said she'd got a job as a nanny - well, oh pair, like..."

"Did she say where?"

"Wuz vague about it. Somewhere in town, though. I remember she said there wuz a load of kids."

“Name of the people?”

Jamie shook his head. “She mentioned he wuz a plumber or summat. Said he did stuff round the house, DIY, y’know - and there wuz other lodgers.”

“Did she seem all right? Happy?”

Jamie gave a snort. “Happy! Yeh - random!” He thought for a moment. “She did say as she liked the woman - the kid’s mother she wuz working for. How she wuz like, kind, an’ she could talk to her. She like, really missed her own Mum? She died y’know.”

Dick Andrews nodded. “Can you remember anything else, lad - any little detail? Did you agree to meet again?”

“Yeh. She giv me her new mobile number, I’ve gorrit in mine.” He fumbled in the pocket of his long black coat. “We wuz goin’ to meet up day before yesterday, an’ I rang it...” he produced the phone and flicked to the number,

“But it went straight to ansafone. She never got back to me.” He realised what he’d said. “Right. I s’pose now, I know why.”

Dick Andrews took the number. “Thanks Jamie. If anything else occurs to you, please let me know - here’s my card. “He extracted it from his breast pocket and handed it to the lad. “I’m sure you’d like whoever did this to your friend to be brought to justice.”

“Yeh.” Said Jamie, in a tone that belied his belief in justice.

“You can go, Jamie. We’ll let you know if there’s anything further.”

The youth got up and slumped out of the room. Dick and John Terry exchanged a look.

“What d’you think?” said John.

“Troubled.”

“Wouldn’t be here otherwise. Drugs, in his case. He’s on probation for dealing. Very confused about his sexuality.”

“Keep an eye on him, will you? Might seem an unlikely suspect, but you never know. Now then – can you give me all the info you hold on Carrie”

## Chapter Six

When Dick Andrews stepped down from the witness box in Court Four, he was sweating. He took out a neatly laundered and pressed white handkerchief and passed it across his brow. In all his years of giving evidence he'd never got used to the nerves, the fearful surge of adrenalin produced by all eyes upon him. He thought he'd done okay, though. He'd been on the stand all morning. Antony Farrow had taken him through every detail of the prosecution case, from the discovery of body one, Carrie Redmond, to the digging up of patios and fields, in the search for others.

Fourteen had been recovered in all - though Dick remained convinced there were many others. The dykes, which had yielded the last three bodies, were deep after all. The defence counsel, Anna Wyatt, a handsome woman, had asked him about his belief. How did he know, why did he think it? What proof was there? What clues? He'd shaken his head and answered none - it was just a feeling. He knew it in his water, though it wouldn't do to say that at the Old Bailey. Giving the evidence had taken Dick Andrews right back to the scenes of crime - the tents, the diggers, the lifting machinery, skips, plastic boxes, grass, paving stones, mud, and eventually bones. He remembered the horror, yes, but strangely, more the exhaustion. The difficulties of keeping control over a team that mostly had little sleep, ate badly and drank too much. Thinking of which, he needed one now - and some lunch.

The Jury's Out pub round the corner from the Bailey, was always packed at lunch time, a jostling mix of journalists, junior counsels and civil servants - even the odd witness. They kept to their separate gangs and as soon as Dick entered he spotted DI Shane Dawkins who'd been the liaison officer on the Webb case and who was taking the stand later. Shane was talking to a young woman Dick Andrews didn't recognise. She was blond and good-looking in an earnest, slightly bohemian way. She seemed to be asking questions.

He approached the table and greeted Shane, asking if he wanted a drink?

"I'll have St Clements, ta Guv." Smiled Shane. He was teetotal now, though in any case wouldn't have had a drink before he gave evidence.

"Dick this is Cate Harrison... Cate - DCI Dick Andrews."

“Ah the Senior Investigating Officer on the case,” said Cate. “I’m delighted to meet you. I’d been hoping our paths would cross.”

And if they hadn’t, thought Dick, with a premonition born out of many years’ experience, you would have engineered it.

“Cate tells me she’s making a documentary film on the case.” Said Shane.

“Well not just this case - it’s about a number of different cases here and abroad.” Cate corrected quickly. “This is just the one I’m pursuing at the moment.”

“Right.” Nodded Shane - obviously very taken with the shapely form beneath Cate’s sweater.

“I hope you’ve said nothing out of turn?” Dick couldn’t help warning. He still saw Shane as a young recruit, almost a son, and treated him accordingly.

Shane gave an easy laugh. “Don’t be daft Guv, I’m not sea-green any longer. I’ve said to Miss Harrison here, that when it’s all over I might let her interview me. She’s asked for nothing else.”

“Hmm.” Said Dick. He profoundly distrusted journalists.

“And I hope you will, too?” Cate turned the full force of her grey gaze on Dick Andrews. He coughed and shifted in his seat.

“I don’t give interviews.” He said. “I might write a book after I retire.”

“I thought you were amazing this morning.” She continued. “So clear and concise. Your memory must be fantastic - after all, it’s a couple of years already.”

“It’s not the sort of case you forget.” Said Dick briefly. But he was flattered. He shot Cate a hard look - the kind he might give a suspect.

“Perhaps I can give you my card...” Cate extracted one from a pocket in her large bag. “In case you change your mind... I’m going to be at it for some time.”

A young man tapped her on the shoulder and she turned and stood to talk to him. Dick Andrews looked at the card she’d handed him. It was tastefully simple with clear print: Cate Harrison, filmmaker, an address in North London, phone and mobile numbers and an email. He popped it in his top pocket. He had no intention of using it, but it seemed rude to leave it on the table.

Ethan and Cate hadn’t spoken since their date. Ethan had left two messages on Cate’s answerphone, which she had declined to return. He’d arrived at Court early that Monday hoping for a chat with her before proceedings began, but she had come in late forcing people to move out of the way so she could get to the one remaining seat in the gallery. She’d avoided his eye and at the lunch break had left the building while he was

still collecting his coat. He'd gone to the pub and found her already deep in conversation with a youngish bloke, who looked like, and turned out to be, a copper.

"Are you fed up with me already?" He said now.

"Not at all, I've just been busy." Cate frowned, slightly. "I was editing over the weekend."

Well, that was a relief. Ethan had had visions of another man, or several other men, dinners, parties, beds...

"What did you make of this morning?"

"Brilliant." Cate nodded towards Dick Andrews. "The detail. I could hardly keep up with my notes. Some of the things Ruth's supposed to have said... You couldn't make it up."

She pulled Ethan a little away. "I want to film DCI Andrews, he's playing hard to get, but I think he's curious..."

"If anyone can get him to say yes, you can."

"Charmer."

"So when do I get my calls returned?"

"Consider it done. We're talking."

"I wanted to ask you out again. What are you doing this week?"

"Working!" Cate couldn't help smiling.

"How about Thursday - that's nearly the weekend."

"I don't know..."

"There's a great film on at BFI - it's all about serial killers."

"Wow - you know the way to a girl's heart. I'll think about it."

"I'll need to book the tickets."

"Okay, okay, I'll come." She was laughing now. "But we can't have a late one." It was good to warn him.

Ethan grinned. DCI Andrews wasn't the only one who was curious. He pushed to the bar to get some sandwiches.

Sandwiches too, brought in by the Clerk of the Court, were served in Ruth Webb's cell. Ruth refused to eat, turning her face mutinously away from the offerings. She was furious with DCI Andrews' testimony.

“Bloody, fuckin’ cheek,” she opined more than once. “He’s nothing but a liar. Lies. Lies. He never arst no-one about diggin’ up the garden. He just fetched in them diggers and done it!”

Anna raised her eyebrows at Roly. Yet again, Ruth seemed more concerned for the state of her garden, than for the bodies found buried in it. Dick Andrews had given a detailed explanation of the layers of stone, silt and estuary mud they’d encountered. “Like a custard,” he said. “Like a porridge.”

It was in the porridge that bones had been uncovered. At first they’d thought one set, perhaps those of the Webb’s missing daughter, but then - three femurs. “And unless we’d discovered the first three-legged woman, it had to be more than one body.”

The response of the Webbs at the time had been outrage at the desecration of their patio. No care at all for the fact that bodies were buried within stepping distance of the children’s play area and the family barbeque.

As they made their way back upstairs Roly, lowering his voice, said. “She was forever going on about the work Eddie had put into the house, when he was first arrested. It was baffling before we realised what was under it.”

“Yes,” agreed Anna, “No need to go there. If we put her on the stand we’ll steer clear of the ruined garden.”

They both fell silent, apprehensive of what the afternoon would bring. Other police officers would take the stand, there would be more damning evidence.

## Chapter Seven

### TWO YEARS EARLIER

The search for Carrie Redmond’s killer began within the confines of the East Anglian town they all inhabited. DCI Andrews ‘knew’ Carrie’s killer was local. Much as he had known, eventually, they would find more bodies buried.

The crime was well rehearsed, it bore all the marks of someone who knew the area. Calls to her cell phone produced no result - the phone was as dead as its owner.

The picture from John Terry's files was printed in the local newspapers and shown on TV. The police team carried it all round the area. A few people came forward to say they recognised her. The station had a couple of calls and gathered a bit of street-to-street info. But most people shook their heads, looking blank. She was just another disappeared girl. There were so many.

Dick Andrews travelled to Lincoln to see Carrie's stepfather. He insisted he had nothing to add. He'd washed his hands of Carrie years ago - she'd been nothing but trouble since her Mum died. He hadn't seen her in over a year. Nor did he seem particularly surprised or disturbed by her death, thought DCI Andrews.

The information they did glean led them almost directly to a run-down area of the town, which bordered the red-light district. Carrie was known there, it seemed, not so much as a working girl, though she might turn the occasional trick, but as a drifter with a minor drug habit. She could be seen on street corners with a local gang, was recognised by taxi drivers who said they'd cabbled her to places, perhaps (with shifty eyes) to score, and shopkeepers who said she was one to keep an eye on. A bit of a breakthrough came when one of the girls who was working a corner, said she'd seen Carrie in the company of a woman. A woman for whom she thought she baby sat. The girl, Alysha, said she'd seen them together in a pub called The Rogue Roundhead and they'd been having a right old good time, pissed and laughing, and joining in Karaoke. No, she didn't know the woman's name, but she was often at Rogue's, they'd know her behind the bar for sure.

Dick went himself to interview the landlord - for some reason he was taking an intense, personal interest in this case. Something about the lost girl, all lost girls if you like, moved him. The landlord said she looked familiar, he couldn't be sure but he thought she'd come in a couple of times with a regular - woman called Ruth Webb. Ruth was a live wire all right, after a couple of drinks! He implied that on a good night, she might well dispense her favours among the customers. He wasn't sure where she lived, but close, maybe Battle or Bridge Street? It didn't take long after that to find the Webb's household.

And what a household it proved to be - though at first glance all was normal. The Webbs were a couple who'd been together years, had several children, some old enough to have left home, and a reputation in Bridge Street as good neighbours and all round 'salt of the earth' people.

Ruth Webb opened the door, to Dick Andrews and a young constable, in her apron, for which she apologised as she led them through to the kitchen, saying it was 'baking day'. The kitchen was indeed filled with the smell of ginger cake, which she took out of the oven, offering each of them a piece and a cup of tea. This was certainly the good neighbour they'd heard about. They declined tea and cake but sat at the table, where Dick Andrews took out the picture of Carrie Redmond. Did Mrs Webb know her, he asked. Ruth, wiping her floury hands, gave the photo a cursory glance and said no, she didn't think so. Well that was strange, said Dick, since they'd been told she baby sat for the Webbs and had been seen in The Rogue Roundhead in Ruth's company. Ruth gave an impatient sigh and took the photo from him, holding it up close to her enormous glasses. Ah, well, maybe she'd been mistaken. The girl did look a bit familiar - what was her name? Carrie Redmond, said Dick, she was around seventeen, lived for a while at Chester House, moved out and was thought to have come here..? A slight change came over Ruth's face. A shuttered look - though she smiled.

"Oh Carrie, I do remember her. Yes, nice kid, she was a lodger here for a bit. But no, I ent seen her in ages." Ruth returned the photo as though that closed the matter.

"The thing is," pressed Dick, "she's been murdered. I'm surprised you haven't seen the coverage on the telly."

"Don't watch it." Ruth almost sneered. "Too much bad news. I got enough goin' on in me own life."

"I'm sure. But could you say when it was she was last living here?"

Ruth looked thoughtful. "Maybe six month ago..?"

"Really? But we've been told she was seen with you as recently as two months ago ."

"Well, maybe she was." Ruth sounded quite put out now. "They comes and goes. We gets so many it's 'ard to remember."

"I'm sure it is. But if you could try, Mrs Webb... What about your husband, is he here?"

"No he ent!" Ruth's reply was even more truculent. "He's workin' a course, what you think?"

"I think we need to talk to him, too. Would you give him this..." Dick Andrews pulled a card from his pocket and handed it to Ruth, "and tell him to call us as soon as he gets home."

He thought Ruth looked momentarily frightened - of her husband, he wondered - but she quickly recovered.

"I'll giv' it him," she said, "but ee don't know nothin' I can tell you. Ee works all hours and ee don't involve himself in domestic, lodgers and tha' - thass up to me..."

"Thank you," said Dick politely, "We'd like to talk to him anyway. Your children would remember her, if she babysat. Are any of them here?"

"Theys at school." Ruth Webb was sulky now. "Anyways you can't talk to them without me there. I knows my rights."

That was odd, thought Dick . Would an innocent person talk so soon of their 'rights'?....

Silently vowing he'd come back after school time, and without making an appointment, he stood and picked up his jacket motioning to the PC that they were leaving.

"Well, thanks very much for your help Mrs. Webb - and the tea - very kind. If there's anything you remember - anything at all - give us a call. And tell your husband, if you'd be so good, that we'd like to speak to him ASAP. This evening is fine - I'll be on that number."

Ruth Webb looked taken aback at the politeness. Dick Andrews often found it usefully disarming. If she was talking about 'rights', next she'd be demanding a lawyer. It was better to make her feel she wasn't under suspicion.

As they walked down the short path to the street, he could feel Ruth's eyes on their backs. She was watching, experience told him, from behind a ground floor net curtain.

The same junior copper was dispatched to see Eddie Webb that evening. Needless to say by eight pm no call had come in from either of the Webbs and DCI Andrews had decided to strike, without showing his own hand in the striking. PC Wayne Amble looked young and fresh-faced, but had an under-lying steel belied by his friendly appearance. He was well up on the case so far and had every intention of pleasing his boss. That way lay promotion.

Wayne had found Eddie in his garden - if you could call it a garden. It was largely concreted over and dotted with the large paving stones Eddie grandiosely

referred to as his 'patio'. As Ruth Webb escorted him ungraciously though the back kitchen, no gingerbread offered this time but a cross response to his visit, "You lot again! Carn a person get no peace of an evenin'!" Wayne saw through the window that Eddie was pacing morosely up and down the area - a smouldering rollup fag in his mouth.

Eddie didn't look surprised to see him. In fact, almost resigned, thought Wayne. He'd nodded a pleasant enough hello to the young copper and offered him a rollie. "Thanks, but I don't..." smiled Wayne. "My Dad died of lung cancer." Eddie registered that with a snort of mirth. "So'll I, most like. If I lives long enough!" They both laughed, joined in contemplation of the absurd human condition. This was going well, Wayne thought.

"Mr Webb," he began, "I'm real sorry to bother you after a hard day, but we do just need to check if you have any useful information you can give us on Carrie Redmond?"

"Oh ay, Ruth mentioned you'd bin round - about little Carrie like. We's sorry to hear as she's met a bad end."

"Yes, tragic. Only seventeen. Can you tell me when you last saw her..?"

"Well now..." Eddie paused, took the fag out of his mouth and stared at it as if it was a calendar. "I'd say it were a couple of month ago." She used to go out with Ruth sometimes, line dancing an' that."

Line dancing, thought Wayne, that was a new one.

"Yes, we believe she was seen with your wife in a local pub. But can you tell us anything else about her? She babysat for you sometimes - did she have a boyfriend, she ever brought round?"

"Oh Lor' yes." Eddie gave a leer. "Plenty. She was quite a girl was Carrie. I used to call her 'Crumpet Carrie'. Or sometimes 'naughty night nurse'." He gave another unpleasant grin.

"Cos she wuz , y'know, nursin' the kids at night, like."

"Right", said Wayne, momentarily stumped for a response. It was a murdered girl Eddie was talking about - really, the mind boggled.

"There was one bloke in partic'lar," continued Eddie, warming to his theme. "Bit of an hippy type - student, I think. She brought him round couple of times. I come back early one night and found 'em goin' at it on the sofa."

And I'll bet you watched thought Wayne, but he said. "Any idea of his name or whereabouts?"

Eddie put the stub of the fag back into his mouth and chewed on it ruminatively. "I think it was Steve," he said, at length. "Or Dave. Somethin' ordinary like that. But I don' know nothin' else about him - where he lives, like."

"Perhaps your children know more?" Tried Wayne. "Babysitters do befriend their charges, tell them things sometimes - even things they shouldn't. I know mine did." He gave a suggestive smile he hoped Eddie would appreciate. Eddie did. He emitted a hearty laugh ending in a prolonged cough.

"Could we have a quick word with your kids, Eddie? You never know."

"Don' see why not." But Eddie's fleeting glance of anxiety told he could see quite well why not.

He led Wayne back into the kitchen. It was empty, with dirty supper dishes scattered about. The sound of television came from a room nearby.

Wayne followed Eddie into what Eddie termed the 'den'. Ruth was sitting on a saggy sofa knitting, with her feet up on a pouffe. The room seemed full of kids - Wayne counted six - maybe some were neighbours or school friends. But no, Eddie swept a quick arm round saying, "Most of 'ems 'ere - ask Michele, she's the oldest. Meesh..?"

Michele looked up from the schoolbook in which she was writing. She looked wary. Scared even. Her eyes were narrowed and her mouth in a tight line, as though sealed. "Wot?" She said, belligerently.

"You 'member Carrie - as baby sat you a while back?"

Michele looked towards Ruth, as if for a signal. Wayne thought he detected a slight incline of Ruth's head, though her eyes remained fixed on Celebrity Big Brother. "Yeah." Said Michele in a final way, encouraging no further interface.

"Bit o' bad news... she's gone and got 'ersel killed."

Michele's face was remarkable for its lack of surprise. "Oh yeah?" She said, in the same emotionless, flat tone. She looked down at her book as if keen to get back to it.

"Young policeman 'ere wants to know does you 'member her boyfriend, was it Steve? 'Ee come round a few times."

"Si. Simon." Said Michele shortly. She cast a swift glance at Wayne as if gauging how little she could get away with. "He was at the college..." she nodded towards the

window. The street outside led eventually to grounds housing the old polytechnic - now the new university.

“D’you know his surname?” Wayne tried gently.

Michele frowned and again checked Ruth, who gave an almost imperceptible shrug.

“I think it was Matthews.” Michele was liberated to say. “Last time I saw her, in town, she was with him.”

“When was that, Michele?” Wayne queried. “Recently?”

Michele seemed to take courage from her parents’ silence. “Couple weeks ago. They were in the Mall, I stopped to talk to them.”

“And what did they say?” Pressed Wayne.

Michele lifted her shoulders in a ‘whatever’ gesture. “He was goin’ home for the hols next day, she said she was going to stay with him. Leicester, I think he lived.”

Pity it hadn’t happened, thought Wayne. Instead of spending the summer having fun outings with her boyfriend, Carrie was lying in the morgue.

“And you haven’t seen either of them since?”

Michele shook her head. “She’s left a few things here...” she ventured, and seemed about to say more, but Ruth shot her a look and she subsided.

“Okay. I wonder if I could have a look at them?” Wayne turned to Eddie who gave him a blank look. “I don’ know nothin’ about no things. Not my departmun’.”

“Mrs. Webb?”

Ruth glowered at him. “I’m tryin’ to watch my programme.” Adding, with heavy irony. “If you don’ mind.”

But Wayne was not giving up. “Perhaps one of the children could show me?” He said. At that, Ruth flounced out of her chair and stomped towards the door. “I’ll show you,” she said. “It’s nothin’, just a few clothes and CDs. She sometimes stayed the night when she looked after the kids.”

Ruth led Wayne through a warren of interlinked passages and then upstairs to another set of puzzling doors. Nothing in the house was as it had once been, or was meant to be.

“Your husband’s done a lot of work on the house?” Wayne was partly making conversation, but partly, genuinely curious. The house was a weird hotchpotch of false walls and unexpected stair flights, with many more rooms than the exterior would lead you to believe.

“Yeah,” Ruth grudgingly allowed. “Thass his job innit. Builder. Handyman. Plumber. He’s done a load in the garden too - laid that patio hisself.”

She opened a bedroom door. The room was sparsely furnished with a single bed, chest of drawers and a couple of chairs. It was obviously one of the ones they let to lodgers.

“She slept in ’ere when she stopped over. There’s a few things in them drawers.” She waved towards the chest.

Wayne crossed and opened the top drawer. Underwear. The skimpy, lacy variety. An almost empty bottle of Chanel no 5 body lotion. A nightdress. A couple of out of date celebrity mags. A beanie hat. A classic Queen CD. Nothing out of the ordinary. In fact, very much the usual things a young woman might leave for convenience. Then Wayne’s finger connected with something sharp. He riffled through the bras and knickers. It was the edge of a half-used strip of contraceptive pills. Now that was odd. Knowing, as he did, the possessive obsession women displayed with such blister packs - his girlfriend freaked out if she forgot to take them away with her and denied him sex the whole weekend - he couldn’t imagine why you’d leave one mid-cycle. Unless you already were, or intended to get, pregnant.

“Would you have any objection if I take these things with me?” He asked Ruth, who was leaning on the door lintel behind him emitting the occasional heavy sigh. She looked uncomfortable with the whole process - kept casting glances towards the bed, as if expecting to see someone in it.

“I s’pose it’s orlright, ”she said, reluctantly. “It’s not like she’s got someone to claim ’em.”

Indeed. Thought Wayne, as he gathered the meagre bits and pieces. And therein lay the tragedy of girls like Carrie.

## Chapter Eight

By the end of week two, the trial of Ruth Webb had settled into a grim but predictable - in some ways, almost farcical - drama. The prosecution case was almost complete and had succeeded, despite Anna Wyatt's best efforts, in painting a picture of a cruel and remorseless partner in crime to an apparently psychopathically disturbed husband. The 'Murdering Mother' as the press had dubbed her. They were longing for a hanging - metaphorically speaking. There had been moments of high comedy, like when Ruth had fallen asleep and snored loudly, and when Judge Solomons' spectacles had fallen off during a very graphic description of the sexual perversions allegedly practised by the Webbs - even some of the testimony, especially from the police, had a deadly black humour. A much needed respite as the gruesome fairy-tale unfolded.

By the Thursday evening, Cate found herself glad she'd agreed to a further date with Ethan. She'd hardly seen him this week - as her priority was editing, she'd been in court only briefly. Her film was shaping up very nicely, she felt. There were gaps of course, which she hoped this case would fill. But the argument she wanted to make - about the difference in the treatment of women deemed criminal from that of men, and the horrified reaction of society to female crimes, particularly murder - was emerging as undeniable. Ruth Webb, guilty or not, already deemed a monster and vilified in the press, would fit perfectly into the most extreme end of the subject.

They'd agreed to meet in the bar of the refurbished BFI cinema. Ethan was already there when Cate arrived and was nursing a bottle of rather good Sauvignon. He poured her a large glass.

"Steady." She laughed. "You trying to get me drunk?"

"Naturally." Ethan smilingly returned. "Been a tough week, thought we deserved something nice."

"What, like this serial killer film..?"

"We don't have to see it." Ethan raised his eyebrows in comic suggestion. "We could just go to my place?"

"What is the film, anyway?" Cate evaded.

"'Peeping Tom' - it's not really about a serial killer, more like someone who could be..."

“Your average sexual predator, then. You know what - let’s not see it. I think I’ve had enough horror for one week. Let’s go and do something fun..”

“Fine by me.” Now he had her captive, Ethan was willing to do whatever she wanted, though he had been rather looking forward to the dark, warm intimacy of the cinema. Cate gripping his hand in the scary bits.

“The London Eye’s only up the road - why don’t we try that..?”

“Why not.”

After procedure wrapped for the day, Anna left Roly and Dan in charge of sorting out Ruth, and rushed off to her meeting with George Karlsson. She’d rung him earlier in the week to make the appointment, and was being hastily fitted between clients and a college dinner event. She knew he could never say no to her.

The Institute of Psychiatry was a modern building, on the gloomy King’s College London hospital campus. It was also miles from the Bailey. Anna had taken her car that morning to facilitate the journey - transport to this part of south London was patchy and unreliable. She wished that, like Harry, she could bike round town, but it wouldn’t help her legal-eagle status to arrive at work red-faced, with muddy, laddered tights.

George’s office was on the third floor, with a balcony hanging over a paved, tree planted area and pleasant if neutral décor. It didn’t do to frighten the horses, Anna recalled from her own years of therapy. She’d once accused her therapist of being grey, grey, grey - as grey as the furniture and walls of her office. The therapist had merely smiled, she remembered.

George was pacing between a large, oak desk and a leather armchair, as he dictated the notes from his last encounter into a tiny dictaphone . He snapped it off when his P.A. Cheryl, showed Anna in, and came forward, arms out to embrace her.

“Anna, my dear.” He kissed her on both cheeks, and guided her to the leather couch, rather as though she were the next patient. “Sit down, sit down, tea? G&T? You look parched.”

“I am cold. And actually, I wouldn’t mind a G&T.” Admitted Anna, though she rarely drank during the week when she was working.

George crossed to a glass-fronted bureau and extracted bottles and glasses. While he poured, Anna took off her coat and scarf and sat on the comfortable couch he'd offered.

"We even have ice... tada!" George flourished an arm as he opened a small cupboard door, revealing a discreet fridge. "One doesn't want to be complacent, but there are a few privileges attached to one's position..."

In fact, there were few in his field considered better than George - his 'position' at the IOP was more than secure and much envied.

Anna smiled. She'd known George far too long to be taken in by what some might deem his arrogance, even hubris. Although he shamelessly acknowledged a big ego, to her he was the soul of kindness and dependability. She knew very well how good he was to staff and students alike - to say nothing of the almost paternal interest he took in his patients - despite his often provocative and apparently blasé manner.

"So, what can I do for you?" He said now, crossing to the couch with their drinks.

"I gather from what I've read in the press, and indeed your tone when you called, that this case is turning into a horror-show?"

"Well - I always knew it would be," Anna gave a rueful smile. "And I didn't say no, did I?"

"As if! Wouldn't be like you to run from a challenge."

"I was pleased, no, let me be honest, excited - and flattered - to be offered it. I thought it would be fascinating, with all the forensic evidence - which, by the way, it is. Give me good old-fashioned murder over fraud any day.

"Weren't you curious too, because it was a woman?"

"My God yes! I totally wanted to engage with Ruth Webb and work out what she's about..."

"And have you?"

"I'm not sure. That's what I wanted to talk to you about."

"Talk away." George's arm, Anna couldn't help noticing, had crept behind her on the back of the couch. She hoped he wasn't going to try anything - it wouldn't be the first time.

"I'm not sure if she's mad, bad or both. She's adamant she won't play the lulu card, but she looks kind of crazy when she says it. As for the things she's supposed to have done..." Anna stopped, lost for words..

“Presumably she says she hasn’t done them?”

Anna nodded.

“And presumably you believe her?”

“Presumably.”

“Which means you’re not sure and you want reassurance?”

“I don’t think the evidence says she did them. So far, it’s all circumstantial, and can be explained on the Rashomon principle..”

“What you see all depends on where you’re standing?”

“Exactly. But there are some things she just won’t tell us. You ask and she doesn’t answer. She evades or goes dumb. She rocks backwards and forwards humming, like a character out of ‘One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest’. I can’t put her on the stand like that - and let’s face it, when you are accused of causing, or aiding and abetting, the deaths of fifteen young women, the jury want you get on the stand and say you didn’t do it.”

Anna took a long lug of G&T at this point.

“You know, unlike most of my colleagues, I believe women are perfectly capable of being psychopathic?”

“Yes - and I know you’re ferociously busy, but because of that, I wanted to ask if you’d assess her for me? She’s been profiled of course several times by the police, a chap you know I think - Adrian Brady? George emitted a snort of disgust. “That old charlatan - thought he’d retired!”

“Of course when... I mean if,” she corrected swiftly, “it comes to sentencing they’ll say she’s sane, knew right from wrong and exactly what she was doing...”

“But you don’t think so..?”

“I don’t know. We had her assessed ourselves when we first took the case, but the report wasn’t illuminating. We need our own conclusion. And our own expert witness.”

George sighed. “You know I’d never let you down, Anna...” His hand now rested lightly on her shoulder, “But wouldn’t it be better to get a woman? You know my colleague here, Jenna, is wonderful on gender issues and very highly rated..?”

Anna shook her head. “I’m sure she is, but this needs a man. A woman saying another woman is psychopathic just won’t wash. You know all those arguments - the whole of the male legal establishment would rise up in horror.”

George gave a snorting laugh. "The opposite of when a rapist employs a female defence attorney."

Anna nodded. "Well, at least we're useful for something!"

They both laughed. Anna took the opportunity the lull afforded to move George's hand, now gently kneading her neck, firmly to his own side of the couch.

"Sorry." Said George. "You can't blame me for trying."

That was true. It was almost a ritual, with their history. But she didn't want to go there at the moment.

"Okay," he said, finishing his drink. "I must admit, I'm intrigued to meet her. But I'm not going to promise I can solve it for you."

"I know that. I just want my... my what? Instincts, I suppose... supported."

"And if she's a psychopath, how does it help?"

Anna shrugged. "Worst case scenario, she gets high security hospital and maybe some treatment."

George looked dubious.

"Worst case scenario, isn't she beyond it?"

The Eye turned out to be an inspired idea. London from on high in the starry winter night was truly fabulous. Orange and white lights and multicoloured neon beamed through the blackness with an almost magical power. As the great wheel passed, towers, spires, cubes and ovals loomed out in strange perspective. They had the pod to themselves and could point, shout and laugh to their hearts' content. When they reached the top and the Eye briefly halted, Ethan caught Cate in his arms and kissed her. She returned the kiss hungrily, the romantic setting perfectly fuelling the moment. After that there was no doubt they would go home together. They caught a taxi on the embankment and when Ethan gave his own address, Cate was silent.

Ethan lived in a loft near Old Street - handy for the Bailey of a morning, Cate found herself thinking, as they ascended in a cranking old industrial lift. The door had many locks and as soon as they got inside Ethan locked, bolted and chained it .

"Blimey," said Cate. "If I didn't know better, I'd think you were the serial killer. How do I get out if I want to run away?"

Ethan grinned. "It's a dodgy area - I've had a lot of break-ins, at least one when I was sleeping."

"Hmm - revengeful girlfriend?" Cate teased.

"Nope - a local junkie. He used sleep in the street doorway and I befriended him. A bit too much as it turned out."

Ethan made tea - a pot Cate was pleased to see - while she looked round the premises. It was a large penthouse-level space with a few partitions for a bedroom, office and bathroom. The kitchen was a galley at one end of the main room - the decor throughout vibrant and modern, with eccentric touches like a rocking chair and an old chandelier hanging over the dining table. She cast an eye at the bedroom and saw a king-size, tousled bed with a primitive patterned cover. The room was otherwise tidy - perhaps he'd anticipated their coming back together. Taking her for granted was cheeky, but Cate couldn't help smiling. Readiness was all.

"D'you approve?" Asked Ethan, as he put the tray of tea down on a round table, in a corner arranged with a TV and sofa.

Cate nodded. "It's great. I'd like something like this myself - room for an editing suite and everything, but I never seem to have time to think about moving..."

"Must admit it was a stroke of luck finding this - I was actually after something much more conventional when a photographer mate decided to go travelling and wanted to sell his lease on." Ethan pointed to a partition wall. "He had a darkroom here as well, but I turned it into my office."

"Perfect." Agreed Cate, accepting a cup of tea. "Milk, yes. No sugar thanks."

They drank in silence sitting side by side on the sofa, an expectant tension between them.

Ethan put his empty cup on the little table and turned to take Cate's from her, then he slid his hand between her legs and swiftly up to the top of her thighs. Cate gasped slightly, but didn't push it away. She lay back into the circle of his other arm and let Ethan's hand find its way into the top of her briefs. He pushed them down, quite gently, at the same time bending his head to kiss her. Her lips parted under his and let in his searching tongue. She closed her eyes and twined her tongue with his. Her breathing quickening. She was hot and wet and ready as his fingers slipped inside her.

Ruth sat staring out of the window. She was thinking about her family. Her children and pets. Especially her pets. She missed Peter rabbit dreadfully - she'd looked after him since she was first in prison. She rocked slightly as she remembered the others. There was Topsy, the veal calf she'd adopted on the local farm when she was a kid. She'd been gutted when Topsy went to the abattoir. Cried for days, until her mother had told her to grow up, and slapped her. She'd had a dog, Button, when she was a teenager and her mother had a cat, Missy. They didn't get on, there was always hissing and scrapping over territory. Rather like her and her mother.

When she and Eddie were first together they'd had cats - a pregnant stray who'd wooed her way into their lives and then dropped six kittens. Ruth had kept two and found homes for two others. Eddie had drowned the last two without her knowing. She was furious when she found out - wouldn't speak to him or shag him for weeks. He couldn't see what all the fuss was about.

The kids had had just about everything growing up - mice, hamsters, gerbils, guinea pigs. Eddie had no patience with it - one of his favourite punishments if a kid had been bad, was to take it out on the pets.

Sometimes he'd kill them. Or threaten to. The kids would go mental. He was cruel like that, was Eddie. She wouldn't tell on him, though. He was thought badly enough of already - she didn't think spilling the beans on how many animals he'd buried in Upperton Dyke, never mind what other things, would improve his reputation. Besides, they'd just use it against her. They'd say she should have stopped him. Ha - like anyone could stop Eddie when he'd made his mind up. She didn't want to think about that, though. She went back to the rocking and counting.

When she was arrested she had a beagle, Kylie, and a kitten, Jack. She hoped Michele was looking after them properly. She didn't know 'cos Michele wouldn't come and see her. The others had been. Well, some of them - not the little ones, they was in care. The bastard social workers had taken them. It wasn't right being separated from your kids - she hated them for that. She loved her kids and she dared anyone say different. The kids wouldn't. Except Michele may be. That girl had always been difficult. Contrary for the sake of it - she couldn't count the number of times Eddie had made her take the strap to her. She'd just stare him down - pig-headed, defiant. After her arrest, Michele had taken to hanging about town with a biker gang. Leathers, chains, knives - probably drugs. Hardnuts all of them. No respect. Still, she wished

Michele would come - she was the oldest at home, the most clued up, it was her job to. Thank goodness for Carly and Lisa who never let her down. They'd always been good girls - done as they was told. Fetched the shopping, washed and ironed the clothes. Still did. That reminded her - she had to tell them about stuff to bring. Anna had made her promise. No more black. She had to wear colours. She'd make a list before she fell asleep.

*She was shackled. They were all shackled - even the children. In the darkness of the cell, or cellar, she couldn't tell which - she could just make out their pale shapes. The little one - she was only four - was crying. It was pathetic to hear - she'd sob and whimper until she passed out.*

*Her own legs were parted and stretched out in front of her chained to the floor, her arms spread to the sides and manacled to the wall. It was painful and terrifying. She could barely move, yet was open and vulnerable to anyone.*

*What was going to happen next? She shook her head, trying to clear it. She couldn't remember why they were here. What they had done to deserve this prison. And the children? Surely they were too young to have committed any crime? There was to be a trial, she thought. But she didn't expect justice - she would surely be convicted. Her jailer had told her, laughing, sneering, that she would never get away. There was no way out except death.*

*There was a noise outside the heavy door - someone was coming. She knew with a terrible certainty who it was. Always the same person, no, no, please no..*

Waking suddenly in a lather, heart pounding, mouth dry, hair sticking to her forehead, she lay there coming to terms again with the fact of the dream. The relief, accompanied by the residual anxiety, washed through her. The clock said 5 am - another two hours until getting up time. She fumbled for her torch and picking up a book from where it fallen to the floor, opened it at the hand-embroidered bookmark.

Cate and Ethan made love on the goatskin rug on the floor, and then again in the big, surprisingly comfortable bed, and then again when they woke up groggy and slightly shocked in the early morning.

They showered separately in Ethan's austere but clean bathroom and had orange juice, coffee and toast together. It was all remarkably civilised, thought Cate as she clanked down in the lift, having left before Ethan to rush home and feed her cat - and the sex every bit as good as expected. She probably would be returning.

## Chapter Nine

George interviewed Ruth on Saturday morning in Her Majesty's Prison Holloway. Anna was there to effect the introduction, having prepared her client as much as possible for the encounter - which was sure to be bruising. It was less sure which of the two, Ruth or George, would emerge with the most bruises, but Anna didn't tell either of them that.

With an uneasy backward glance, she left them in the meeting room and hurried out. Harry was waiting for her in the car, they had to food shop and then go to watch Jake playing rugby. Anna was late, Harry was cross. He never liked it when she spent time alone with George, though they were best of friends and had been since Cambridge. When she'd told him afterwards that she'd been to see George to quiz him about the case, he'd fallen unusually silent. They hadn't discussed it since. But then of course, they'd hardly had time to discuss anything.

George and Ruth sat across the scratched Formica table from each other. Ruth had a sullen expression on her face, but betrayed her anxiety by tracing over a name, "Tracie Marie" previously gouged on the table, with her finger.

George watched her for a while and then asked how she was. Ruth looked startled.

"Orl right, I s'pose'.

“You look tired. And a little upset. Did something happen?”

“Wot? You mean something else than being accused of multiple murders?”

Ruth occasionally had her own droll humour.

George acknowledged it with a smile. “Not fun, I agree. But I meant something in the last twenty four hours - maybe here, in Holloway?”

“I... I ’as bad dreams...”

George imagined so. What else would a person accused of multiple murders have?

“Ad one last night.”

“Can you tell me about it?”

Ruth shot him a suspicious glance from under frowning brows. His tone was altogether too friendly - she was reminded of the polite young policeman who’d first interviewed her. “So, Mrs Webb, I know it must’ve come as a terrible shock to you finding him like that, but what can you tell us about your husband’s death?” Ruth almost smiled now at the memory.

“I dreamed about my pets.” She said. “The ones thass dead.”

George nodded. “That would be upsetting, I can see. But were they alive in the dream?”

“Yeah.”

“And what were they doing?”

“They was wiv me. We was playing ball, runnin’ and jumpin’. I was sittin’ in the park and Button had his head on my lap.” Ruth sniffed and put up a hand to wipe a tear from under her glasses. George left a pause and she continued. “An’ then Bunty - she was a spaniel, soft as shit - she was letting me comb her, she loved that. She’d lie there good as gold and then suddenly she’d turn and snap at the comb and like as not your ’and.”

“When it became too much for her?”

“I s’pose.”

“Well, we’ve all felt like that, haven’t we? We lie still and put up with the petting and stroking and then suddenly we’re overwhelmed with an urge to bite back.”

Ruth stared at him. George left a pause, then continued.

“Were you happy in the dream, then?”

“Happy.” Ruth considered the word as though it were not in her vocabulary.

“Yes. I mean - with your pets you felt loved? Needed perhaps?”

Ruth gave a slow nod. "They loved me. I was good to them. They 'ad every reason. I never 'armed a one of 'em"

"Of course not. And what about your children? Do you feel they love you? Need you?"

Ruth dropped her head so much her glasses slid to the end of her nose. She pushed them up automatically.

"Well 'course they needed me. Need me. I should be with 'em, not in 'ere."

"How did they show they loved you?"

"By doin' as they was told. Not playin' up. Not makin' Eddie angry."

Ruth sounded quite angry herself now.

"What would happen when Eddie got angry?"

Ruth made a low growl - the almost animal noise one of her pets might have made.

"Anythin'. He'd go crazy. Smash things. Their things, toys, furniture... he might throw his dinner..." ( don't tell about the pets , don't tell about kicking the dog with his steel capped boots. Don't tell about him kicking her with his steel capped boots.) "Y'know... juss what men do... he 'ad a temper, did Eddie."

"He'd take it out on you?" George slid in quickly.

Ruth didn't speak, but her lowered eyes told him it was true.

"But you were used to that. Your father was a violent man, too, wasn't he?"

"He knocked my mum about." Ruth conceded. "Wot's that got to do with anythin'?"

"I'm sure you know that we sometimes repeat the behaviour we've grown up with. It's only human."

Ruth stood suddenly and gripped the edge of the table. She looked so ferocious, George made an involuntary move backwards.

"Human!" She shouted. "Yeah - thass juss it! It's only human. I'm only human. I'm sick, sick, sick of bein' treated like I'm some kind of monster!" Her voice had risen to a shriek and there were flecks of spittle at the corners of her mouth.

George held his ground, nodding sympathetically.

"I understand how distressing that is. Really, I do."

Ruth swayed a little, then slumped back into the chair.

"Dr... Mr..." She'd clearly forgotten his name. "Just tell 'em that, will you?"

*Extract from 'Wytch Watch' Page 64*

*"The witch trials started on a Tuesday - June 2nd, 1692 and all of Salem Town, no matter how divided by land issues or religious passions, turned out for it. The Oyer and Terminer Court for Suffolk, Essex and Middlesex counties was packed - everyone in their best and neatest Puritan dress, the predominant colours black and white - even for the prisoners, if you counted their prison pallor. 26 people - largely women and children were led into the courtroom, some, mostly the youngest, already terrified and weeping. All were supposed to be in league with the Devil - a real and living presence to those in court - and of having, in some cases, lent themselves to him as a shape shifter. There was no point in denying the charges - everyone knew that. The witches, particularly the weak, more easily led women, were already convicted. Hadn't a witch cake been made by 'white' magic in the very household of the original accusers? Tituba, their black slave, well versed in ancient voodoo, had made it using rye meal and the urine of the afflicted girls. It was fed to a dog, which howled for days, while at least one of the accused had suffered cramping stomach pain in the cells. Proof undeniable she was a witch.*

*As if that weren't enough, there was the evidence of the 'touch' test. The witches had been made to lay hands on the writhing girls when they were in their extreme fits, and lo and behold the fits had stopped as the evil spirit rushed from them. It was only a matter of time and putting on a show of justice, before the accused were taken to be hung and buried in a shallow grave with no stone or marker. Two of the women were pregnant and though their offspring might be considered Devil's spawn, they would at least be allowed to give birth before dying. All must suffer the appropriate punishment, must be exorcised, if the Wrath of God was to be averted. Then - and only then - could the community start to recover.*

*The courtroom audience was still and hushed - only the odd whisper from behind a hand disturbing the church-like quiet. The watching women were uncomfortable and couldn't meet the eye of Pastor Cotton Mather, who sat close to the jury and the bench of Judges. Mather, already on his third wife and father of twelve children, eyed them coldly. No wonder the women dropped their gaze. They were embarrassed on behalf of their sex, members of which had transgressed so fearfully - worried what it would say about themselves if they were at all sympathetic. So much so, that many had become the main accusers of the witches - baying for their blood in a most unseemly and un-Puritan manner. Though such hysterical behaviour made the men uneasy, they could hardly say it was improper."*

After rugby, Jake, though embarrassedly pleased they had come, wanted not to have a nice tea with his parents, but to go off with his team mates.

“Drinking lager, I suppose,” said Harry, somewhat morosely.

“Well darling, he is nearly eighteen. We were doing much worse at his age.”

They sat opposite each other in the friendly teashop close to Jake’s school pitch, a plate of buttered teacakes slowly congealing between them. What Anna said was true. When they’d met as freshers at St Catherine’s, they’d both been wayward teenagers. Anna coming from an unhappy, lower middle class background where she’d far outrun her parent’s aspirations and Harry from a middle class family of doctors - his father an eminent surgeon, they’d both been eager to shake off their restricting backgrounds. George was in their year too, and with a couple of others, Maria - who became an actress, and Seamus - later a city whiz, they’d made up a fairly louche gang, devoted to ecstasy, absinthe and general hell raising. Sometimes Anna missed those days - her job now was so responsible, so straight. She wondered if Harry felt the same, but if he did he never said so. Anna had at first been George’s girlfriend, though the relationship wasn’t very successful for her - at least, sexually. One night, when very stoned, she and Harry had violated the friendship code by sleeping together and discovering they shared a love of wild, animal sex. George took six months to forgive them - Harry often wondered if he ever had, completely. Certainly, George still hankered after Anna - and on occasion over the last twenty years when things had been rocky in their marriage - or in his several - had made an obvious play for her. Anna insisted she’d never taken any notice.

Harry didn’t want to rock the boat by bringing up George and Anna’s recent ‘secret’ meeting, so he reached out for a teacake and bit deeply into it, taking comfort from the currants and oozing butter.

Anna looked out of the window at the bleak winter view, the trees on the common still bare and black, the grass a withered yellow. She felt wintry and withered herself today - as if the last couple of weeks had knocked the puff out of her.

“So, was George helpful?” Harry couldn’t resist.

“Well, he’s interviewing her today, isn’t he?” Anna shrugged. “We’ll see what his assessment says.”

“Did he mention Caroline?” Caroline was George’s estranged wife. His third.

Anna shook her head. “It was a purely business chat. Functional.”

“Mm.” Harry didn’t sound sure. “I wonder what’s really going on there? I thought this time he’d found someone he could stay with.”

“So did he.” Anna was offhand - she knew where this was leading. “But since she took that job in Paris...”

“He’s never settled exactly, has he?”

George’s life had been tumultuous on the relationship front, with break-ups, make-ups, children, houses, alimony, despite his being top of his field, eminent, feted - or perhaps because of it.

“He’s too absorbed by his work. That’s his real mistress.”

Harry shook his head. “Not since you.”

Anna clicked her teeth with annoyance. “Harry - how many times! As you know very well, we were together for barely a year - that’s hardly committed!”

“He’s never got over you.” Harry took another teacake, bugger the calories, “Not that I blame him.”

“That’s very flattering darling,” said Anna briskly, “but you wildly over estimate my influence.”

She gathered her bag and gloves. “If you’ve finished giving yourself heart attack on a plate, shall we get going? I’ve got a lot of work to do this evening.”

Harry stubbornly wiped butter from the plate with his finger. It was always the same when she was in court. He at least could leave his work behind him. Once he left the operating theatre, he was his own man. He’d done his best. Often saved a life. Now he had a clean slate, clean conscience. Anna was different. She worried away at everything, brought her cases into the home, the kitchen, the dinner conversation. Into the bedroom. There would be no sex tonight he was sure, wild and animal or otherwise.

*Much later, her eyes closed and the book she was reading fell from her hands, the bookmark drifting listlessly to the floor, as sleep and dreams overwhelmed her.*

# Chapter Ten

TWO YEARS EARLIER

The investigation into the murder of Carrie Redmond took a new turn with PC Amble's discovery of the contraceptive pills. DCI Andrews became more and more convinced it was her lover who'd killed her. Anything else didn't make sense, no struggle, no forced intercourse, no moving of the body - though who would have left it out in the open like that, for anyone to find, was a mystery. Perhaps he - it had to be a he - had been disturbed. Just had time to snatch her bag and scarper. Or perhaps... Dick Andrews crossed to his office window at this thought... perhaps he wanted her to be found. Wanted to be caught. He looked out onto the carpark - coppers in shirtsleeves coming and going. God it was hot. The tarmac was glistening and the trees round it looked scorched already. Yes - wanted to be caught. Was sending a signal. He'd had that on cases before. The killer either having fun goading the police, thinking he was clever enough to fool them, or feeling such guilt he left deliberate clues. Usually though, they were multiple killers, not men involved in a crime of passion. Still, if the clues were there - it was up to Dick to find them. He dispatched a DI to Leicester to track down Zach Mathews, the boyfriend, the college had supplied a home address, and decided to pay another visit to the Webb household himself.

Ruth Webb took a long time to answer the door. So long, Dick Andrews was turning away when he saw a small face peeking at him from behind the ground floor net curtain. He'd timed the visit to be after school hours - so this was obviously one of the children. Dick smiled and pointed to the front door. The face disappeared and after a moment Dick heard sounds in the hallway and the door slowly creaked open. A girl of about fourteen stood in the crack.

"Hello there," he said in his friendliest tone, glad that the hot weather meant he was hatless and in shirtsleeves. "Is it Michele?" She coincided with the description as

given by PC Amble - dark with heavy brows and a wary look. The girl nodded. She opened the door a fraction further and DCI Andrews saw she was dressed in a neat, navy school uniform. It looked like that of St Stephen's, a nearby Catholic secondary.

"I'd like to talk to your Mum for a minute - could I come in, please?"

The girl drew back, looking alarmed. "I'm not allowed to let anyone in," she almost whispered. "Mum's busy. I mean, she's out. We're not allowed to talk to strangers."

"Quite right," nodded Dick. "But I'm not really a stranger, I've met your Mum before and besides, I'm a police officer." He drew out his badge and showed it to her. Michele looked unimpressed. "Where is your Mum, love?"

"Er... I think she's gone to the launderette." It was so patently a lie that Dick didn't bother asking where that was. He wondered what Ruth was up to in the house. "And so you're looking after the little ones?"

Michele gave a slight nod. "How many brothers and sisters have you got?" Dick made it sound like he was just taking an avuncular interest.

"Three brothers, but one don't live here now. An' three sisters, an' another one who's married."

"My goodness, that's a lot!"

"Mum likes babies."

But not once they were old enough to answer back, warranted Dick. "Are you the oldest at home?"

Michele nodded, pre-empting his next question by adding, "I'm nearly fifteen."

"What about the others?"

Andy's the eldest - he's a mechanic, an' he lives in town. Susan's married to Tom, who works for the council and she's got a little girl, Scarlett, but Sue don't..." Michele broke off, as if she'd strayed into forbidden territory. She resumed quickly with, "There's Carly she's twelve, an' Lisa she's eleven, Zac's eight, and then Jodie who's seven and Tyler who's five."

"And when your Mum's out, d'you have to make their teas?"

Michele sighed. "It's boring. I hate cooking."

"What do you like doing?"

Michele shot him a suspicious look, as if suddenly conscious he was wheedling far too much information out of her. She shrugged.

"Reading. It's private."

Dick could well imagine in this house there wasn't a lot of privacy.

There was a sound on the stairs behind the girl. A tall Asian man came down the stairs and along the hallway towards the front door, pushing past Michele. She opened the door wider for him and he gave her a grunt of acknowledgement in passing. He ignored Dick Andrews completely and set off down the road at a fair lick. Dick looked questioningly at Michele. She dropped her eyes. "That's Abu... one of our..." she paused slightly, "lodgers."

This household got more and more complex thought Dick.

He heard Ruth's voice shouting from above. "Who's there Michele?"

Michele cast him a wild glance - exposed by the very person she'd been protecting - and shouted back. "It's a policeman, Mum. He wants to talk to you."

"Tell him to fuck off!" Ruth swore loudly.

Michele gave Dick an almost amused glance, as if to say, "You heard her."

Looking over Michele's head in the widened door space, Dick could just see Ruth halfway down the stairs. She was wearing a red baby-doll nightie with ruffles and on her feet were large faux tiger slippers. Interesting costume for four-thirty in the afternoon, he thought. This was a far cry from the wholesome, gingerbread-baking Mom.

Ruth came boldly down the stairs and stood at the bottom, her hands on her hips. "What d'you want this time?" She said, rudely. "I'm starting to think you fancy me." She leant on the newel post in a startlingly suggestive parody. "You better not let my Eddie catch you."

Dick Andrews decided to ignore the provocation. It was another unexpected view into her personality, though.

"Sorry to disturb you again." He said pleasantly. "I need another chat with Eddie, I was hoping you could tell me where he's working?"

"Roofin' over at Bardsley's. But he's got nothing more to say. This is just harassment!"

"I'm sorry you feel that, but these are just normal investigations. I'm sure with all your daughters, you wouldn't want to see us do less than everything to bring a young girl's killer to justice?"

Ruth looked like she wanted to say, "No comment", but in fact said nothing. Her nightie had slipped over one shoulder revealing almost all of a plump breast.

Michele was visibly squirming with embarrassment and for her sake, if nothing else, Dick Andrews decided to leave it for now. He'd catch up with Eddie at Bardsley's warehouse, down near the cut. And on the way he'd mull over this afternoon's thought-provoking material.

The old brick storage warehouse on the side of the cut was a well-known landmark. Some years ago efforts had been made to turn the whole basin from a derelict and occasionally dangerous part of town, into a user-friendly cultural centre with bars, cafes and restaurants. It had been semi-successful until dwindling financial support meant some projects ran out of funds, or just steam. Bardsley's was a picturesque old oyster warehouse, now turned into a music performance venue, but having been strapped for cash in its development phase, it frequently needed repairs. In the daylight hours, the area was still fairly deserted despite the lovely weather and pleasant, canal-side walks, but at night, it was often busy. Ironically after all the upmarket planning, in so far as there was a red light district in the town, this was still it - it mostly consisted of a few young women addicts, who hung around the cheesier pubs and bars looking for trade. When they found it, there were plenty of cobbled back alleys.

It was just coming up to 5 pm - tool-downing time, thought DCI Andrews - as he parked his unmarked BMW in the basin car park. He could see scaffolding with platforms on the side of the building and a couple of figures on the flat part of the roof. Perhaps Eddie was one who enjoyed working later. More money - less grief at home. DCI Andrews was familiar with that syndrome. He encountered a group of workers coming out of the lift with their satchels and tool-bags and enquired whether Eddie Webb was still aloft.

"Oh ay - he'll be last to leave." Said one of them, grinning.

"Long as there's someone left to listen to his stories." Said another.

They all laughed.

"Stories?" Queried Dick.

The men exchanged leary glances. One cocked his head towards the roof "He nearly 'ad young Dave over the edge with shock this afternoon, describin' what ee'd bin up to."

“Up to?”

“To 'ere 'im talk, he's a right stud. Allus goin' on about what he's doin' with 'is missus, and various 'girlies', as ee calls 'em.”

“Or what he'd like to do.” Said another.

“He tells a tall tale,” said a black guy wearing a badge saying, ‘Project Manager’, who seemed keen to move his chatty work force on. “We don't take no notice.”

“Yeah, it's just Eddie”. Said another, and they all laughed and, shoved slightly by their boss, slouched off towards the pub, their post-work day beginning with a pint. Dick watched them go, nudging each other and chortling. One cast a shifty glance back at him, no doubt wondering why he was asking for Eddie.

Dick was beginning to put two and two together. The jumbled warren of a house. The scared, shuttered kids, Ruth in her flimsy lingerie, and all he'd heard about her leisure activities, the ‘lodger’ in a hurry to disappear. And now Eddie's ‘tall stories’ - obviously sexual in content. Call me old-fashioned, he thought to himself, but whatever the first impressions I had, this isn't normal. Form he may not have, but something's not right - what on earth goes on in that Webb household?

The lift disgorged two men at this point. A younger one - this must be Dave - and judging by PC Able's description, Eddie Webb, who was rolling a fag while spinning some yarn that had young Dave in pink-faced hysterics. Eddie finished with, “So any time you fancy it, just pop round. We keep open house, an' you're always welcome.”

Hmm, thought Dick Andrews, as long as you're not police. He stepped forward. “Mr Webb?”

“Eddie cocked an eye at him. “Who wants to know?”

“I'm Detective Chief Inspector Andrews,” Dick flashed his badge. “Your wife told me I'd find you here.”

“Did she, now. Well she's got no right. None of her business where I am.” He nudged Dave and they both tittered.

“Wives.” Dick Andrews gave an answering grin. “Always wanting to keep tabs. Worse than cats with their curiosity.”

Eddie lit his fag, not agreeing or disagreeing.

“Phew, been a long hot day. Fancy a pint Eddie?”

Eddie nodded, “Woun' say no. So long then Dave. See you tomorrer,”

By the time he got home that evening, Dick Andrew's head was ringing. It wasn't just the two pints he'd consumed - his absolute limit, he was a Bordeaux man, really - it was the endless Eddie stories, and through them the threads of life in the Webb home he'd picked up. To call Eddie scatological was kind. His garrulous sexual rambles, accompanied by leers, digs and slaps, fuelled by requests for further pints of lager, were on an epic scale. He was doing this to this woman, and at the same time that to another; he liked threesomes, foursomes - even five. He was into bondage - isn't everyone, he asked Dick with a dirty laugh and apparent surprise when Dick demurred. He loved anal, (again, didn't everyone?) and had even tried his wife on a bit of 'lesbo'. He liked it when a 'lemon' came on to him - as they frequently did, he averred - because they realised he was a real man, and could give them what another woman couldn't. (This was accompanied by arm gestures) Dick could see why Eddie's tales had become legendary.

He wondered though, why Eddie was telling them to him. Sometimes being plain clothed was a blessing - people forgot they were talking to a policeman, there again, some just didn't care. Eddie had a need - a compulsion, you might say - to come out with this stuff. It seemed he really couldn't help himself.

On Carrie he veered between knowing nothing and knowing far too much. She was a minx, a tease and a sexual terror. She was a part time hooker and Si was her pimp. She was a drug addict, liked a drink. She and Ruth had done 'lesbo' stuff together many a time. Eddie had... he stopped to sup and didn't go any further with his own involvement, but it was clear to Dick that he'd had sex with the girl, though with or without her consent he couldn't tell.

Ruth, said Eddie was 'insatiable'. "She's a real nympho my wife," he boasted, with a collusive wink at Dick. "She likes two or three men a day, or women (snigger) when she's got one on 'er. All my mates have had a go with her" - he indicated the work posse in another part of the bar - "an' even a few of your lot." He gave an inviting leer. Dick wondered if he was being pressed to take part - a vision of Ruth in her frilly, little-girl nightie appeared on the surface of his lager and he shuddered. He'd have a look into his officers though, back at HQ.

Carrie's boyfriend was no obstacle - according to Eddie he joined in too, when he wasn't pimping Carrie round here, in the red light district.

“Did you know she was pregnant.” Dick flung out the question as much to stop Eddie in his pornographic tracks, as anything. It had the desired effect. Eddie shut up pronto and went back to making his tenth or was it eleventh fag, rolling it between what Dick now focussed on as scarred and filthy fingers.

“Did you?” pressed Dick.

Eddie seemed torn, then he nodded slowly. “She did say, like...”

“And did she say whose it was?”

“Well, it ud be that Si, like...”

“She said that?”

“Well no, she never said - we just assumed like. Ruth offered to help her, you know, get rid of it, but she din wanna know.”

“She wanted the baby?”

“Some gels is juss like that.” Eddie gave another leer. “It makes ’em feel sexy, I reckon. My Ruth’s like that. She’s that horny when she’s expectin’...”

Dick didn’t think he could stand any more revelations about Ruth’s horny habits, or come to that any more lager, so leaving Eddie with a full pint, he made his excuses. When he got home he ate the rather dried up Shepherd’s pie Pamela had left to microwave, then took two paracetamol and went to bed, grateful it was Pam’s Yoga night.

## Chapter Eleven

Anna began the case for the defence of Ruth Webb the following Wednesday. In her opening statement she pointed out, yet again, that there was no actual evidence against Ruth. Everything was circumstantial and in the eye of the beholder. No one was saying Ruth was perfect or spotless, but that there was a huge difference between

an eccentric, even chaotic, lifestyle, including sexual partners other than her husband - and murder.

The first witnesses called spoke to Ruth's good character. They included two neighbours who testified she was 'the soul of kindness', who would 'do anything for you' and her kids were 'always nicely turned out, clean and well-fed looking'. One opined that the general feeling in Bridge Street was that the police had got it terribly wrong, when the Webbs had first been arrested. She didn't say - and Anna didn't ask - what they felt now.

A third witness was a former cellmate, who said Ruth was friendly enough and had kindly tended and loved her animal charges. She had been very upset at the arrest, had missed her kids terribly and had constantly protested her innocence. There was no darkest hour cell-bunk confession to report, much to the disappointment of the press gallery. Apparently, on more than one occasion, Ruth had shouted that they, "could ask 'til they was blue in the face, she'd got nothing to say, 'cos she hadn't done nothin'". The cross examination hadn't produced much gold either. Anthony Farrow had got nothing but huffy looks from the neighbours he questioned - as if they thought they were being accused of lying and were proportionately affronted. He had got the cellmate to admit Ruth had a temper and didn't get on with the other prisoners. But the cellmate qualified that by saying it wasn't all Ruth's fault - the other inmates had called her a child molester, threatened her, picked fights, spat in her food - she'd had to be moved out to special wing for her own protection. Okay, thought Anna, so far so good.

She saw Ruth at the lunch break before hurrying to meet George - and warned her that he would be giving evidence that afternoon. Ruth gave her a faintly baleful glance - Anna was reminded of 'double, double, toil and trouble' but shook Shakespearian witches away - and said she,

"'oped as he's took what I said serious!"

Anna reassured her that of course he had, before dashing to the coffee bar of their assignation. George was there before her, looking immensely dapper in his professional pinstripe and Gieves & Hawkes shirt, only the pink tie a bit of a giveaway to his real role as an arty, nutty Forensic.

He'd ordered decaf latte and steak sandwiches for them both, in some aspects Anna's tastes hadn't changed in years. She fell upon hers gratefully - she'd been too anxious to eat that morning, the first day of a defence she always awoke with

something akin to morning sickness - and de-briefed him on the action in court. They'd spoken since he'd interviewed Ruth of course, and she had a fair idea of what he was going to say, but she wanted to be sure he wasn't going to throw her any googlies. George answered her queries by placing an almost avuncular hand over hers.

"Calm down Anna, it'll be fine. I can't guarantee what I say will get her off, especially if she did it" - he grinned - "but I'll do my best for you."

Anna smiled in return. She was, as ever, grateful for George's sound intellectual process and voice of reason. Though she was still worried about the pink tie.

"Is Ruth Webb mentally ill? In my opinion, not. She doesn't claim to hear voices, she's not depressed, she isn't exhibiting dangerous behaviour, or self-harming. Is she a psychopath? There again I'd say not, and not because I have any problem using that term for women. But under the circumstances, it just isn't a helpful diagnosis. She exhibits distress when others are hurt, her children and her pets for example. She is capable of empathy, as we see from her kindly treatment of friends and neighbours. Even some of the young women who've given evidence against her, say they regarded her as a motherly, affectionate presence. Does she have a borderline personality disorder? - Well possibly. Probably even. But again, it's not a term I regard as helpful.

Ruth Webb in my estimation is a very damaged person and that damage happened in her childhood years, long before she met Eddie Webb. She says - and she will tell you herself - that she was sexually abused by her father, from an early age. Her mother knew this very well but refused to do anything to help her. Ruth became something of a victim thereafter. Her normal responses to relationships were blunted by this incestuous trauma. When a charismatic older man came along - a man with worldly experience, a great story-teller, funny and fun to be with - what's more, exhibiting apparently unconditional love for her, she was immediately captivated. She was happy to give in to his more exacting demands - sexually and otherwise - and, most importantly, Eddie provided an escape route from her appalling home life. She wasn't to know how controlling his behaviour would quickly become - she had little to judge ordinary relationships by - being controlled, used and abused was what she was used to. To her, his behaviour - the enticing of young women into their home, the

pressure he put on her to join in his sexual escapades - was 'normal'. Did she know what else he was doing? Again, she will tell you herself that she did not. Under the circumstances of the household, the many underground rooms, the sound proofing, plus the powerful hold Eddie had over Ruth and the likelihood that, conditioned as she was from an early age, she would accept many of his behaviours unquestioningly, would seem to suggest that quite possibly she didn't.

However, I am not the Judge in this court, or the Jury - I'm relieved to say." (At this point there was a ripple of laughter in Court Four) "You will make up your own minds on that ..."

"Thank you for that, Mr Karlsson." Judge Solomons said, rather dryly. There was another ripple of laughter.

"With respect M'lud, what I meant was that whatever I say is conjecture based on what I've observed of Ruth Webb so far. And what I have observed is that she is a human being. She is not the 'monster' the popular press are so keen to invent. Whether we like it or not, She is human. And so, we must beware of 'judging' Ruth by the unrealistic, 'high minded' standards we may think of as our own 'passionate' beliefs. We are all human. It's a condition from which we cannot escape, but which we are all too quick to repudiate in people who have *transgressed* what society deems to be proper behaviour. Particularly when they are women... Just think about this - if all our own behaviours, our nasty little habits, our darkest fantasies, our most unpleasant and murderous thoughts, were laid out side by side and someone was asked to judge us by them, how would we look? Would we be clean, pristine, moral, upright, without blemish - Good? I don't think so. We make a terrible mistake - and a very short sighted one - when we judge people like Ruth as different - in anything but degree - from us. When we say they're inhuman. Not of our species. Our genus. Given the right conditions - and I really believe this - we are all capable of 'bad acts'; of perverse fantasies, torture, murder, even genocide. Ask yourselves, if you had lived in Nazi Germany - what would you have done? If more recently you were on one side or the other in Bosnia, or in an African conflict - Rwanda or the Congo, Zimbabwe - how would you behave? Survival for the fittest, as Darwin proved, is a red in tooth and claw business.

Besides we Humans have a nasty way or enjoying inflicting pain and humiliation on others - look at Abu Graib. An isolated example? I don't think so. Given

the opportunity, be it child soldiers, roving militia, suicide terrorists, Nazi Capos - we are all vulnerable to being persuaded to behave really badly.

Did this happen to Ruth? Was she suborned by her husband - the man she has described as 'her soul-mate', and, 'the love of her life' - into behaving really badly? Into molesting, torturing, murdering? I can't give an answer to that, but I can say that we are all in danger of not listening to the true evidence about her - because we have already cast her out into moral gloom. Branded her, as we have other women before, as wicked by association, and beyond redemption. We must all ask ourselves - are these women the modern day witches?"

George Karlsson's 'quality of mercy' speech for the defence was the talk of the trial for days. It was widely quoted in the broad sheets, with variously pompous or fulsomely praising editorials. Even the tabloids had fun with it - showing pictures on their page threes of bare busty models wearing medieval punishment devices, the scold, the stocks, chastity belts. One had an article on the last witches put to death in Essex, complete with a gallows and a ducking stool.

In HMP Holloway, Ruth was regarded, almost, with awe when news got round of her unexpected white knight. She herself had listened open-mouthed in the courtroom. She had told him many things about her life with Eddie and her kids in the two hours she'd spent with him, but she'd never hoped for that kind of understanding. It was like he'd really listened to her as... a... person in her own right, not just the other half of a murdering duo, blank-faced and soulless.

When her solicitor, Roly came to the cells that evening she'd fallen on him, hugging and kissing his cheeks. Poor Roly had been rather embarrassed, but she'd just wanted to share the first good feelings she'd had for months. It was his doing after all, to have got Anna as the silk, and Anna's to have got George. They were her team and she felt - momentarily, at least - proud of them.

Anna herself was divided between horror and mirth, both of which she shared with Harry over dinner that week.

"Honestly, what is he like? I'll have no choice but to put her on the stand, now."

"Thought you said you had no choice, anyway?" Said Harry, sucking a chop bone.

“I said the jury would expect it, I didn’t say it was a foregone conclusion...”

“Well, now it is...” Harry poured himself a generous refill of the Chenin. He offered the bottle up to Anna, but she shook her head. “One less thing to worry about.”

“God you surgeons are so... practical.”

“Pragmatic more like,” demurred Harry. “Deal with the circumstances. But I ask you, if you were on the operating theatre which would you rather have - practical good sense or a soliloquy?”

“You should have seen the jurors’ faces,” Anna almost giggled. “They looked stunned. Like someone had just accused them of being Nazis. As for Judge Solomons - well, I never noticed it before, but thank God he has a sense of humour!”

“Good old George.” Harry almost sighed as he said it. “Never one to go half measures.”

## Chapter Twelve

‘Malleus Maleficarum - Hammer of Evil Doers’ (‘Hammer of the Witches’) 1486

### An Academic Commentary

“The intense hatred of women, which is expressed in the Malleus Maleficarum, can be understood partly as the product of a religion based on a male priesthood required to be celibate. The philosophy that underpins such religious practice is inevitably likely to appeal to some men who are misogynistic and is unlikely to be challenged when celibacy is a core part of the faith.

Old, poor, sullen, mad and superstitious women were so easily convinced of their own guilt, that such women would utter curses to prevent themselves being injured by others and that those who feared them could easily believe their misfortunes were due to the curses. The MM shaped cultural views on witchcraft, identifying the features which were to become central to the persecution, providing witch-finders with a template to guide their investigations.

A central element in the Malleus Maleficarum is its quite astonishing targeting of women, and specifically midwives, “who surpass all others in wickedness” (Malleus Maleficarum Part 1 Question VI.) The text expresses the idea that more witches are women and explains it in terms

very much focussed on female sexuality. They refer to such authoritative sources as the Bible, Cicero, Seneca and others to justify the argument that women are much more prone to vice than are men - feebler in intellect, more prone to wickedness and conclude that "All witchcraft comes from carnal lust which is in women insatiable." The document prefigures the enormous numbers of women who would be tortured, burned or hanged in the following century. However, it cannot be claimed that the *Malleus* brought about the fear and hatred of women that was such a clear feature of the persecution. Rather it reflected a view of women that was already prevalent in the church and the educated world, as attested by the number of authorities that the authors refer to.

The treatise argues that because the Devil exists and has the power to do astounding things, witches exist to help. The Devil's power is greatest where human sexuality is concerned, for it was believed that women were more sexual than men. Loose women had sex with the Devil, thus paving their way to become witches. It is mostly witches as opposed to the Devil who recruit other women, by making something go wrong in the life of a respectable matron that makes her consult the knowledge of a witch, or by introducing young maidens to tempting young devils. Witches cast spells and remedies that can be taken to prevent witchcraft or help those that have been affected by it. The arguments are clearly laid for the lay magistrates prosecuting witches - how to conduct a witch trial, from the method of initiating the process and assembling accusations, to the interrogation (including torture) of witnesses. Women who did not cry during their trial were automatically believed to be witches. The treatise singled out women as specifically inclined for witchcraft, claiming they were susceptible to demonic temptations through their manifold weaknesses. It was believed that they were weaker in faith and were more carnal than men.

Women accused as witches often had strong personalities and were known to defy convention by overstepping the lines of proper female decorum. After the publication of the *Malleus*, most of those who were prosecuted as witches were women. Indeed, the very title of the *Malleus Maleficarum* is feminine, alluding to the idea that it was women who were the evil-doers.

The *Malleus Maleficarum* accuses witches of infanticide, cannibalism, casting evil spells to harm their enemies, and having the power to steal men's penises. It goes on to give accounts of witches committing these crimes. It launched centuries of witch-hunts in Europe. Estimations of deaths have varied widely, but the more commonly accepted estimates are between 40,000 and 100,000 people, mostly women. The writers of the *MM* demanded the death sentence for all witches who caused impotence. Their views on contraception outdid the current anti-abortion extremists in the US who are shooting doctors who do abortions. They taught that wasting

human seed by sex outside the vagina (which they called “the ordained vessel”) was worthy of a death sentence - as were all acts of contraception. They also used cod science: ‘there was a defect in the formation of the first woman, since she was formed from a bent rib that is a rib of the breast, which is bent as it were in the contrary direction to a man. And since through this defect she is an imperfect animal, she always deceives’.

Women were said to be practising witchcraft when they “charmed” men “and inclined “the minds of men to inordinate passion” (MM) (Thus if a man raped a woman, she may be to blame because she must have “enchanted” him.) We still use the words the witch-hunters used when we speak of the power of a beautiful woman. A glamorous woman is casting an illusion. A “glamour” was an illusion created by a woman’s spell. A beautiful woman is said to “enchant”, “charm”, “bewitch” us. These words were first used to deny that the beauty of women was naturally attractive to men. Many men loved this theory because it meant they never needed to acknowledge any woman as more talented or spiritually powerful than they. If they did feel a woman was superior, she must be literally bewitching them.

The authors of *Malleus Maleficarum* were very grateful they were not women. They thankfully prayed: “Blessed be the Highest who has so far preserved the male sex from so great an evil.” They agreed that witches could do wondrous things without supernatural help for, “the most extraordinary and miraculous events came to pass by the workings of the powers of nature.” Of course they added that women did not naturally have great magical powers. Women, they said, were weak and thus could only do major acts of magic by putting themselves under the command of devils.

The *Malleus Maleficarum* went through 19 editions and was a principle text for “The Inquisition.”

#### *Malleus Maleficarum Part 2 - Chapter 7*

*“And what, then, is to be thought of those witches who in this way sometimes collect male organs in great numbers, as many as twenty or thirty members together, and put them in a bird's nest, or shut them up in a box, where they move themselves like living members, and eat oats and corn, as has been seen by many and is a matter of common report? For a certain man tells that, when he had lost his member, he approached a known witch to ask her to restore it to him. She told the afflicted man to climb a certain tree, and that he might take which he liked out of the nest in which there were several members. And when he tried to take a big one, the witch said: You must not take that one; adding, because it belongs to a parish priest.”*

Horrifying though the story told by the MM and its commentary was, Cate had to laugh at the nest of members - it was so perfect an analysis of male castration terror and the power of a woman to do it. No wonder the treatise came to the conclusion that, *"Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live"*

She closed the skin-bound book with an almost audible sigh of relief. Normally she would have done such research on the web, but as she had a colleague who worked in the British Library archive, she'd decided to have a look at an actual copy of the infamous *Malleus Maleficarum*. Get the feel of it - as it were. It did, she thought, as she smoothed its shine-worn back, feel ancient and a little creepy - almost as though some of the horrors its followers dealt out had stuck to its pale, gold-embossed skin.

Cate was readying herself for the interview George Karlsson had granted her. He obviously knew his witches - it wouldn't do as a woman, especially one espousing feminist thinking, to know less than he did.

She left the library for the chilly Euston Road, busy with end of day workers and traffic. Anna Wyatt's chambers, where they'd agreed to meet, weren't far and Cate decided to walk, enjoying the brisk breeze blowing through her hair. It might remove some of the shuddering gloom of the archive gallery. She was surprised George had suggested the chambers - he obviously had business with Anna. Cate hoped Anna would come back there, after court ended for the day. She might finally get her to say yes to an interview when the case closed - two birds with one stone.

George was in Anna's tall-windowed office, his chunky body squeezed into a swivel chair by the bookcase. He hadn't, noted Cate, taken the obvious place behind Anna's smart modern-Italian desk. When Cate entered, he jumped to his feet, pink and bustly, rubbing his hands together, and then holding one out to her. She took the chubby freckled offering and was given an emphatically firm and dry shake. That was reassuring. If there was one thing she hated about her job, it was having to shake so many limp, damp hands - she understood why the Queen wore gloves.

"Good to meet you." George was saying. "Tea? Water? No? Okay - so, where do you want me?"

"That chair's fine, or the window seat, if you're comfortable there?"

They settled on the window embrasure with the last of the light behind him. Cate unpacked her light, High Definition camcorder and fixed a small mike to George's lapel, getting a pleasant waft of his warm, and expensive, aftershave as she did so. He

was a sexy little man, she suddenly thought, though that hadn't previously been her impression. He had an apparently natural tactile quality, which was very attractive.

"You know of course, I can't talk about Ruth Webb, or this trial?"

"Yes, of course. But off the record, do you think she's guilty?"

"Trust a journalist! But off the record, I have no idea. Sometimes I can tell, but in her case, really not. She's carrying so much guilt - it's impossible to say if that's about the killings or her whole life."

Cate nodded. "Women do. Carry guilt. And she's vulnerable enough to be persuaded she did the murders, even if she didn't."

George shot her a sharp look. "Been reading up on female psychology?"

Cate smiled. "Caught me! But no - unless you count the *Malleus Maleficarum*."

"Great treatise. Shows us just how terrified men are of you wicked women."

"I take it that's a joke?"

"Well, not entirely. We are terrified of you."

"That leads us neatly in." Cate pressed record. "I wanted to ask you about your work with women offenders in general. If you're terrified, how do you manage?"

"By being very careful. Very respectful of their power and of how I might be on the receiving end of it." George put the tips of his fingers together and leaned back into the cushions. "I learned my lesson early on."

"Could you tell me about that?"

"It was when I was a baby psychiatrist on my first assignment. Lamb to the slaughter, with a group of extreme offenders in a high security unit. I was being introduced on my rounds and a very disturbed patient said she wanted me to change her medication. She was told that Dr Karlsson was just saying hello today and would deal with specific requests at his next consultation. The woman grabbed my tie, pulled me forward, head-butted me and kicked me in the privates. I learned after that to keep my distance."

"No goolie-kicking, I promise!" Cate broke into laughter.

George turned out to be an excellent interviewee. He was a practised raconteur, with, it seemed, no shame or reticence about sharing - a special side-line being the telling of stories against himself. These largely featured women who had threatened him, wounded him, cursed him and tried to make love to him. If half what he said was true, it was a wonder he'd survived so long. And no wonder at all that his marriages hadn't. Cate did in fact get personal with him when asking the effect such dark and

dangerous work had had on his own life. George was thoughtful for some time, then said that in his profession ten years was the burn-out time. He'd often had to counsel younger colleagues that they should take extended leave, or at least go on holiday. "When they start to invade your dreams," he said, "and sooner or later they do, you know it's time to stop."

Cate nodded.

"But what about you, Cate?"

"Me?"

"Yes. What effect does doing this work have on your life? You are dealing with killers too - have they got into your dreams?"

Cate gave an awkward laugh. She hadn't come prepared to talk about herself. She certainly wasn't going to start telling a psychiatrist about her dreams. She started to gather up her equipment.

"Don't want to answer, eh? I'll take that as a 'yes'." George was teasing her Cate knew, and yet it was hard to lightly parry his banter.

"I do lots of other things, this isn't my only work."

"So - that makes it less invasive?"

"Well, yes. I don't go home with it 24/7 like you. Sometimes I'm filming bear cubs. Or beautiful scenery."

"How would you like to see some on Saturday?"

"Psycho-killers?"

"Beautiful scenery."

"Oh." Despite her sophistication, Cate was shocked. Was Dr Karlsson asking her on a date? Was that ethical? Was it even legal?

"Buckinghamshire. I've got a VIP box for the boat-race finish. We could motor out after and have a nice lunch?"

"I..."

"Good. I'll pick you up at 9am - address?"

Out on the street afterwards, Cate could hardly believe she'd given it to him. Was she mad? She chuckled to herself as she humped the equipment into the boot of her battered VW - he certainly had a way with him. Disappointingly, Anna Wyatt had

rung as she was packing up the camera to say she would be late. Cate overheard George telling her he wasn't going to wait, as he had an evening appointment. He had waved Cate cheerily off the premises, promising her a, "Splendid day out on Saturday. Provided the Light Blues win, of course." It was only when she was half way home that Cate remembered she had promised to see Ethan on Saturday.

## Chapter Thirteen

### TWO YEARS EARLIER

The news of Eddie Webb's suicide hit Dick Andrews like a ton of a rubble. It was simply the last thing he was expecting. It happened the weekend after their encounter in the pub and he couldn't but help think he'd had something - a lot probably - to do with it. But it was unexpected, in that Eddie had betrayed no anxiety, no sign of depression, or indeed anything but a cheerful loquacity and leery goodwill towards all and sundry. Still, it seemed obvious that the suicide pointed to Eddie's guilt, and that after due diligence the case would be closed on Carrie Redmond's murder. A love affair had gone wrong, a young girl had got pregnant by her married lover and when she wouldn't have an abortion, the lover had decided to get rid of the trouble in his own way. And yet - there were things in this scenario that DCI Andrews found very unsatisfactory. If it was that simple, why had the body been left virtually in the open? Why had Eddie - and Ruth - not adopted a more discreet position? What about the boyfriend, 'Si' - what role had he played?

The police were round at the Webb household within minutes of Ruth's hysterical 999 call. The paramedics were already there and had taken the body down and pronounced Eddie dead. Ruth cast an evil glance towards DCI Andrews when he entered, dragged back from an early round at the golf club.

She was breathlessly explaining she'd come down in the early morning on Sunday and found Eddie hanging from a beam in the scullery. "Thank God it were before the kids wuz up", she kept repeating. No, she'd had no inkling. He'd been fine

when he got back from work the night before. There was no note. No explanation at all. Now Dick Andrews had appeared, she turned on him with ferocity. "It's you lot 'oundin 'im. Thass wot's dunnit. You lot's driven' 'im to it. It's 'arrassment , thass wot it is. I'll hav you! You won' get away with it - I knows my rights!"

She then burst into noisy tears and was taken to sit down by attending WPC Brendan. It was a strange reaction, thought Dick, of all the ways you could respond to your husband's apparent suicide. Unfortunately, she had a point. If Eddie did turn out to be innocent she might try to sue the police, though it would be hard to prove their actions had amounted to harassment. The police case against Eddie had been coincidentally strengthened the previous day when word came back from the DI he'd sent to Leicester, that Si Matthews had been backpacking in Thailand when the murder was committed. There were numerous witnesses to confirm his absence from the UK and his whereabouts that week - including obviously, his parents. They said there was talk of a girlfriend going with him, but at the last moment she'd cried off. He'd gone with his best friend from school instead, and wouldn't back for another fortnight. On that Sunday morning, everything pointed to Eddie, but frustratingly there was no actual proof. And now there would never be a confession. DNA was their only hope and DCI Andrews would have to get a thorough body swab, pending a charge for murder.

He was on the phone outside the property sorting that out, when he saw Michele Webb watching from the bay window of a nearby house. The kids had all been taken to a friendly neighbour, as soon as Ruth discovered Eddie's body. No matter how hysterical she seemed, she'd had the foresight to do that, thought Dick Andrews - which was interesting. He nodded to Michele, the poor kid must be in a terrible state - well, all of them would be really. To his surprise she nodded back and then made a curious gesture, almost as if she was beckoning him. He gave a swift look round - there was no one in the vicinity except for a PC stationed at the door to prevent unauthorised entry - then he crossed the road towards Michele, who had now disappeared from the window. There was a path leading from the front gate to the side of the house and he caught a glimpse of someone hovering towards the bush-shaded rear. With another quick check around - empty street, no apparent watchers - DCI Andrews opened the gate and took the narrow, paved path to the side entrance of the house, where indeed, Michele was pressed against the fence behind one of the budding

bushes. Her white face was pinched, her eyes enormous. She looked suddenly far older than her fourteen years.

“Michele... I’m so sorry about your dad. Are you all right?”

Michele nodded, then reached out and gripped the lapel of his coat, pulling him into the shadows.

“I don’ wan’ no-one to see us.” She whispered.

“Okay.” But he had known that, intuitively. “How can I help?”

He was thinking maybe something to do with Eddie’s suicide, some request not to be sent home, or to have the older siblings alerted - in other words, a cry for help. He was completely unprepared for what happened next. Michele put her hand into her pocket and brought out a carefully folded piece of paper, which she held out to DCI Andrews. “It’s a note. My dad left it.”

Dick took the paper and opened it. There in a scrawly, handwritten print was Eddie Webb’s suicide note. “I Eddie Webb, being of sound mind, declare that I am the killer of Carrie Redmond. Because I don’t wish to bring more shame on my family, I am ending it now. There is also nine (approx) other bodies which is buried under our patio. Eddie Webb.” The signature was also printed.

Dick swallowed hard. He looked at Michele whose eyes were fixed on his face.

“D’you know what this is, Michele?”

The girl nodded.

“Suicide note.”

She sounded remarkably composed.

“And how did you come by it?”

“I come down early this morning. Before anyone was up. I found me dad. He was dead. This note was lyin’ on the kitchen table.” She paused then added, as if for extra verification, “With the marmalade pot on top of it.”

Dick Andrews shook his head slowly - this was hard to believe. “But Michele, what made you take the note? And why didn’t you say anything to your Mum?”

“She woun’ ’ave given it to you. I thought... I knew... she would hide it. Tear it up or somethin’...”

“What made you think that?” Talk about the plot thickened.

“She woun’ want you to know what he did. All them things he did. What he says in there...” She had read it, then. “he shame like, for the family...”

“Yes,” said Dick. “I see, but still, it’s an odd thing to do.”

Oddly self-possessed he was thinking, for a child in shock who'd just found her father hanging. "Weren't you frightened? Didn't you scream or anything?"

"No. I just took the note, got some orange juice and went back to bed."

"You weren't upset that your father was dead - and in such a manner?"

Michele shook her head again, her mouth a stubborn line.

"I was glad."

It was one of the few moments in his long career when Dick Andrews was genuinely speechless.

## Chapter Fourteen

The trip to the boat race went rather awry. For a start it was snowing that morning - nothing heavy, just a wet spit of sleet from a dull, grey sky. A reminder that it was hardly Spring yet - and indeed the last couple of weeks it had been both cold and gloomily wintry, as if to mirror the darkness of the case in which they were all involved. Cate replaced the rather smart, trouser suit she'd been going to wear with jeans, Uggs and a large furry Parka, usually reserved for filming. So when George rang her bell promptly at 9am, she was thrown to see he was dapperly dressed with a Cambridge blazer and tie. He even had a panama with blue band - obviously this race was important to him.

His 'beamer' was top of the range of course, with a hood that, had it been the shiny, sunny day they'd envisioned, would, she was certain, have been down and hair and caution blown to the wind. George drove as if that were the case anyway, and a couple of times Cate found herself clinging to the passenger handle.

The VIP box jutting above the Thames was full of similarly, smartly attired people and Cate felt embarrassingly under-dressed, though George didn't seem to notice, or care. He introduced her to his - largely ex-Cambridge - friends, as a, 'very accomplished documentary film maker'. She wondered if he'd Googled her, done his

homework. She'd done hers on him before the interview. Originally of Swedish extraction, George's forbears had settled on Tyneside. Far from being the product of public school, George was a Grammar school boy, son of a GP in Ashington. All traces of Geordie had been eradicated from his accent - clearly a decision he'd taken early on, perhaps at Cambridge. But it made sense of his need to be accepted, and demonstrated the pleasure he took in his own success. Perhaps too, it made him more at home with his patients, most of whom would not have been near a university.

Champagne was already flowing by 9.45 and high spirits abounded, people - mostly the men - were out on the terrace despite the biting cold and an overhung, broody sky. The women, who were called things like 'Mags' and 'Poppy' stayed in the warm, protecting their fragile Spring silks and re-applying their lipstick. They barely involved Cate, whom they clearly viewed with suspicion - what on earth was George up to this time? - they laughed and talked non-stop, while downing large amounts of champagne. Cate wondered what they did. If, indeed, they did anything. Their husbands or partners were obviously very rich, judging by the number of Mercs, Porsches and BMWs in the car park. How much simpler her own life could have been if she'd married a rich husband. A patron. Well, there was still time, she supposed.

The race started with Cambridge out in front and when they finally came into view round a deep bend, there was much shouting and cheering from the terrace. Sadly their advantage didn't last and a few minutes later the Cambridge boat had dropped behind and Oxford romped to the finish. George's crowd were vociferous in their criticisms and, fuelled by more champagne, quickly discussing how they'd been robbed and what had gone wrong with the tactics. It was the Cox's fault it was concluded. "Bloody dreadful - no idea how to crack the whip. Better last year when it was that girl." "Looker too!" "Yeah, that bouncing bosom!" This was followed by suggestive laughter, which the women did not engage in.

Given his driving when he'd been sober, Cate was alarmed to see George down a full glass of champagne to get over his disappointment. Perhaps he was empathising with the Cox, who'd now been called everything from a pig to a cow by the onlookers.

"Lunch." Said George, after another bottle had been trashed. There's a nice little pub on the water...

"Pub?" Said Cate, arching her eyebrows. It was the nearest to a comment she felt she could go. George was, after all, a man of a certain age - and a professional. Still,

she was glad to escape from the ribald company - they diminished George somehow, which was a pity.

“Five minutes away.” George promised. “Come on, you media bunnies never say no to a drink!”

Cate wondered if his use of the word bunny was deliberate. Meant to reduce her, make her manageable. As a psychiatrist, he must have an acute awareness of the language people choose - so yes, she decided. It could have been worse - he could have called her a media whore. She wondered what that would have meant.

The Pub was indeed a very pleasant gastro establishment, part of a well-known chef's franchise. George flourished the menu and asked if Cate needed advice, as he knew it pretty intimately. Amused, and curious about what his choices would be, she said she was happy for him to order. The men in her life were competing to impress her with their gourmet expertise, she thought. How odd. Though she liked food, this media bunny rarely gave much thought to what she was actually eating. As a glamorous ceviche of Scandinavian salmon arrived, she felt a little guilty on Ethan's behalf. She was meant to be out with him now - she'd ignored a couple of texts already.

“Tell me more about this film of yours,” said George when he'd cleared the last mouthful of salmon with its last drop of wondrous dressing. Cate felt if she hadn't been present, he might have picked up his plate and licked it. “Have you interviewed lots of killers?”

“Not as many as you.” Cate smiled, “Mostly it's about the six degrees of separation. How having a killer in their midst affects the lives of everybody around them.”

“Aha - I imagine you've picked off some of my colleagues then - though of course none of them is such a handsome, photogenic beast as myself.”

Cate couldn't help laughing. The man's ego was so outsize, it was actually attractive - perhaps it was the satirical beam in his eyes that redeemed him.

“Well, you certainly have great presence.”

“Not to say a stunning sense of the absurd. You'll have noticed, I'm sure, that lots of us forensic types have a terrific line in black humour.”

“A survival mechanism.” Said Cate. “I don't take it too seriously. I do the same.”

She paused. “I agree, actually, with lots you said in court. We're all too busy pretending deviant behaviour is nothing to do with us. We're of a different, morally superior calibre.”

“Well, to be fair, we are.” Corrected George. “We may say, that bastard! I’d like to kill him - but we don’t actually go out and do it.”

Cate had the feeling George was referring to one of his colleagues - perhaps wishing that he himself were not so civilised.

“It’s particularly terrifying when it’s women,” he continued. “They are the keepers of the flame - the ones holding society together. Without that influence men would just be rampant and out of control, there’s no saying where it would end - nothing less than the dissolution of the world, as we know it. More Sauvignon?” He poured into Cate’s uplifted glass. “Quite right - actually, it’s rather a good one.”

“No wonder we have to punish women so much when they step out of line,” murmured Cate, sipping. “Back in the day the argument was that women are much more prone to vice than men - feebler in intellect, more disposed to wickedness. The Malleus Maleficarum concludes, ‘All witchcraft comes from carnal lust which is in women insatiable.’ ”

“Are you?”

“Am I what?”

“Insatiable?”

“Cate laughed, momentarily taken aback by the frankness of the question. He might have been interviewing her. Cheekily employing her own shock tactics.

“Yes. But not for sex.” She paused. “I don’t think.”

George gave a snort, almost inhaling his wine.

I’m insatiable for knowledge. Information. Truth. That’s what all my work is about.

“Truth. Ooh - that’s tricky. Not many people want to hear it.”

Cate nodded. “I know. We’ll rush to read endless, titillating coverage in the tabloids - but when someone tries to tell it like it really is, they get punished for it.”

“Have you been punished for it?”

“What makes you say that?”

“You’re a provocative woman - your company name alone tells me that, never mind your attitude. And declared interests. This film for example, it’s about women who kill?”

“It’s not just about that...” said Cate, quickly. She didn’t know why she felt the need to defend it.

“Whatever, it’s not exactly cheery. Augurs scary things to come from the filmmaker - especially as she’s a woman. It isn’t every day a woman exposes her dark side. Can get her into a lot of bother.”

“We all have a dark side, George. You said it yourself in court.”

“Touché. Drink up - let’s get another bottle.”

George drove back beautifully. He seemed even more creative when drunk - having a ball with the traffic, diving in and out, cursing other drivers good-humouredly. Once or twice he stopped to point out special views, secluded walks, good picnicking places. He had, he confided, done much of his courting around these lanes. After the third attempt he knew them rather well. Cate couldn’t help wondering if he was considering her for a fourth.

It was already gone seven when he pulled up at her front door. He made no attempt to invite himself in, make another date, or even kiss her. Surprised - and a little piqued, she didn’t want him to do any of those things, of course, but still - she heard herself thanking him for the day out and hoping they would meet again. He gave an enthusiastic, but non-committal response, wished her good luck with her ‘dangerous, dark project’ and drove off with a wave. How very annoying. George obviously knew how to play the game. Softly, softly with the ladies.

Her phone was ringing as she entered her flat. It would be Ethan she knew. It had the urgent, tone of an annoyed suitor. She’d see him tonight, she thought - the sudden memory of his hot tongue thrusting down her throat making her shiver. She picked up the phone.

“Ethan hi. So sorry to miss your calls, I... I got pulled into an emergency session - my editor thought he’d lost a whole lot of crucial footage. False alarm fortunately, but it took all day to retrieve it. Sure, why not. Where would you like to meet?”

*That night the dream was different. There was swirling water again, but this time she was drowning in it. She was strapped into some sort of contraption. She couldn’t move her arms and legs, her gown billowed out around her as she plunged,*

*terrified, through the murky water, down, down, down. Weed wound round her throat, tangled with her hair - there was the foul taste of muddy river, or pond water. She struggled to escape, but her limbs were pinned. Bound with leather straps. Through strands of snaking hair, she could see her fingers, pale green, clutching at the water. The pain in her lungs was unbearable, but she dare not let her breath go. Without it she would drown, surely. Bubbles escaped her clamped lips and shot upwards. Then suddenly, she too was rushing upwards - pulled with great force through the dense depths. She reached the surface heaving and retching, but no sooner had she gasped in a mouthful of air than back she plunged - the contraction - a seat she realised - manipulated with great force by someone on the bank. Many hands - a crowd of screaming people. She faintly heard shouts, "Drown the bitch!" "Dirty witch!" "Duck her again - she's still breathing!" Then laughter, disappearing as the eddies swept over her head, muffling all other sound and sensation.*

## Chapter Fifteen

### TWO YEARS EARLIER

The week after Eddie Webb's suicide was unforgettable for DCI Andrews. Indeed, he often relived it later in nightmares. As Senior Investigating Officer on the case, everything ultimately fell to him. He was acutely conscious of the responsibility. (Two years later when he came to give his court testimony, the over-riding memory was still of intense pressure, and yes, fear. No amount of Bordeaux could lull it. Besides, he tried not to drink too much in those circumstances.)

Later, on the day Eddie's body was found, when Arthur Rowbotham's forensic team had been in and taken thorough DNA swabs - much to Ruth's fury, "You still carn' leave the poor beggar in peace, even now yous killed 'im." - and the body had been removed to the mortuary, Dick Andrews tried again with Michele. The children had not been returned to Bridge Street, which after the note's explosive confession, was now being treated as a potential crime scene, but taken in by social services -

again, much to Ruth's rage - until decisions could be made about them. They were now in the common room of the local care home, being fed fish fingers and chips and watching telly. The two older ones, Carly and Lisa, were mutinously refusing food and kept saying they wanted to go home; the little ones were not at all sure what had happened - though they knew it was something bad. The older sister and brother, Sue and Andy, had been contacted and were reported to be on their way. Ruth was still at Bridge Street, 'helping the police with their enquiries'.

Dick Andrews sat down by Michele, who was playing with a Nintendo set and gently removed her headphones. Michele stared at him, warily.

"Michele," began Dick gently, "can you talk to me for a few minutes?"

Michele gave a quick nod, at the same time swiftly checking if any of her siblings were watching, but they were gripped by X-Factor.

"You said you were glad your Dad was dead - can you tell me what you mean by that? Why you are glad?"

"He was a mean shit." Said Michele.

Despite himself Dick Andrews was shocked. It was no way to describe a recently dead parent. Particularly not one who'd committed suicide.

"He killed my cat," Michele continued, "stomped on her with his boots. She were only a kitten, really."

"How upsetting for you," said Dick. "Why did he do that?"

"He says she's pissed on his trousers. He allus leaves 'em by the back door when he comes in from work. Mum, see, she don't like anything dirty in the 'ouse."

"I do see," said Dick. Interesting revelation on Ruth's character he thought. He supposed it depended on what you meant by dirty.

"She's buried under the patio," continued Michele. "It was dug up, so I buried her - give her a nice send off with daisies and my iPod playing an' that."

"When was this Michele?"

The girl thought. "Last year - March. I remember 'cos she's buried next to Alana."

A cold hand gripped Dick Andrews' heart. It felt like violent indigestion.

"Alana?"

"She was another orpair we 'ad. Used to look after us when Mum and Dad wuz out. She come from that place up the road. That 'ome..."

"Chester House?"

“Yeah - that’s it. She was nice. I still got her slippers.”

Indigestion or not, Dick made a mental note to get hold of them for DNA testing.

“And how do you know Alana is buried there?”

“I seen Eddie - Dad that is - digging the hole - two days after Alana disappeared, like.”

“Disappeared?”

“Well, went off, they said...”

“Who said?”

“Eddie. Eddie and Ruth. My parents.” The contempt with which the girl spat out the word was way beyond her years.

Dick had to get this straight.

“So, your Mum and Dad said Alana had left, but you knew she hadn’t?”

Michele nodded. She looked suddenly much older and sharper.

“I keep watch see, in a place they don’t know I know. I seen Dad take her down the basement. She ’ad his Gaffa tape over her mouth. She was kicking and struggling like.”

“And this was a couple of days before you saw her in the hole in the garden?”

“Oh, I never seen her in the hole. I just knew she wuz there, cos thass where he put all the others.”

Dick took a deep breath. “And how do you know that, Michele? Have you ever seen one of the ’others down there?”

Michele shook her head,

“But it was a family joke, like. You know, if you don’t be’ave - do your chores, eat your tea or whatever - Dad’ll put you under the patio.”

Dick wondered why Michele was telling him this with such apparent ease. Families with horrid secrets usually rallied round the surviving parent, stuck together, a circle of shame. It was rare in cases like this for kids to be so forthcoming. Cases like this - what was he thinking! Had he ever had a case like this? What on earth was it developing into?

“Were you scared he’d put you under the patio?”

“We all was. We ’ad to do what he said. What they both said,” she corrected herself.

“Your Mum was involved too?”

Michele took another look round. Lisa and Carly had their eyes on her, Dick noticed.

Michele shrugged. "I don't know no more." She picked up the Nintendo again and very deliberately put in the earphones.

By late afternoon the diggers had moved in. Despite Ruth's screams - "You shits, you cunts, my Eddie laid that patio hisself - look at the work in there..." - the summer evenings were still long and the demolition could begin. So far, Dick Andrews had not told Ruth he was in possession of Eddie's suicide note. Partly he wanted to protect Michele, who'd made it clear that if he told Ruth how he'd come by it, "She'd kill me!" Under the circumstances, that could be only too true. Mostly he needed Arthur to use his skills to verify that the note was indeed Eddie's - you never knew. The possibility that Michele had written it herself was too horrible, unthinkable - but Dick was taking no chances. A huge amount of equipment was being assembled under the white crime scene canopy, bounded by strips of green and yellow crime scene tape. The Webb's garden soon looked like an archaeological dig in Jordan or, less appropriately, with its huge forensic tent, a wedding. DCI Andrews' excuse to Ruth, before they started was that Eddie was a murder suspect and owing to some information received from a 'colleague' the garden would have to be searched. She went unusually quiet and sat down. Dick told WPC Brendan to make her a cup of tea.

More police had been drafted in, grumpily giving up their leave at short notice. Sgt Jimmy Bland, in shiny new wellies, was put in charge of the working roster, PC Wayne Amble was in the driving seat of a digger - apparently he'd always wanted a go on one - DC Shane Dawkins wanted a go too, but Dick Andrews wanted his skills otherwise employed. He was to be the family liaison officer.

"What the fuck kind of job is that, Guv?" Whined Shane, but Dick wouldn't change his mind. He didn't want his young protégée traumatised by the discovery of body parts - he drank too much already.

During the evening, while Dick was supervising the arrival of the heavy lifting gear, tricky in narrow Bridge Street, the older Webb siblings appeared. Sue, who clearly favoured Eddie's looks, though without his leeriness, ignored the police and went straight into the house - presumably to find her Mother. Andy, a good looking,

longhaired youth of about twenty, hovered awkwardly, as though unsure why he was there at all. DCI Andrews went over to speak to him.

“Andy thanks for coming down. You’ve heard what’s happened?”

“What - that Dad’s dead, like? Yeah. But whass all this, then..?” He gestured towards the diggers, already upending the heavy flag-stones. Dick noticed his hands were grimy. Ingrained oil, he supposed, from his job as a mechanic.

“I’m sorry for the mess, but your Dad... well, I haven’t told your Mum this yet but your Dad, he admitted to something before he died.”

“Oh yeah? Like what?” Andy had turned nervily aggressive.

“Like murder, Andy. Specifically, of a young woman known to the household, Carrie Redmond. Do you remember her?”

Andy jerked his head, apparently involuntarily, at the mention of Carrie’s name. He didn’t meet Dick’s eyes... “Carrie, yeah. She used to come round a bit. Baby-sat and that. Friend of my Mum’s more like.”

He looked thoroughly shifty, thought Dick. Clearly he knew more than he was letting on.

“Did you know Carrie yourself?”

“Well, o’ course, I met her a few times. She seemed a nice enough girl”

“You didn’t have anything more to do with her than that..?”

“Wha’? No.” He shook his head vehemently. “She ’ad a boyfriend, like.” Andy now seemed quite uncomfortable. He took a tobacco pouch out of his pocket and rather fumblingly extracted a paper and enough tobacco for a rollie. Diversionary activity, thought Dick. Andy rolled in the same manner as his dead Dad - slowly and ruminatively, giving himself time to think. The digger Wayne Amble was driving crashed into a low rockery wall at this point. There was a screech from the kitchen window where Ruth stood watching. Andy winced. Dick turned and shouted,

“Watch it Wayne - you’re not meant to demolish the whole bleddy house!” Well, not yet anyway, he added silently.

“I’ll let you get into your Mum...” Dick released Andy, who was now lighting up his fag. He felt the moment had passed. He needed a proper sit down interview with young Andy.

“I just want to get it straight how such a thing could have happened, Andy. Your Dad made some strange claims... to a... a work associate.”

Andy gave a snort of hollow laughter. “Dad was allus one for the stories. ‘Specially at work. You coun’ stop him. But you coun’ believe a word he said, neither. Rubbish mostly.”

“May be,” said Dick. “But just to be sure... would you mind coming down to the station, in the morning?”

“‘Spose not.” Andy was truculent, “If I can park my bike there. I ’as to get to work by twelve...”

Dick nodded and Andy sloped off into the house. Shortly afterwards there was a loud burst of crying from indoors. Dick Andrews could hear a woman - Sue, most probably - making soothing noises. Yes he’d interview her too, he thought, but tomorrow. He’d had enough revelations for a Sunday. Almost Old Testament, when you thought about it. They sure were an extraordinary family.

## Chapter Sixteen

If Anna thought her defence case could rest on George Karlsson’s electric testimony, she was much mistaken. When the atoms from his charge had settled, Antony Farrow QC called a witness whose sole purpose, it soon became clear, was to rebut everything George had said. There was a frisson in court as Michele Webb was escorted in to take the stand. It was at least partly because of her biker gear. Who comes to court dressed in leathers with chains dangling everywhere and a nose stud? But mostly because it was all over the court twitter-vine that Farrow had called Michele to testify earlier but she had gone missing. It was something of a coup for him to have got her to the stand now, especially as after George’s eloquence, the jury might sway in Ruth’s favour. Farrow looked more than a little smug as he fondled his lapel preparing to address the crowd.

Michele was also wearing her customary mulish face - she didn’t cast a glance at her Mother. Ruth however, fixed her with a powerful black beam from behind her glasses. Despite her tough image, and though sixteen now, Michele was still so small

she could barely see over the rail and Judge Solomons ordered a stool for her to stand on. There was quite a kerfuffle as one was found and Anna took the opportunity it afforded to survey the jury. They looked worried and anticipatory at the same time – suffused with a kind of feral glee. No doubt they would be squirming soon enough at the things Michele would divulge. This case was gutter press thrills with knobs on.

Anna herself knew very well what Michele was likely to say from her police statements, and had discussed her potential disclosures at length with her team. She was very concerned that Farrow had finally been able to produce Michele - a witness they had themselves rejected as likely to be hostile - to demolish any sympathy George's words had gleaned for Ruth.

Ruth's solicitor, Roly Baring, was of the opinion that Michele had such a vagrant history she could probably be easily enough discredited. In the time since Ruth's arrest, Michele had run away from no fewer than three foster homes, staying eventually with her older sister, Sue. Michele had then taken up with a gang of tough lesbians, notorious for petty crime in the small town. There was also the suspicion of drug abuse, and even prostitution. Sue had called in the social workers on a number of occasions, saying Michele was out of control and a danger to herself, if not her own family. But things generally settled down again. Roly thought there was a strong bond between the sisters. For the moment Michele was still living, at least occasionally, at Sue's, which he took to be an influence for the good - however marginally. It may even have been Sue who'd helped get her to court - though it was likely her evidence would be damaging to their mother.

Dan had lent Ruth his mobile earlier in the week and listened to a conversation between her and Michele, in which Ruth had begged Michele to visit her. The girl hadn't been near her since the arrest. Ruth had been very distressed when Michele refused. Afterwards, she'd cried and said how cute and loving Michele was when she was little, how she was always her favourite, "til she got too know-all and big for her boots". Clearly, it was a complex relationship.

Judge Solomons banged his gavel and declared that now the witness was satisfactorily visible, court proceedings could continue. Antony Farrow stood with his sheaf of notes and they were off.

To say Michele Webb's evidence was damning to Ruth was to put it very lightly. Starting when she was 7 years old, she alleged, her father had been sexually abusing her. She gave many incidents, but a particularly graphic one stuck in everyone's mind.

Her earliest abuse memory was of her Dad holding her down and sticking a large black dildo in her, tearing her open and causing her to scream with pain.

“That must have been very frightening?” Suggested Farrow.

“Terrifyin’!”

“This was, after all, your Dad - a man you loved and trusted?”

“I juss din’ understand what was ’appnin. Why he was doing this.”

“You say you screamed. Did anyone hear you?”

“We wuz in the cellar. Me Dad, he’d done it up like. It was an underground, sort of den. We sometimes played there.”

A communal shudder went round the court as it was recalled from DCI Andrews evidence what was later discovered in this kiddies play area.

“So, did anyone come to your rescue?”

Michele paused and shifted her eyes to Ruth. Ruth’s glasses had slipped down her nose, but for once she didn’t push them up. Her eyes stayed fixed on the ledge in front of her.

“Yes,” Michele said slowly. “Me Mum came.”

“And what did your ‘Mum’ do?”

“She just stood there, looking. Me Dad said to her, give us a ’and. I was kicking and crying like.”

“And what happened next?”

“Me Mum, she come over and she says to me, now be a good girl, this is all for your own good. Then she gets hold of me and pins down me arms so me Dad can, you know...’

“So your Dad can..?”

“Stick it up me more. The dildo. She held me down ’til he got it right inside me.”

“How long did this incident last?”

“It seemed a long time. Me dad was moving the dildo around inside me, and sort of moanin’ and me Mum, she had one hand over me mouth an’ she was sayin’, ‘Don’t worry, your Dad’s just helpin’ you out. This is all to make you a better person, a better wife later on...’”

“How did you feel about that?”

“Betrayed. She betrayed me. She was on his side. Then and always after.”

“There were many other incidents?”

“Loads. He used to get me down to the cellar, pretty much every night. It wasn’t long ’til he started sticking his own thing in me, instead of the dildo.”

“His own thing?”

“His cock, prick, willy... penis.”

“I see.” Antony Farrow wiped his brow with a spotless hanky accepted from his junior.

“And was your ‘Mum’ still aiding and abetting him?”

A loud expletive escaped from Ruth. All eyes turned to her.

“Fuck, indeed.” Said Antony Farrow.

The judge called a short recess for everyone to cool down. Cate saw Ethan dash out of the press gallery. Hot to be first with the copy, of course. She looked forward to reading it, wondering what spin he’d use this time. They had spent a torrid Saturday night together. The more fuelled, no doubt, by her irritation over George Karlsson’s cavalier behaviour. Ethan was a good lover though, she had to hand it to him - he knew how to please. She had spent most of Sunday in a post-orgasmic swoon, interrupted only by Ethan’s deli-counter brunch served with home-made Bucks Fizz, and later a horror movie which had them both in tucks, so different was it from the reality they were experiencing every day in Court.

Today was no exception. In fifteen minutes proceedings resumed and with them Antony Farrow’s questioning.

“I’m curious Michele, about the rest of the household. Did anyone else know what was going on? Surely your siblings must have heard, or commented?”

“Well, see the cellar was soundproofed. So you coun’ really hear much above that level. An’ the little ones, they wuz just too little.”

“But what about your older brother and sister...” Farrow consulted his notes, “Sue and Andy?”

“Sue, she wuz away then, livin’ with my Auntie Betty. Auntie Betty had an accident ‘n’ she wuz in a wheelchair, she needed someone to look after her, see. But Andy” - Michele took a dramatic pause and looked round the court - a number of jurors were shaking their heads in horrified disbelief. In the press gallery there was furious scribbling.

“Andy used to join in with me Dad... later, like, when he wuz old enough. They had this, like, deal.”

“A deal, you say”

“They only did it together when Ruth, my Mum that is, wasn’t there.”

“So there were occasions when just your Dad and Andy were present.”

“Lots. And with the other girls.”

“The ‘other girls’ being...”

“First off me sisters. And then, all the ones that stayed with us. Orpairs, and nannies, like. All the ones they murdered.”

“She’s a little liar!” screeched Ruth, when they convened in the holding cell some hours and a great deal more unpleasant evidence later. “She’s allus bin difficult and contrary. Many’s the time I’ve bin forced to take the belt to ’er, ’an now she’s gettin’ her own back. Thass why she stole Eddie’s note and give it the filth in the firs’ place! She juss wanted to get me in trouble!”

“Are you saying she’s making the whole story up?”

It wasn’t the first time Roly, or Anna, had asked the question. But Ruth had never given a straight answer.

Now she said, “She knows as well as I does who wuz responsible. Who allus had the first... an’ the last word. It was ’er Dad, an’ he was a sick, sick man.”

The team exchanged glances. Ruth’s words were horribly reminiscent of what she’d said about her own father.

“We’ll be cross-examining tomorrow. We’ll be able to discredit what she’s said then.”

Anna spoke with more optimism than she felt. Michele’s story had been very compelling.

“I should bleddy think so!” Ruth snarled. “Blamin’ me! Ask Sue! Ask anybody! I done all I could to protect that girl and this is what I get. She’s just a cunt! She’s a lesbo and a prostitute and a cunt!”

Ruth was starting to froth up. Anna knew there was no point in going on. Besides, she’d invited Roly back to dinner and frankly, couldn’t wait to get away to somewhere normal. Of course, in kindly inviting the lonely Roly back, she was taking

her work home with her. But she needed to discuss strategy with him anyway. Perhaps there was something they'd over-looked? Anything to help redress the balance of the increasingly damning case against their client.

## Chapter Seventeen

### TWO YEARS EARLIER

Detective Chief Inspector Andrews' interview with Andy Webb did not provide as much information as he would have liked. Andy was, by turns, aggressive and defensive. Especially when quizzed on Eddie's relationship with Carrie. More than once he reminded Dick that his Dad was, "Dead, you know. Less 'ave a bit of respect!" Strangely though, he did not seem upset by the actual death. More angry - or even glad. Perhaps Michele wasn't the only person who considered Eddie a shit.

Andy did admit Carrie was a frequent visitor to the household, often staying over after going to Karaoke with Ruth, and that her boy friend, Si, was by her own account, "a bit of a wanker". No, he had no idea of any involvement between her and his father, let alone that she was pregnant (his eyes flickered wildly at this point - a good thing, thought Dick, that smoking was banned in the interview suite, otherwise for sure he'd have been reaching for a rollie). But - and here he gave a sort of leer - it wouldn't surprise him, his Dad was a known 'goer'. An odd revelation for someone trying to protect his parent, thought Dick.

"Yes - so he told me." Dick said. "By his own admission, he had affairs with many women..."

"I woun' call 'em affairs. They wuz nothin' serious - me Mam woun' have that. It was just a bit of fun he'd likely have with the lodgers... the kids' nannies... you know... anyone really, who wuz stayin'..."

"So your Mother knew about these incidences?"

“Oh, yeah. Like as not she’d join in. Me Dad liked a bit of ‘lesbo’ action. He often said he’d ‘ad Mum go with a ‘lemon’.”

This tallied with what Eddie himself had told him, recalled Dick. And it had been clear from his horrible confidences in the pub, he’d lusted after Carrie. Again though, it was an odd admission from Andy. Unless he was trying to deflect Dick’s interest from himself.

“Did your Mum ‘join in’ with Carrie?”

Andy laughed, and then, remembering he knew nothing, quickly said, “No idea. Like I said, I never knew there wuz anythin’ goin’ on there. Carrie ‘ad that boyfriend.”

“Do you remember a lodger called ‘Alana’?”

Andy shrugged. “There was that many through the ouse’. I wuzn’t livin’ there, remember.”

“So that’s a no?”

Andy nodded.

“What about your Mum’s other ‘affairs’, Andy? You know about them?”

“Kind of.” Andy wriggled in his seat, and looked away. They’d hit another barrier.

“I’m sorry to ask you Andy, but does your Mum accept money for these liaisons?”

“Wha’!” Andy looked seriously affronted. “Are you suggestin’ she’s a prozzie?”

“It had crossed my mind.” Admitted Dick. “Big family. Every little helps.”

“She never!” Andy was adamant. “It’s not about the money. They wuz more to please me Dad. He liked the idea of her with other... people.”

“Male and female?”

Andy shrugged again.

“Whatever.” He looked at his watch. “I gotta go. Work.”

“Alright Andy, thanks for your help. See, although your Dad’s admitted to killing Carrie, we still need to establish that it’s true, and work out what was his motive.”

Andy didn’t respond to the opportunity to discuss motive. He sullenly pulled on his denim jacket and picked up a Darth Vader like crash helmet. At the door he turned and said, “Look. It may not be normal, as far as you think, how they carried on. But iss not illegal, neither.”

No it isn’t, thought Dick, but rape is and so is murder.

Sue Carter, nee Webb had agreed to an interview that afternoon, but before that DCI Andrews got helpful news from his pathologist. Arthur Rowbotham confirmed there were Eddie's fingerprints and other DNA trace - spit where he'd probably licked the stub of pencil in which it was written - on the suicide note. The note was, as far as they could tell, genuine. Though whether it was true was another matter.

Dick Andrews went to the canteen for lunch, but gazing at the shrivelled sausages and curling chips, and mindful of his waistline, opted for a cheese salad. Pamela, at least, would be pleased with him.

An hour later, Dick offered Sue Carter, who looked upset but not unfriendly, the comfiest chair in the interview suite and began by giving her his condolences.

"Thanks," she said, rubbing her eyes with a scrunched up tissue. They were red, indicating she'd been weeping. She apparently, did not think her father was a shit.

"It's an awful shock, I can't deny. I mean - not just he's dead, but what he says he's done. I just can't believe it."

"Ah. Andy told you then."

"Well, of course. And my Mum. She was devastated."

Yes, thought Dick Andrews, I bet, particularly if she knew already. That explained the burst of sobbing from the house the previous evening.

"You were aware your Father was having sex with Carrie?"

"Absolutely not! I mean, I saw her in the house lots of times. She and my Mum were close. But I thought she was Andy's girlfriend."

"Andy? Your brother, Andy?"

"Well, yes..." Sue seemed to realise she'd spoken out of turn. "I mean, he never said so - I just assumed... I'm probably wrong."

She felt in her handbag for a fresh tissue and rubbed at her eyes again. Well, this was interesting, thought Dick. Who was protecting whom, he wondered.

"Did you see Carrie and Andy together?"

"No. I mean yes, but only at the house. They'd be horsin' around. Just play, really."

“Your Mum and Dad,” Dick tried to find a delicate way of putting this, she seemed a nice woman, “they had an unusual arrangement - sexually. It seems they both had many other partners.”

Sue looked embarrassed. “So I understand”.

“Do you know when that started? I mean had they always been like it?”

“Sorry, you’d have to ask my Mum. We don’t talk about it.”

“What about your siblings? D’ you think they knew?”

Sue shook her head. “I’ve no idea. The older ones may be.”

“You don’t seem to know much about what went on at home, Sue?”

“It wasn’t my home.” She said quickly. “I mean, I wasn’t hardly there since I was a kid. I stayed with my Aunt most of the time. See after Mum had Lucy, she was quite poorly.

“Lucy?”

“My sister that died?”

“You have a dead sister?” Yet another twist, thought Dick. Where would this one lead?

“Yes, well I hardly knew her really. She was between Andy and Michele. She died when she was tiny. My Mum went a bit funny after that.” She touched her head. “Up here. She coun’ cope with us all. So I got sent away.”

“That must have been hard?”

Sue smiled, slightly. “It’s awful to say it, but I was glad. Our house just had too many of us. Michele was a toddler and then Lisa was born and straight after, Carly... My Auntie Betty didn’t have any kids and I got spoiled rotten.”

Hm, thought Dick, and perhaps shielded in other ways.

“Tell me about Michele. Are you close?”

“I think so. She always wants to come and stay. She loves being with me and my little girl, Scarlett.”

“Is she unhappy at home?”

Sue looked down. There was a pause.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” said Dick.

“She doesn’t... didn’t... get on with my Dad.”

“And what about your Mum?”

“Mum doted on her when she was little. Especially after Lucy died. Michele was her favourite. She always...”

Sue stopped, as though again afraid of saying too much.

“Yes,” Dick prompted gently. “She always..?”

“Protected her. Tried to. My Dad could be very...”

“Hard on the kids?”

“Oh yes. Not so much the younger ones.”

“He was keen on punishment?”

“He’d make my Mum do it. She’d have to belt us. Well, not me of course, I was gone. But Michele, if she did anything my Dad didn’t like...”

“He’d get your Mum to punish her?”

Sue nodded. She looked ashamed. Obviously she’d tried to provide a refuge for Michele.

Dick Andrews decided on a gamble. “I’m going to tell you something in confidence, Sue. I want you to promise that just for now, you won’t tell your Mother...”

Sue looked wary, “Alright... I s’pose.”

“Michele found a suicide note from your father. She gave it to me.”

Sue gasped. She looked genuinely surprised Dick was relieved to see.

“What did it say?”

“Well, that’s just it... he admitted to killing Carrie. But he also said there were other bodies, buried in the garden.

“What!”

“It’s a shock, I know, I’m sorry.”

“You mean, he says he’s killed these other people?”

“Actually no, he doesn’t. It’s implied, but that’s why we’re digging it up. We have to be sure, obviously.”

Sue looked sick. She grasped the sides of her chair.

“So if there’s anything else you can tell us - anything at all - it would be very useful. Your Dad may have been telling the truth. Or, he may have been protecting someone else..”

“Who?”

“That’s exactly what I’m trying to ascertain, Sue.”

After Sue Carter had left, looking considerably worse than when she'd arrived, DCI Andrews had a cup of tea and checked his messages. Among them was a phone call from a Jamie Martin. He searched his memory - eventually locating Jamie as the Goth boy from Chester House. The one who'd been a friend of Carrie's. He'd left a mobile number and Dick Andrews immediately rang it. Jamie answered on the sixth ring.

"Jamie, Hi, it's DCI Andrews here. You rang me..?"

"Oh yeah." Jamie's voice was drowned out by pings, bangs and loud music. Dick could hardly hear him.

"Where are you?"

"Soz - it's noisy, right? I'm in the MacWorld Centre."

"Never mind. What did you want to talk to me about?"

"It's probably not important... But I remembered something else about the last time I saw Carrie..."

"Go on..."

"She took a phone call. She went all girly and flirty when she was talking. Giggling and pink-faced. Daft. I thought it must be the boyfriend - y'know, the student she'd talked about? When she finished she said she'd got to go now. She was off to somewhere down by the canal? To meet Andy..."

"Andy. You're sure she said the name was Andy?"

"Yeah. Andy, I'm sure. Is that a help at all?"

"Oh yes, Jamie. That's a big help, thank you."

Not a bad day, after all, thought Dick. Perhaps we would allow himself a glass of Bordeaux that evening. Yes, a nice Médoc - 2005 was an excellent year.

## Chapter Eighteen

Anna's house was lit up like a big top when she and Roly arrived back by taxi. Good lord, thought Anna frowning, what on earth was going on? Roly thought about the electricity bill and how much better it was to be a barrister than a solicitor. It turned out that Vincent and Muriel had called by unexpectedly and been asked by Harry to stay for supper. Marnie was showing Muriel her current science project, which featured electricity and required every light in the house to be burning. Loud Jazz riffs came from the first floor, where Jake and Vincent were in the sitting room competing on Harry's baby grand piano. Roly was momentarily discomfited by the obviously well-heeled, middle-classness of it all and the contrast with his own much shabbier and more chaotic household. Which reminded him, he must ring Julia soon. Last night she'd been asleep when he'd called and rather cross at being woken.

"Honestly Roly, I'm nineteen months pregnant, I need my sleep. And Sian kept me up all last night. He's being a complete little bastard." Sian was their four year old and quite a handful even when Roly was at home - refusing to adjust to being one of several children. Now yet another was on the way. Not for the first time Roly rued his wife's devotion to her religion.

In the kitchen Anna introduced Roly to everyone. Harry was cooking - Thai curry judging by the powerful aroma of lemon grass - while Deia laid the table. Marnie and Muriel looked up from the complex graph Marnie was explaining in correct but rather ponderous French, "Il faut activer ici, l'impulsion électrique", and nodded hello. Anna got a bottle of Sauvignon from the fridge and poured them both large glasses.

"Need that, do you?" Chortled Harry. His handsome face was rosy from the cooking heat, his blond hair slightly stuck to his forehead.

"And how," agreed Roly, taking an instant gulp. "What a day".

"Can we help?" Anna knew Harry would say no, he loved to cook solo. "If not, Roly and I need to do a bit of reviewing."

"You carry on. Dinner in about half an hour. Oh, pour one for me before you take that, darling."

Anna did so, taking the opportunity to brush his damp cheek with her lips, then with bottle and briefcase, led the way to the study. She and Roly threw themselves down gratefully in the deep leather armchairs. Anna closed her eyes for a moment. It

was good to be home. The noises and smells, the life of the house, restored her. “Use the phone if you need to,” she offered Roly. He glanced at his watch and saw Julia would be putting the kids to bed - or trying to - he’d call her a little later.

“So,” said Anna, opening her eyes. “Michele. How are we going to blow a hole in that one?”

Cate too was reviewing the day’s evidence as she put her notes onto the computer. She did them in the form of the court exchange - or as much as she could glean from her rather sloppy short hand. Antony Farrow QC was still, after two hours, taking Michele through her horrifying evidence. Cate typed swiftly.

Antony Farrow: Michele, you say your Dad and Andy ‘murdered’ a number of girls. That’s quite a claim. To which girls are you referring?

Michele: The ones what stayed with us over the years. One day they’d be there like, and the next they wouldn’t.

Farrow: Why do you say they were murdered?

Michele: Well, their bones was found under our patio - right. They didn’t bury theirselves, like.

There had been nervous laughter in court at that point.

Farrow: But why do you accuse your Father and brother?

Michele: I ’ad this hiding place, under the stairs. I’d see ’em take the girls down to the cellar. I knew what was going to ’appen to them there.

Farrow: The same things that had happened to you?

Michele: Me, and the rest of the family.

Farrow: You are saying all the family were systematically abused by your Father and brother?

Michele: I don’ know about ‘systematically’. But pretty much every day, yeah - one or another of us.

Farrow: And did your Mother join in?

There was a pause. Michele seemed to be considering. After casting a sidelong look at Ruth, who still sat with her eyes downcast fiddling with something in her lap, she said.

Michele: She knew about it.

Farrow: You said before, that she aided with your own abuse. Was that the same with the others?

Michele: I reckon.

Farrow: Did they tell you so?

Michele: None of us never talked about it.

Farrow: You didn't even confide in your big sister, Sue?

Cate made another note that Michele had looked disturbed at the mention of Sue. She took her time to answer.

Michele: I tried to keep her out of it. I reckoned she wuz the only one who'd like, escaped. Y'know, 'cos she weren't there when she was a kid.

Farrow: So none of the above was discussed with Sue?

Michele: I did tell her some, like. Mostly about me Dad bein' 'ard on me. But not the worst stuff. No.

Michele shook her head emphatically.

Farrow: Very well. Let's go back to these other 'girls'. The ones you say your Father and Andy killed. Did you ever see your Mother going down to the cellar with them?

Michele: She'd take a tray down.

Farrow: A tray?

Michele: Yeah, of tea like.

There was more laughter, stifled quickly.

Farrow: So you are saying that while your Father and Andy were down there abusing, torturing these young women, your Mother would be making tea and taking it down to them?

Michele: Well, sometimes they'd be at it hours. I'd get bored and go to bed.

Farrow: Did you ever see what they were doing?

Michele shook her head.

Farrow: Or hear anything?

Michele: Muffled grunts and groans. Music sometimes - R'n'B. But like I said, it was soundproofed.

Farrow: Did any of the young women appear to go down voluntarily?

Michele: Not unless you call being carried with their hands and feet tied and tape over their mouths, 'voluntarily'.

An almost Mexican Wave of laughter greeted this, Cate noted. Judge Solomons had banged his gavel and called for silence. Reviewing it now, Cate thought it was as though the beholders found the information too awful to be able to absorb it soberly. After a moment, Antony Farrow had continued.

Farrow: And you maintain that your Mother knew of all this?

Michele: Oh yeah, definitely. The next day like, when me Dad 'ud be digging hole outside, she'd be clearing out their room, or washin' the clothes they'd left be'ind...

Farrow: In other words, she was a willing accomplice?

Michele: I reckon she joined in. She liked, y'know, what you said - 'torture'. She was the one who allus took her belt to us, or kicked us, or made us walk around with things stuffed up us.

Farrow: That is a reference to a 'chastity' belt, you say your Dad created?

Michele: It was a big vibrator like, on a strap. He said it was to help stretch us inside. Later, like, for us husbands.

Cate had looked at the defendant then, she remembered. Ruth was silently weeping, tears running slowly down her cheeks. She lifted her hands to wipe them away with something. It was, Cate saw, a small furry toy rabbit.

There was a ring on Cate's doorbell. She clicked her teeth with annoyance - she wanted to finish this while it was still in her head. She went over and picked up the entry phone.

"Hello?"

"Hi Cate, it's me."

"Me..?"

"Ethan?"

Cate had completely forgotten she'd invited him round. They were going to compare notes on the day and then go to the local pub for supper.

"I knew that, silly. Come on up."

Cate pressed the buzzer and sighed as she heard the front door clang. She was excited by Ethan no question, but just now her work was even more of a turn on.

Harry's Thai chicken curry was a big success. Everyone complemented him - even Jake, who didn't like curry and Marnie, who hadn't eaten chicken since her favourite hen in Oxfordshire was taken by a fox. Vincent opined he couldn't get better in the Vietnamese quarter of Paris and Muriel shyly agreed. She didn't have much English and they had spoken mostly French at the dinner table, to put her at her ease. Unfortunately, it had the opposite effect on Roly, whose French was schoolboy at best. He excused himself before pudding - 'rhubarb and ginger crumble,' promised Harry - and went to the study to ring Julia.

"Julia - how's everything?"

"Okay, I suppose. When are you coming home?"

"Friday late afternoon, as usual."

"No - I mean, when will it be over?"

"If only I knew. Tomorrow we get to cross-examine the daughter, but the more that comes out about this crazy case, the more I think Ruth'll be convicted."

"Poor woman."

"I doubt anyone will agree with you. They'll just see her as a monster."

"Roly, even if she did do all the things she's accused of, I can't believe she's wicked. I can't believe anyone's fundamentally wicked. I believe the things she did are wicked. We're all capable of doing wicked things."

"Oh yes. What have you done today that's wicked?"

Julia laughed. "What, apart from nearly drowning Sian when he deliberately splashed his bath water all over the floor?"

"Yes, apart from that."

"I don't know my love, I just know that no-one is wholly bad."

"I'll try and remember that."

Sometimes, thought Roly, Julia's religion - costly though it could be - was a saviour. All the grim revelations about the Webb family made it easier to be grateful that his own children had been born out of love.

# Chapter Nineteen

## TWO YEARS EARLIER

The garage, Goodwin's, where Andy Webb worked was downtown near the canal basin, not far from where Eddie had been at Bardsley's. Dick Andrews took a police car down, with a uniformed copper driving. He wanted to rattle Andy. A man came out front wiping his hands, on seeing the car pull up. DCI Andrews introduced himself, shook the man's oily fingers and asked him if Andy was about. "In back," said the man, who'd identified himself as Ronnie Goodwin, the owner. He jabbed a thumb towards the garage's interior and Dick Andrews, motioning the uniform to stay in the car, followed the thumb's direction into the warm, grease-smelling atmosphere.

Andy was under a jacked up car and came scrambling out as soon as saw the DCI. He looked puzzled and a bit alarmed.

"Hello Andy. I just came down to clear up a couple of things with you," said Dick, pleasantly. "Perhaps I could have a few moments?"

"Can we go outside?" Andy clearly didn't want his work mates to overhear the conversation.

They walked down to the brick wall on the bank of the cut. It was low enough to sit on and Andy did so, fetching out his rolling tobacco. He was attractive enough, thought Dick with the sun falling on his long blond hair, pony-tailed today, his strong arms on show in an oily singlet, a tattoo of a Celtic dragon on one shoulder.

"What d'you wan', then?" Andy said, almost carelessly.

Dick Andrews leaned against a bollard.

"It's come to my knowledge that, despite what you told me, you did know Carrie Redmond rather well."

"Who says?" Andy immediately looked sharper.

“That doesn’t matter, right now. You were seen messing about with her on several occasions and you called her on her mobile. We have the number - it won’t be too hard for us to check how many times.”

Andy stared at him. “So?”

“So Andy, I’m going to run a possible scenario by you.”

“Knock yerself’ out.” Andy lit up the fag and leaned back closing his eyes to inhale deeply. He was calming himself, Dick saw, determined to give nothing away.

“I think you were involved with Carrie, much more than you’ve said. Maybe your Dad was too, but she cared about you and I think it was your baby she was carrying.”

“Never.” Andy shot upright and opened his eyes.

“I think,” pressed Dick, “that she told you she was pregnant and you didn’t want to know. She was making a fuss, threatening to tell what you’d done to her - you and your Dad, and maybe even your Mum, to the authorities. A young girl in care? Could have caused a lot of bother. You told your Dad and you decided between you to get rid of her.”

“It weren’t like that at all!” Andy almost shouted.

“Was it you Andy? Did you kill Carrie? And did your Dad take the rap to save you?”

“No, no, no, no!” Andy gripped DCI Andrew’s arm and spat the words into his face. “You’ve got it all wrong!”

“Have I. Well why don’t you put me right, Andy. “Cos at the moment, I’m thinking of arresting you on a charge of murder.”

“I never killed no-one!” Andy was shouting and a couple of his work mates peered out of the garage gloom. Andy lowered his voice.

“She did say as she was pregnant. But it was me dad she told. She thought it was ’is. She said it was the dates an’ all. I liked her all right, but she come on to me later, see, after me Dad had already started with her.”

“I see. That must have been difficult for you.”

“No kiddin’. Carrie says like, she’s goin’ to have it. She don’ believe in abortion. Me Dad tries to persuade me to say it’s mine. ’Cos of me Mum, see. She’d go mental if she found out.”

“Found out about the pregnancy?”

“Found out it was me Dad’s.”

“That wasn’t allowed?”

“Too right. She’d be okay with a bit of messin’ around. She done it herself with Carrie. But a baby - thass serious like. She woun’ put up with that, she’d kill my Dad.”

Dick wondered again at the phrase and if Andy meant it literally.

“Carrie though, she woun’ agree to any of tha’. She wanted to put pressure on me Dad. She really thought he’d pay up...” He laughed bitterly, “Don’ ask me why. He’s mean as shit. She threatened to tell Ruth what ’ad ’appened.”

“About the pregnancy?”

“Well, that. ’An all the times he’d shagged her, with Ruth not bein’ part of it.”

“That was their arrangement, that Ruth was ‘part of it’?”

“It were with Carrie. Ruth like, fancied her... she was different than the others.”

“Others?”

Andy bit his lip, realising he’d walked into that one.

“The lodgers, the babysitters. They’d sometimes play games with ’em.

“Sex games?”

Andy shrugged.

“So this was one that went wrong. Left you all in a bit of a two and eight. How did you decide to resolve it?”

Andy fell silent. He was already reviewing what he’d said, Dick could see. Wondering how best to get out of the situation. Eventually, he said,

“I never decided nothin’. It was me Dad who decided. Juss like always. “

“Are you saying he killed Carrie on his own?”

Andy shrugged. “If he says so. First I ’eard of it was when I seen it on the news. Then your officer called me up and told me what had happened.”

“But surely you must have missed Carrie - where did you think she was?”

“We’d ’ad words. About the baby, like. I thought she’d gone off with her boyfriend. She tol’ me they was goin’ on holiday...”

“Okay, Andy. But why do you think your Dad confessed to Carrie’s murder? And why did he leave her body for anyone to find?”

It was hardly consistent with his previous *modus operandi*, Dick was thinking. If there were indeed bodies buried under the patio.

Andy shrugged again and drew a last gasp on his fag end.

“Mystery t’ me.” He gave an unpleasant grin. “Maybe he wanted to frame me for it. *You* thought I done it!”

Dick was not altogether convinced by this tale. There was too much that didn't make sense - especially in Carrie's attitude. Why on earth would she want to go through with the pregnancy? Why would she have wanted to be with Eddie in the first place? It was more understandable that she'd fancy Andy - a lad near her own age, who was personable and even, Dick could recognise, sexually attractive. It sounded as if she was blackmailing Eddie - had he just snapped over her demands for money? Dick decided however, that it was all he was likely to get from Andy without more hard evidence.

Ronnie Goodwin had come onto the garage forecourt and was looking ostentatiously at his watch. Dick Andrews gave him a wave and said to Andy, "Okay lad, you can get back to your work. But I will want to talk to you again, Andy. So don't be going off anywhere."

Andy got to his feet and stubbed out his fag, flicking the end towards the cut.

"Where would I go?" He threw over his shoulder, as he slouched towards the garage.

That afternoon, DCI Andrews brought Michele back to the Webb's property - with the police search team, bulldozers and diggers. The once-flagged garden was now strewn with broken slabs and rubble, beneath which layers of moist stodgy clay had been laid bare. Like that cake his wife, Pamela, sometimes made as a Sunday treat - Death by Chocolate - in parts almost a blancmange, thought Dick turning a clammy clod with his Wellington boot. He'd had to promise Michele that her Mother wouldn't be present.

"I can't be doin' it in front of her," the girl looked scared. "She'd kill me."

Again, thought Dick. It seemed all the children lived in terror of their Mother's murderous rages. He'd reassured her that Ruth would be out. In fact, she'd been removed to a police 'safe' house. These days, Health and Safety deemed it too traumatic for her to witness what she clearly believed to be the desecration of her patio. The house was empty, the rest of the children still at the care home until suitable fostering could be found. DC Shane Dawkins was on the case.

In the kitchen, Dick gave Michele a pair of Wellingtons to put on. Her legs were very skinny and she looked like a little, spindly doll in the outsize boots. Machinery

was juddering all around them as they walked into the back garden, but Dick Andrews held up his hand and it slowly ground to a stop. Michele looked round, her small pinched face distressed.

“I’m sorry for you to have to see it like this.” Dick’s tone was kind.

Michele shook her head. “Iss not that,” she said quietly, “iss wha’ might be under there...”

“I know,” said Dick, patting her back. “Could you show us, Michele, where you buried your kitten?”

The girl pointed. “Over by the barbeque.” There was a slightly raised area by a battered garden shed. The patio flags there had not been disturbed yet.

“Wayne,” shouted Dick Andrews, gesturing at him. PC Wayne Amble removed his industrial ear-muffs, “Boss?”

“Move the digger over to where this young lady tells you.”

Wayne nodded and put the muffs back on, starting up the noisy engine. It was clear he was enjoying this job. Michele went over the area she’d identified and directed Wayne towards the flags at the back of it. “In here,” she shouted. “Under that flower pot.”

She struggled to move the bushy geranium. A couple of PCs hurried to help her. As soon as it was cleared, Wayne’s digger attacked. The PCs prized up the loosened stones and dragged them off, revealing the same sludgy soil as in other parts of the garden. DCI Andrews took Michele’s hand. “Are you all right with this, Michele?” She nodded, her eyes looking huge in her small face, and pointed again to a patch in the corner where the pot had stood. “Right there,” she said, “that’s where Minx, my kitten’s buried.” Dick pulled her away. He didn’t want her seeing bones. Kitten or otherwise.

“You can leave it to us now, love. WPC Brendan will take you inside for some juice, all right?”

“Don’t you want to see where Lucy’s buried?”

“Lucy?” The indigestion was back.

“My sister. Lucy. She died before I wuz born.”

“Yes Sue told me. But what makes you think she’s in here?”

“They allus said so. A cot death, my Mum said, and my Dad buried her in the garden.”

Dick rubbed his chest, hard.

“They din’ have a patio, then.” Michele added, as an afterthought.

She crossed behind the ramshackle shed. Following her, Dick Andrews saw a bank of nettles and creepers beneath a conifer. Michele pointed again. “Down there. Me Mum used to come and sit there sometimes. It made her sad.”

Sad didn’t describe the feelings overwhelming Dick Andrews. This was becoming like one of the Gothic sagas beloved of Pamela’s reading group. He guided Michele back to the patio.

“Don’t you worry, we’ll have a look. Now is there anything else you want to tell me.” Horrible though the thought was, Michele could know more. Eddie had admitted in the note to at least nine bodies.

“There’s some in the cellar, I reckon.” She said now, almost provocatively. “I think so, anyway... I seen me Dad goin’ down there with his pickaxe and shovel, like.”

“When was this, Michele?”

“Lots o’ times. Late at night, like, say 3 o’clock or somethin’...”

“What were you doing up at that time?”

“Well, see sometimes I’d fall asleep in my hidin’ place. An’ then I’d wake up again, when me Dad came down. An’ after he’d gone in, I’d look at the time on me mobile.”

It beggared belief, all of it. “Can you show me this hiding place, Michele?”

“Yeah, okay.”

Michele led the way indoors via the kitchen door. The steps to the cellar went off an old-fashioned scullery which had been roughly extended - testament, no doubt to Eddie’s building skills - to hold washing machines, tumble driers, a jumble of clothes baskets, drying equipment and general gardening implements. The steps led, as Dick well knew to a large door with many locks and bolts, beyond which was a dug-out basement with a cement floor and steel beams supporting its ceiling. It was one of the first places they’d examined on Ruth’s departure - Dick well remembered the shock - or thrill perhaps - of seeing the sturdy, pockmarked beams. Immediately above them was the floor of one of several living rooms.

What none of the police team had particularly noticed was a tiny space under the stairs about halfway down from the scullery. It was no more than a place where the support wall had fallen away by a few bricks, perhaps with the extra digging needed to create the basement. It was a completely dark hollow just big enough for a small, curled up child. In fact the perfect hiding place for Michele.

“When I was really little,” she was saying, “I used to get in there with my torch to read. I councoun’ do it in the bedroom... there wuz too many of us.”

It made perfect sense, DCI Andrews had to admit.

“D’ you remember the first time, you saw anything happening here - with your Dad and Andy?”

Michele frowned. “I think I was about nine, or ten.” That was already nearly five years ago, noted Dick. “I’d dropped off and they woke me up coming down. They wuz carryin’ somethin’ big and they kept stumblin’ with it. Me Dad says, ‘She’s a whopper - we’ll go for a titch next time.’ They wuz laughing and joking, like.”

“Was...” Dick stopped. How to put this delicately? “What they were carrying - was it moving, at all?”

Michele shook her head. “I din’ even know what it was. I just guessed. But my mum, she ’as sleeping pills, and them other ones for her moods, like.”

“Anti-depressants?” A good dose of those in a cup of tea would do it, Dick thought.

Michele shrugged. “I dunno. She gets ’em from a Doctor - one of the blokes as comes round to see ’er. Me Dad knows him. Knew him...”

That was enough, thought Dick. The reminder that this young girl, child really, had recently lost a parent - no matter what the circumstances - was a wake up call. He’d get Shane to take her back to the home. As soon as she’d left, he’d call up reinforcements to start digging up the cellar. And Andy Webb was definitely due another interview. ASAP.

Back at ground level Michele was ushered into a police car in the care of DC Dawkins, the family liaison officer. Dick Andrews took Dawkins aside and told him that after dropping off Michele he should go to see Ruth and tell her they were applying for a warrant to dig up her cellar. Shane Dawkins shuddered. They could both already hear the shrieks of abuse that would produce. “You ’ent goin’ to start rippin’ up my ’ouse, you cunts! You got no right! My Eddie worked his balls off doin’ them improvements!”

“Say that I’ll be coming by later on to explain everything to her,” added Dick.

“Oh, thanks Guv.” Shane was ironic. “That’ll solve it.” He grimaced. “Not. You’ll owe me a very large drink for this one.”

As the car drove away, there was a shout from PC Wayne Amble. “Boss. Over here!”

DCI Andrews almost raced over to see the bone he was holding. It was way too big to be a kitten's.

## Chapter Twenty

Dick Andrews was in court for the cross examination of Michele Webb by her Mother's Counsel, Anna Wyatt - as he had been for her previous appearance. He wouldn't normally have been. Normally, as soon as he'd given his evidence he put as much distance as he could between himself and the trial. It was bad enough having to be in the witness box, though it went with the territory of course, he acknowledged, but to have to sit through days more of often gruelling testimony, no, no way. This time however, was different. He felt a strong responsibility to Michele - it was he, after all, who'd been her first point of contact. He'd had to woo her along the path to truth - as he thought of it. He'd had to make sure she was taken care of - as much as was possible under the circumstances - and he'd been the one, in the end, to persuade her to come to court and give evidence. Many times in the lengthy process, she'd been on the point of withdrawing her entire story - twice she'd disappeared completely leading the prosecution to have to apologise for her non-appearance. Once she'd even tried an overdose of painkillers - though she'd insisted to Dick afterwards, it had just been a mistake. She was under great pressure, Dick realised, from other members of her family. Shane Dawkins, as liaison officer had had the toughest job in many ways. Trying to keep the Webbs on message was worse than herding cats, he'd often complained. There came a point when only Dick Andrews could do it. Few in the courtroom beyond Anthony Farrow's bench knew that yet again his persuasive services had been called upon. After her last defection, he'd been asked to find Michele and make one last attempt to get her to the courtroom. Dick Andrews couldn't refuse. He'd grown fond of the little girl as he still thought of her, in spite of the rings and tattoos and biker boots - all efforts, he could clearly understand, to distance herself from the

awful events of her previous life, as much as to claim grown up status. He couldn't abandon her now.

That particular morning instead of taking the early train to the City, he'd driven out to Sue Carter's quiet cul-de-sac. If anyone would know where to find Michele, she would. Sue looked awful, traumatised no doubt by the court proceedings, which she had mostly attended. She wasn't at all pleased to see him, though she didn't abandon her customary politeness. No, she said, Michele wasn't there. She hadn't seen her for a week. She might be with her girlfriend, Sal, who lived in town – she'd find the address. She went inside, leaving Dick on the step. He looked around, noting the twitching curtains and not far off a scrum of cars no doubt belonging to journalists. The bastards were all just awaiting a result to pounce. Sue hurried back and thrust a scrap of paper into his hand.

"Don't say I gave it to you, if you don't mind?" Her eyes, puffy from recent tears, looked pleading. Dick shook his head. "Don't worry - I'll keep you out of it." He gave a nod towards the hovering sharks. "As much as I can, anyway."

Sal opened the door of a manky-looking squat to him. Michele was indeed there, but no way was anyone getting passed her bulky, aggressively, leather-clad minder - she made that very clear. Dick asked, with great consideration, as was his wont, if Sal wouldn't mind requesting of Michele that she at least see him. Reluctantly Sal agreed and came back shortly saying he could come in, adding that if he caused any trouble she would 'bottle' him. Dick didn't doubt it. Bikers had scant respect for the police. He found Michele hunched on the sofa watching a revelatory-type chat show on Sky. A parade of lumpy, unhappy subjects were led on to be questioned about their dysfunctional lives by the shiny, smiley hostess, while cheered or booed by an audience of their peers.

Michele, who looked very small swamped by a coverless duvet, barely acknowledged his presence, but Sal rather unexpectedly came back with a mug of tea, saying she'd put one sugar in, was that okay? Dick was pleasantly surprised there was anything so non-alcoholic in the place, and readily accepted the sugar.

"Are you all right?" He said gently to Michele. The last time he'd seen her she'd still been in recovery from the 'accidental' overdose.

Michele nodded mutely, her face at its most shuttered.

"I could go on this." She said - pointing to the television. "I've got a better story than any of this lot."

“Only if you tell it.” Dick grabbed the opportunity.

Michele gave a barking laugh. “I s’pose that’s what you’ve come for.”

Dick sighed. “It’s your last chance, Michele. Without your testimony Ruth will almost certainly walk free- is that what you want?”

Michele shrugged. “I don’ really care no more. I know what happened, thass all that matters to me.”

“But what about to those other poor young women?” Dick played the empathy card. “Don’t they deserve justice? I know you care about what happened to them.”

“They’re dead anyway. Whass the diff?”

“Truth. Honour. A decent burial. That’s the ‘diff’. You could do that Michele.”

“I can’t make it right, can I.”

It wasn’t a question. There was a short silence. A burst of jeering laughter erupted from the television.

“No.” Dick said slowly. “No one can. But you would be giving something back. Something their families would appreciate. Some of those girls were loved. Some had families who cared for them.”

“Lucky them,” Michele sneered, but without conviction.

“To say nothing of what a result in this case might mean for the future.”

Dick Andrews did not for a moment believe with any conviction, the, ‘we’re taking a stand so something like this can never happen again,’ mantra, so frequently trotted out, could stop other human beings brutish behaviour, but he had to try.

Michele seemed to shrink even more as she said in a very small voice, “You’re saying that it’s me, an’ only me, as can get my mum sent down. It’ll be all my fault if she goes to prison?”

Dick bowed his head. That was in effect what he was saying.

“Well - how would you feel if that wuz you? If that wuz your mother? ”

“Terrible,” Dick conceded. “Indescribable. I’m not denying it’s very hard. But I’m not sure, knowing you as I do now, that you can live with yourself if you don’t do it.” He paused, wondering if he could persuade Michele with a reason he had trouble with himself. He decided he might as well try.

“Then, Michele - there is the matter of redemption.”

So, Anna Wyatt had Dick Andrews to thank for the fact that Michele had wooed the jury away from her client. Now Dick sat rigidly forward on his bench, his fingers gripped together in anxiety – would Michele appear this time? And what version of her story would she choose to come out with?

Barring unforeseen events, or more unexpected witnesses, this would be the last stab of the prosecution's attempt to get a conviction, so there was a very full attendance in court. That - and the highly anticipated grilling of Michele, with its promise of high drama. This was where Anna Wyatt excelled - the reason she was a celebrated defence counsel.

The usual hush fell, as the court was ready to begin. Dick held his breath, letting it out as Michele was led in and helped onto her stool again by the clerk of the court. She took the oath with her head down and so quietly that Judge Solomons had to request she spoke up. She gave herself a visible shake, apparently growing a couple of inches in the process. When she put her head up and spoke it again, it was in a full, clear voice whilst looking Anna directly in the eye.

Having arrived early to get a seat near the front of the press gallery, Cate Harrison was watching almost breathlessly. She'd refused to spend the night with Ethan - really this was becoming a habit, he, and she come to that, could wait until the weekend. Now, she craned round to see if he'd come in and nodded when she spotted him close to the back, looking she thought, rather bleary. They would no doubt compare notes later on what was promising to be an explosive day.

After the usual confirmations had been got out of the way by her junior, Dan, Anna stood. She was looking particularly impressive this morning, having taken care over her unusually discreet make up. No red lipstick today, noted Cate - she obviously wanted to impress the Jury with her propriety. She was though wearing some extremely expensive scent Cate couldn't place - when Anna made certain gestures it wafted up, carried on the warm air of the courtroom towards the gallery.

"Ms Webb, can I ask you first if I may call you 'Michele'? I would like us both to feel at ease."

Michele nodded warily.

"Orl right."

"Very well, then, Michele. Few of us here can imagine the horrors of what you have been through and I do offer you my most sincere sympathy. Like everyone else in Court, I hope when this is over you will be able to begin to rebuild your life."

Anna paused to make sure the Jury had absorbed her generous gesture.

“However, it is my job, and some might say not a very pleasant one, to question everything you have said in close detail. This is, as I think you understand, for the benefit of making sure that your Mother (Michele blinked at the word) has a fair trial, and every opportunity to put forward her own explanation of events. Sometimes things can be seen from a very different perspective - depending on where the viewer is at the time. Do you follow me?”

Again Michele nodded, though this time suspicion had entered her expression.

“It’s important that you realise I am not calling you a liar, but merely trying to establish that there is often more than one interpretation of a situation. Is that fair enough?”

Michele had no choice but to nod again. Dick Andrews felt for her.

“Let us deal first with the matter of your brother, Andy. You have said in previous testimony that he was also guilty of the murders admitted to by your Father.”

“I never said that.” Michele sounded quite aggrieved.

Anna shuffled her notes and read out loud from her transcript. The words sounded odd, almost comical, in her received pronunciation.

“So there were occasions when just your Dad and Andy were present.”

“Lots. And with the other girls.”

“The ‘other girls’ being..?”

“First off my sisters. And then, all the ones that stayed with us. Au pairs, and nannies, like. All the ones they murdered.”

“That is what you said, when my learned friend, questioned you, yesterday.”

“But I never meant Andy killed ‘em. Only that he was involved, somehow.” Michele said now.

“Well, you were very clear. You said, and I’m quoting, “All the ones they murdered.”

“It was a what d’you call it..?” Michele thought for a moment. “Assumption.”

“Dangerous things ‘assumptions’, Michele. You see how they can be misunderstood. Better to leave it to the police and the forensic evidence. Can you explain exactly, what you meant to say?”

Michele breathed in, deeply. Dick Andrews sat forward in his seat. He knew very well what was coming.

“I meant to say, what I meant was, that Andy was definitely involved in forcing them girls to have sex. Just like he forced me. An’ I seen him goin’ in there, in the cellar, with me Dad, loads of times. An’ I ’eard him down there. I never seen ’im kill no-one and I never seen ’im dig an ’ole, nor bury ’em. But ’e was right in it with me Dad. So, I just sort of assumed like...”

Anna pounced. “And isn’t it fair to say that you never saw your Mother (Michele blinked again) kill anyone, or dig a hole, or bury them. You just sort of ‘assumed like’ about her too?”

“I never said she killed no-one.”

“Thank you. I want to be clear about that. ”

“I just said, she knew.”

Michele was not giving up easily. Dick gave a small smile to himself. Good for her.

“If your brother Andy was involved in the murders - and we have heard from the Police and their pathologists that the forensic evidence does not conclusively point to the involvement of anyone else - yes?”

Michele nodded again.

“Then, let’s ‘assume’ for a moment that your brother, Andy, was involved in at least helping your Father - would you agree that was possible?”

“I s’pose. I don’ understand the what you call it... frensics”

“Unfortunately, they don’t tell us enough in this case. As the Officers involved in the investigation have explained, much of the recovered material was so degraded it was very hard to establish who had touched it.”

There was a communal shudder in the Court. Anna paused to withdraw a little. One had to be careful not to alienate the Jurors by being too graphic.

“What I mean, Michele - and this is what I mean by it mattering where you were standing - is that it was clear to you , as it is to us - she gestured round sending another wave of musky essence towards Cate - that your brother Andy might very well have been involved in at least helping kill the young women. That could have happened in the cellar, for example, and only your Father would have known. Equally, even if he didn’t administer the coup de grace himself - he could at least have been present when your Father did?”

“I don’t understand,” Michele shook her head. “Whass a cooda - grass?”

There was a ripple of suppressed tittering in the press gallery. They all, apparently, found it hilarious that they were dealing with an ill-educated underclass here. This could never have happened in a middle class home - oh, no. Cate exchanged a sharing look with Ethan, raising her eyebrow. He gave her an almost imperceptible wink.

"I'm sorry, what I should have said was, he could have been the one who stood by, helped in some way when your Father, finally, put the young women out of their misery?"

"The thing is, with Andy - he wasn't what you'd call violent. I mean he'd have sex with you..."

"Rape you." Anna interrupted.

"Yeah - I s'pose. It got to be normal after a bit though. Not what I'd call 'rape'"

"D' you mean you were having sex with Andy willingly?" This was a new tack. Was Anna now going to implicate Michele in collusion, wondered Cate. The Court too rustled with renewed interest. Dick Andrews clenched his hands together.

"No." Michele was deliberate in her reply. "But after the first few times I giv' up making a fuss. It weren't no use - he was that much stronger. Besides no-one was going to stop him, no matter how much I yelled."

"So, you accepted it?"

"Like I say - it wasn't as bad as when me Dad did it. Andy wasn't so rough. I mean, he'd pin your arms down, like, but he'd never hit you nor nothin'."

"But you still made the 'assumption' as you called it, that Andy had 'murdered' the young women."

"Well, he'd do what me Dad told him. We all had to do what he said..."

"So - just to be clear - you are alleging that Andy would have raped, tortured, possibly killed, or stood by at the killing of these young women, because your Dad told him to?"

Michele nodded. Then she gestured towards Ruth in her pew. "Or, because she did."

Anna couldn't let that go by.

"Michele, you have been adamant that it was your Father and Andy you saw dragging or carrying people to the cellar. You've said they did this without your Mother's involvement and that she was even excluded. You mentioned..." Anna

consulted her notes again, "A 'deal'. And stated that, 'They only did it together when Ruth,' your Mother, 'wasn't there'.

Isn't that right?"

Michele nodded, reluctantly now, it seemed.

"So I have to suggest to you that you have invented - perhaps not intentionally - but that you have invented this story about your Mother's involvement. That it is an 'assumption' not based on any facts."

Michele said nothing. She stared hard at her tattooed fingers gripping the ledge in front of her.

"If I can remind you," Anna went on, "of what I said before, about its all depending on your point of view of proceedings? And because of that, the danger of making 'assumptions'? Isn't it possible that all of the activities we have been discussing took place without your Mother's involvement, or even her knowledge?"

There was a pause then Michele pounced. "What about the tea?"

"The tea?"

"The tea tray she'd take down the cellar. She must of known what was going on inside."

"Did you see her go inside?"

"Well, no... Andy or me Dad, they'd take the tray off of her, like, at the door,"

"Exactly. So why should she know what was going on 'inside' if she never went inside?"

Michele gave a mulish shrug.

"Even you, who had a ringside view, didn't really know what was happening in there. You could only guess - isn't that correct?"

"I guessed right, though." Retorted Michele.

A frisson of support for her went round the court.

"As it happens, you did. But it's only with hindsight from the discovery of everything since, that we can verify your suspicions. I have to suggest that your 'assumptions' about your Mother are not 'right', but a question of adding two and two and making five."

"I can count." Michele muttered.

"Michele." Anna gave the girl a straight but not unfriendly look. "You've had a very bad time within this family. You have had a terrible experience at the hands of the very people who should have been your protectors. Your Father has gone. Your brother

has gone. That leaves only your Mother to blame. Isn't it possible that you are so angry with your Mother for, as you allege, joining in with your rape and for not protecting you from further abuse, for letting your father and brother get away with it, that you want her to be punished?"

Michele shook her head vehemently.

"You've said on a number of occasions what a powerful and cruel man your Dad was. How Andy had to join in the rape, torture and possibly killing because your Dad told him to - and you all had to 'do what he said'. Isn't it possible that your Mother too was afraid of him? Afraid of what he would do if she said no, or in any way crossed him? That she too, even in her treatment of you and your siblings, had to 'do what he said?'"

"They wuz in it together." Michele said stubbornly.

"There is no proof of that at all, Michele. If your Dad needed help he could have got it from Andy."

"She cleaned up after. She washed their clothes. She knew what my Dad 'ad done!"

"Perhaps like you, your Mother thought she 'knew' what was going on, 'guessed' what was going on. And, like you, she didn't tell anybody, because like you she was afraid. Shamed. But I suggest you have dreamed up the story of her direct involvement. I suggest that because of your past history, your appalling treatment, your distressing relationship with your Mum, you want her to be guilty!"

"No, no! That's not right!"

"I suggest to you that since your brother Andy's death, there is no one who can corroborate or deny what you have said. And that's why you can say it."

"That's not true!" Michele was shouting now. "It's nothin' to do with Andy. I said all this before. I told Mr Andrews."

She gesticulated towards Dick who was now sitting hunched over, his head propped in his hands. He returned Michele's look - acknowledging what she said with a sad nod. He was already praying he wouldn't be re-called after her outburst, but mostly he was thinking poor girl, poor little girl.

The Judge called an early recess when both Michele and her Mother burst into tears. Ruth was taken back to her cell, Michele away with a court official. Dick Andrews went down to the basement canteen, a gloomy, industrially green, space suffused with an understandable - almost palpable - aura of trauma. He got a BLT sandwich - he wouldn't mention it to Pamela, if she asked he'd say he had soup - and a cup of what turned out to be extremely weak coffee and took them to an empty table by a dimly lit window. He ate his sandwich without tasting it and abandoned the tepid coffee after three sips. How he wished he still smoked. Now would be the perfect time to light up and let the stress evaporate with the spiralling wisps. A sharp picture of Eddie and later on Andy, slowly manipulating their roll-ups surfaced unbidden in his mind.

Dick closed his eyes, remembering the time two years ago when he'd gone to question Andy yet again in the light of Michele's further information. Andy's digs were in a run down residential street of mixed houses and flats near the centre of town. Andy was in an alley at the side of the divided house, mending his motorbike - he had oily, metal parts scattered all around and was poking at some tubing deep in the engine. Fiddling with the interiors of things was obviously a family obsession, Dick remembered thinking.

"You again," Andy sneered as he saw DCI Andrews approaching. "What've I done this time? Robbed a bank?" He gave a snort of laughter.

"Not to my knowledge Andy," Dick said gravely. "I think however that you did have a lot to do with this." He fetched a copy of Eddie's suicide note out of his pocket and read it aloud.

" 'I Eddie Webb, being of sound mind, declare that I am the killer of Carrie Redmond. Because I don't wish to bring more shame on my family, I am ending it now. There is also nine (approx) other bodies which is buried under our patio. Eddie Webb.' "

"What the fuck!" Andy scrambled to his feet and looked ready to run.

"Indeed." Said Dick Andrews. "Your Dad's suicide note. And I have to tell you that we have found at least one set of bones buried under the patio, just as he avers, and we are at present digging up the cellar of the house, where we believe there are possibly others."

Andy had gone a whiter shade of pale. He put out a hand to steady himself on his bike handlebars.

“So, I ask you again, Andy, what do you know about these activities?”

“Nothin’. I swear.” Andy sounded quite desperate. “I din’ even know he’d killed Carrie - let alone them others.”

“Which others?”

“I don’ know - the ones you said...”

“The ones you helped your Father subdue and carry down to the cellar? The ones both of you forced into have sex? And now he’s gone, only you know what else went on with them down there?”

Andy was silent.

DCI Andrews thought for a moment. It was clear Andy was in this up to his neck. But if he arrested him now he’d be lawyered up and saying nothing more in a blink. Although it was a risk, was it more use to the case to let him run free for a while longer? He decided it was.

“I want you to come back to the house with me Andy. I want to show you what we’ve found and I want you to help us with our enquiries into what could have happened...”

Andy stared at a pool of oil by his feet. He seemed in a trance, unable to move or respond in any way.

Dick Andrews shook his arm, “Andy?”

Andy raised his eyes. They looked like those of a sick animal, thought Dick, uncomprehending and glazed with misery. “I don’t want to caution you,” said Dick, “I want you to come willingly. I’m not saying you had anything to do with the actual killings.” Andy gave a barely perceptible nod.

“Can I bring the bike..?” He almost whispered. “Then I can go on to work, after...”

Dick didn’t tell him there would likely be no ‘after’ except on the inside of a police cell. And to his dying day he would regret that he’d given Andy permission.

On the way back to Bridge Street following Andy on his Kawasaki, he’d seen the lad suddenly swerve in front of an articulated lorry coming too fast in the opposite direction. In the resulting head-on collision, Andy was killed outright - parts of his body scattered across both lanes of the highway.

## Chapter Twenty-One

QC Anna Wyatt's cross-examination of Michele Webb ended late on Friday afternoon, ensuring an exhausted weekend for everyone involved in the case. It was already dark as people left The Bailey - London Wall was muddy and dank with slush from yesterday's light snowfall. Dick Andrews hurried for the train home thinking how much he hated rush hour, particularly on a Friday. Roly Baring was also cursing the trains, as he discovered at Liverpool Street that his had been cancelled. Julia would be furious - and rightly so, it meant he wouldn't be home now until after all the kids were in bed. The rest of the weekend he would probably spend on the phone, or working. His home life was falling apart in a way that had never happened before. Julia, he was well aware, was beginning to despair of him, not least because of his increased drinking. Not an evening passed now, even at home, without his having several glasses. For his part, Dick Andrews was looking forward to his first all week, and pondering on which from his rack - the Merlot, or the Margaux? - he would break open. Pamela was non-judgemental of a Friday evening - seeing it as his reward for a tough week. And with his fears over whether he'd done the right thing in forcing Michele to court - this had certainly been a tough one.

The Wyatts had planned to go to the Eave cottage for the weekend, taking Vincent and Muriel, but really Anna felt too tired. She would have to cook and worse she would have to talk. She felt completely incapable of either. Harry said not to worry, he'd shop and cook, but even he knew he couldn't manage the social side on his own. "Why don't you invite George down too?" - he suddenly suggested, "He can take care of the talking."

Anna had to admit it wasn't a bad idea - although it was strange for Harry to propose it. She called George on her mobile as she stripped for a shower. He answered

straight away, always pleased to get a call from her. He said he would love to come - probably tomorrow if that was okay, and could he bring someone with him? Anna quickly computed beds, wondering if George was sleeping with the 'someone', or if they'd require separate rooms - which could be tricky. She didn't ask, however - leaving it to chance was less bother. It was also more intriguing. They settled that he and his friend would arrive in time for lunch on Saturday unless he let her know different.

In the little wine bar where they'd had their first date, Cate and Ethan met for a drink straight after Court finished for the weekend. Cate had at last agreed to let Ethan see some of her work on the film and was going to take him home to look at a rough edit. They were on their second glass and Ethan was already using the cover of the table to run a hand lightly up her denim-clad thigh, when Cate's mobile rang. She quickly checked and saw it was George Karlsson calling.

"Hang on Ethan," she said, removing his hand kindly but briskly, "I have to take this. Work."

Ethan grinned ruefully, but didn't attempt to stop her leaving the table. It was fair enough - the signal wasn't good where they were sitting.

Cate moved to a quiet corner nearer the light and answered. "Hello?"

"Cate, it's George, as I'm sure you know with that smart-phone of yours. How are you?"

"Fine. Thank you." She wasn't going to give away how cross she was with him. A whole fortnight and no contact.

"I guess you've just come out of the Bailey - I spoke to Anna..."

"That's right. It's been a challenging week, as she'll have told you. She was pretty much on the ball."

"Yes. She generally is."

"So, what can I do for you George?" Cate wanted to pitch it as friendly, but professional; collegiate, like his Cambridge friends.

"I wondered if you're busy this weekend. Or if you'd like to come and stay in the country with me."

Cate was amazed. The very cheek of it.

"That's kind - but I do have a few things on." Ethan was waiting after all.

"It's Oxfordshire - a lovely cottage belonging to the Wyatts. Anna and her husband Harry? Anna just invited me and I thought you might enjoy it."

Anna Wyatt - now that was tempting. But Ethan was waiting, she reminded herself.

“I don’t know if I can change things at this late stage.” She said. She certainly wasn’t going to drop everything just because he asked her.

“Have a go? I think it will be fun. And of course, you’d get face time with Anna - I know you’ve been wanting that.”

The devil, she thought, laughing silently to herself. Trust a psychiatrist to know your soft spot. And trust a devil to tempt you with it. He wouldn’t, she was pretty sure, have mentioned to Anna whom he was going to bring.

“Let me see what I can do. I’ll call you in the morning, if I can make it.”

“Good, good. I’m intending on leaving at oh, say ten-ish - it’s at least an hour’s drive.”

“I’ll call you early. ‘Bye George.”

She pressed ‘end call’ before he could say anything else. Let him stew. Serve him right.

Ethan or not, it was an attractive prospect she had to admit. Anna would be way too discreet to say anything about the trial of course, but getting to know her could be very useful for later. She might, at last, grant Cate the interview she’d long wanted. She waved and smiled at Ethan who was paying the bill. She’d give him a splendid night. Then tomorrow she’d call George and agree to go with him.

Back in her cell Ruth Webb ate her supper - fish pie with peas, some of them still frozen - and drank a cup of strong tea. Her friend, the warder Gill, knew how she liked it. Always made sure there was plenty of food dished up for her when she got back from Court. Had taken her under her wing, so to speak - something Ruth wasn’t used to. She was the one with the wings. How many young girls she’d taken in. Comforted them when their lives went wrong, parents abused them, boyfriends left them, money was short, Chester House imposed too many petty rules. Her house had been a haven, a sanctuary. Everyone knew it. It was famous in the neighbourhood for a place lost girls could go. They were never turned away. Ruth washed their clothes, made them dinners, cups of tea. Eddie would do other things, of course. Want *her* to

do other things. But it was only a bit of fun, she'd thought. And now this. It was so unjust. Her own children snatched from her. Estranged. Michele in Court with her lies. The hatred in that girl's eyes, after all Ruth had done to protect her. Why?

Ruth snivelled without having the energy for a proper good cry. Court took it out of you. Something about the lighting. Made you tired all the time.

There was a light knock on her door and Gill came in bearing a dish of apple sponge and custard. "Saved it for you. It was nearly all gone."

Ruth blew her nose.

"Don't take on," said Gill comfortingly. "It'll be over soon."

Yes, thought Ruth. Over with me behind bars for the rest of me life. Thass all I've got to look forward to. She snivelled again.

Gill offered her a tissue. Ruth wondered why Gill bothered with her. The rest of the warders, and inmates come to that, treated her with scorn. Spat in her food, tripped her up in the showers, stole her things. Murdered her rabbit. Gill was the only one who showed kindness. Perhaps she was a lemon? It had crossed Ruth's mind. Gill was a plain woman, not likely to be 'out' on the gay scene, what with her thick ankles and her job. Maybe she saw Ruth as a potential lover? What with all the revelations about her in Court - and in the press - it would hardly be surprising. Ruth was too weary to conjecture further about it now. She lay down on her bunk and picked up a celebrity magazine Gill had left for her. 'Heat', ha! That'd be the day - when she ever felt that again! Still fully dressed, she pulled the bedding up round her ears and closed her eyes. At least it was Saturday tomorrow, no Court - Sue would send clean clothes and toiletries with Lisa and Carly. They'd tell her what was happening. Out in the real world.

*It was three am, when the dream struck. She knew because it was so violent it woke her up and she checked the bedside clock. She struggled to remember the details before it fled. She was being stoned. Spat on. She was semi-naked - just a ragged shawl around her and a ripped skirt exposing bare legs and feet. She was crying between gasps for breath, as she ran. There was the water. She plunged in. The baying crowd behind her followed, splashing out from the shore, but she swam strongly and they were soon left behind. She could hear their howls growing fainter*

*as her head broke water. Where was she going? She didn't know. The water grew colder and there was no land in sight; just the dark ultramarine of the welcoming depths..*

## Chapter Twenty-Two

### TWO YEARS EARLIER

Explaining her son's fatal accident to Ruth Webb was one of the most difficult things DCI Andrews had ever had to do. She screamed so long and loudly he thought she might go into a seizure. She did in fact fall on the floor and thrash around kicking the furniture - thank goodness he'd had the foresight to take WPC Brennan with him. The WPC managed to get Ruth onto the sofa, put a pillow under her head and motion Dick to the kitchen. "A cup of tea. "With a lot of sugar," she hissed at him. "She's in shock."

Dick Andrews knew his way around the safe house where Ruth was staying - he'd had a suspected terrorist in there the previous year. The man had turned out to be a desperate refugee who'd been suckered into arson by an Islamist gang. Even in this quiet town mad things happened.

Dick made tea, aware that the following encounter would be something of a tricky confessional from him. All he'd told Ruth so far was that Andy had died instantly in a bike crash, while on his way to Bridge Street. He didn't know how much more she could take in - at this rate he'd be calling an ambulance for the second time that morning. As he waited for the tea to brew he listened out for happenings next door. Ruth's loud sobs had subsided. WPC Brennan was murmuring something soothing. Dick carried the tray back in and set it on the IKEA coffee table. The safe house had been furnished on a very low budget.

They drank their tea - Ruth's had four sugars in it - in silence. As he put his drained mug down, Dick took a deep breath.

"I'm so very sorry to be the bearer of these terrible tidings, Mrs Webb, Ruth..."

"Sorry!" Ruth spat the word back at him. "Iss all your fault! First you killed my husband and now my son! Oo's next? Me? Kill me now! I don' wanna live no more!" She pulled dramatically at her blouse, baring her chest and popping several buttons. DCI Andrews was reminded of her stance on the Bridge Street stairs, breasts almost hanging out, as she'd waved goodbye to her 'lodger'. He motioned Brennan to cover her up and the WPC draped a sofa throw around Ruth's shoulders.

DCI Andrews tried again. "No one wishes you any harm, Ruth. It's tragic what's happened to Andy, but it was an accident." Best stick with that version of events, he'd decided. There was after all considerable doubt over any motive.

"I wanna see my boy!" Ruth shouted. It was as though she needed proof.

"I will willingly take you myself. His body..." What's left of it, Dick thought, "is in the hospital mortuary. We can go as soon as we've finished talking."

"I've got nothin' more to say to you. You'll never get nothin' out of me. Cos I ent done nothin'!"

Talk about jumping to conclusions thought Dick Andrews. Did she expect to be accused, then? Again, he had to wonder how much she'd been involved. Michele seemed to think, plenty.

"Very well, Ruth. But there are some things of which I have to make you aware. I'm sorry to be doing it in such circumstances, but I'm afraid it's time you knew the facts."

"Facts! Iss a fact that not content with digging up my garden, now you're digging up my 'ome!"

"There are good reasons for that. Unfortunately. I have to tell you that we do have in our possession a note left by your husband when he committed suicide."

Ruth stared at him blankly her mouth dropped slightly open.

"In it he admits to the killing of Carrie Redmond, as I think Andy had already told you." Ruth stared at him dumbly. "And it also states that there are several other bodies buried under the Bridge Street patio."

This got the desired result. Ruth looked aghast. She clutched at her chest and seemed to be fighting for breath.

“It has recently come to our attention also, that there may be other bodies buried under the house. That’s why we’ve obtained a search warrant to take up the cellar.”

“Note.” Gaspeth Ruth. “He never left no note! I’d’ve seen it!”

The tricky bit was how much to reveal about Michele’s involvement. They were after all a family - they still had to live together. May be. It couldn’t be helped, though, Dick decided.

“Eddie did leave a note, Ruth. By chance Michele found it and gave it to us.”

“That cunt!” Ruth was predictably explosive. “She prob’ly wrote it herself! I woun’ put it past her!”

“Forensically speaking, that’s been proved impossible - the note has your husband’s DNA on it. But, that’s not all. As a result of the information contained within it, we have indeed been digging up your patio and I’m very sorry to tell you...” Dick Andrews paused but there was no nice way of putting it. “We have found bones.”

Ruth was now looking very ill. Though whether from shock or prior knowledge it was impossible to say. “The kids’ pets is buried there...” she whispered.

“These are human remains, Ruth.” Dick let that sink in and after a moment, continued. “I did talk to Andy about this situation. And he did admit to me that both himself and Eddie had had relations with Carrie Redmond. And that she was pregnant. Did you know that Ruth?”

Ruth barely managed shake her head.

“Before he died, Eddie told me that he knew about Carrie’s pregnancy. And that you did too and had offered to help Carrie get rid of it.”

Ruth shook her head again, this time more definitely.

“Andy knew about it, too.” Dick continued. “He insisted that Carrie had told Eddie it was his baby.”

Ruth stared at the floor.

“You see Ruth, I’m wondering if you did in fact know about the baby? And also that it was Eddie’s baby. Perhaps you were angry about it - that would be understandable. Perhaps you and Eddie had words. Perhaps that was why he killed Carrie? Perhaps that’s why he killed himself? D’you see what I mean?”

Ruth still said nothing.

“And even, maybe, that’s why he left the note. Perhaps he thought if he took all the blame, the rest of you wouldn’t be implicated?”

“I never...” Ruth whispered.

“Yes? You never..?”

“I never knew.”

“About Carrie’s baby?”

“About the bones.”

“You didn’t know about any human burials under the patio - is that what you’re saying?”

“I never knew about none of it.”

There was a pause. Then Dick Andrews played his most potentially devastating card.

“What about Lucy?”

Ruth jerked back so violently that her glasses fell off her nose. She shot a look so filled with malevolent rage at DCI Andrews that he himself reeled back.

“Am I under arrest?” She hissed at him.

Dick paused. Wondering if he should caution her now.

“No. We are just chatting.”

“Oh no we ’ent. If you think I done wrong you can arrest me. If not, fuck off and leave me alone.”

Which is how DCI Andrews found himself reading Ruth her Rights.

## Chapter Twenty-three

Driving to Oxfordshire on an unexpectedly beautiful, spring morning was exactly what she needed Cate realised. Last night had ended up on the dark side - starting, as it had done, with her showing Ethan footage of her killer film. There was no doubt Ethan was impressed but it had made both of them hyper and at the same time, wretched. Sometimes it was all too clear to Cate why forensics agreed it was only

ten years to burnout. She and Ethan finished two bottles of good Burgundy and then fell into bed and made hot and heavy remedial love for the rest of the night. She'd had to plead more work to get him to leave early this morning. Somewhat hung over, Ethan had not been pleased.

George took much more care with the driving than last time, she noticed with relief - gently negotiating the twisty lanes with their high hedges of budding Hawthorne and occasional overhanging Beeches. The sky was a vaporous blue, the sun struggling to burn through wispy cloud and light up the newly sprouting greenery. The countryside was coming back to life - which was always cheerful. George had a CD of 'Das Liede Von Der Erde' playing - how cleverly appropriate, thought Cate with an inward smile - but told Cate she was welcome to change it or fiddle with the radio till she found something else enjoyable. She didn't bother. Mahler's lovely hymn to the earth suited her mood perfectly.

"I haven't mentioned to Anna that it's a journalist I'm bringing." said George.

"No. I didn't think you would."

George laughed, "Touché. She'll be fine about it. She's actually very nice, very hospitable. Not at all like her stern Court persona."

Hm, thought Cate to herself. I'll be the judge of that. To George she said, "I'm very nice too. I don't bite unless severely provoked. And, by the way, I don't define myself as a journalist."

"Okay. A... what? Factual filmmaker? Documentarist?"

"Filmmaker will do fine." Said Cate. "Anyway, I don't expect we'll talk about it. Anna's made it clear in the past she doesn't want me to interview her."

"Well, we'll see." George sounded optimistic. Cate was glad she'd had the foresight to transfer the work to the laptop in her overnight bag...

"I'll take you down to the river where I fish when we get there. It's a gorgeous spot close to the bottom of their garden."

There were compensations for the heavy load of being a Barrister, thought Cate. The idea that an independent filmmaker could ever afford a country house - let alone one with a river running through it - was absurd. Unless, that is, she won the lottery.

"Are we going fishing?"

"If you want to. We could add trout to the menu."

Cate hadn't fished since she was a child, sent on awkward bonding exercises with her stepfather. How would it feel to do it again? She wondered. Would she have the same feelings of anxiety, even dread?

"Maybe." She said. It depended what else was on the menu.

They were given, as George had promised, a warm welcome at Eave cottage. Not so much a cottage as a sprawling villa, thought Cate as she was shown to her comfortable, en suite bedroom. Anna had applied the benefit of the doubt and given George's guest a separate room. Vincent and Muriel were in the loft - usually slept in by the older children. They were still in bed - "Ah, young love," sighed Harry. George was to have Marnie's room - Marnie being on a sleepover at her best friend's in London.

After they'd been given a few minutes to unpack and wash their faces, Anna called them down for coffee. If she was concerned that Cate Harrison was the guest, she certainly didn't show it. Sipping the excellent Italian brew, Cate wondered if Anna even remembered who she was - had noticed her in the Court? It was odd seeing the QC in mufti. Anna was wearing tight jeans, a baggy jumper - though it was a Jil Sander, Cate recognised - Puma sneakers and a Burberry scarf - the perfect costume for country living. Without the barrister's wig, her hair was a long and glossy chestnut mane, today drawn into a loose ponytail.

"Now," she was saying, "Harry and I are going into Banbury food shopping, if anyone wants to come. If there are special requests, speak now?"

George said. "I don't fancy town, the market's on and it'll be crowded. I thought I'd take Cate fishing."

"Good idea. "Harry said enthusiastically, "There's rods and waders in the outhouse. When we get back I'll come and join you."

"After you've cut the hedge and cleared the pond." Said Anna, firmly.

Everyone laughed. It was obvious who wore the waders, thought Cate. Though Harry was also quite formidable, with his size and ruddy, handsome face - to say nothing of his skills as a surgeon. They were the very essence of an exemplary Sunday Times couple.

"Cate, are you happy with that?" Anna turned to her with a smile. "Don't let George dictate what you do - he can be quite a bully."

Cate smiled. "That's fine with me. I'm looking forward to exploring your lovely domain."

“Oh” - Anna was deprecating. “It needs lots doing. But the country’s nice. And such a relief after Court Four, no?”

Ah, so she had noticed. Cate acknowledged her comment with a complicit nod.

As the SUV bumped off down the drive, George took Cate into the outhouse - a sturdy, brick lean-to with mullioned windows and lots of shelves - and offered up Wellies and Barbours and what he termed, ‘fly hats’. These were tweedy Trilbies with brightly feathered fishing flies hooked under their bands. George put one on Cate’s head - “Check it out,” he pointed to the mirror hanging on the back door. “It’s a good look for you.” Cate checked and had to agree. The Trilby sat well on her blond hair, which she’d plaited in readiness.

Carrying what seemed to Cate like a lot of gear including net baskets to keep any fish they caught alive, they headed down the garden. A wooden latch-gate in the dense hedge at the bottom led onto a narrow path, and a small bridge - Cate was reminded of Willow pattern - over a busily plashing stream. They followed it a little way, until it broadened out into a full sized river cutting through a sunlit open meadow. One or two grazing cows raised their heads without undue interest.

Shortly, George stopped at a mild slope of bank and indicated that this was a good place. Cate caught up and dumped her gear with relief. It was surprisingly heavy. George opened the stools and put up the brollies, then quickly showed her how to attach a fly and cast a reel. They agreed that Cate could stop any time she’d had enough (she privately thought it would be as soon as she caught anything) then they pulled on waders, the current was quite strong and deep, and strode into the water. Over the next hour Cate experienced an extraordinary mix of feelings. For a start, it was amazing how much she remembered. After a couple of goes she was casting her line and reeling in like an expert. She could see George was noting her progress with interest. She felt a tug and reeled in quickly to find a small perch on the line. She instantly knew how to unhook its mouth without wounding it and with no question threw it straight back. It was too small and anyway perch tasted disgusting. George nodded surprised approval. There would definitely be questions later.

After an hour, during which Cate remembered the pleasure of rippling water, the sun on your back and a well-timed action - the net baskets dangling in the shallows at the river edge had four good-sized trout in them. It was a little after noon and the sun was now quite hot, so George said they should stop and drink the flask of tea he’d brought. They stretched on the sun-warmed bank and sipped their tea and ate

chocolate digestives in companionable silence. For some reason, thought Cate, she felt very at home with George. More so than with Ethan, in spite of their electric sexual chemistry. She looked at him through half-closed lashes and wondered if they would end up in bed. There was a sudden movement and splash across the bubbling river.

“Otter,” said George, sitting up. “There are quite a few round here, now.”

“Otters! How lovely” Cate exclaimed. “I wish I’d seen it.”

George pointed. “There’s its nose...”

Cate too sat up and followed George’s finger. The otter’s nose and whiskers were just breaking the water by the opposite bank, creating a widening eddy.

“It’s so cute! Where’s my camera?” Cate pulled her Nikon out of her bag and stood up to snap the sleek creature. It ducked and dived then basked on its back - all but posing for her. Cate showed George the digital pictures, delighted with her capture.

“Very charming. Perhaps you should take up nature studies?”

“I have done wild life. As well as wild lives. ”

“I bet the first’s less stressful.”

“Ooh - I don’t know. Red in tooth and claw!”

George looked at his watch. “Did Anna say what time lunch would be?”

“Two-ish, I think.”

“We should make tracks. Let’s get the fish out.”

He hauled up the baskets and handed one to Cate. She shook her head. “I’m not killing them.”

George looked surprised. “Not squeamish, surely? With your work!”

Cate shook her head again. “I couldn’t kill anything myself. Never.”

“Even if your life depended on it? What about in a concentration camp?”

“We’re not in a concentration camp.” Cate retorted. “We’re on a peaceful, otter-strewn river bank in loamy England. And I don’t care how much you goad me, I’m not killing that fish!”

George laughed and with admirable ease took out a fish and slit its throat. The fish jerked once and was still. Cate shuddered and looked away. It was silly, she knew - she would still eat it.

“I used to fish when I was a kid and I never could then either.”

A picture of her stepfather tormenting her - "Pathetic baby. Mummy's girl!" - until she cried, appeared in her mind's eye, clear as if it had happened today. She hadn't thought about that consciously in years.

"Ah," said George, "I thought you'd done it before. You're good."

"Not good enough." Cate muttered. She scrambled to her feet. "Shall we go? We don't want to be rude."

George gathered up the equipment apportioning the bag of fish to Cate. As they walked back along the meadow, he threw an arm casually round her shoulders and pulled her close to him.

On Saturday evening before dinner, which Harry was cooking, Vincent and Muriel went for a walk and George suggested that he and Anna have a look at Cate's film. She'd mentioned that she'd brought the rough edit with her and might do some work on it over the weekend.

Cate was alarmed, though she admitted to herself it was the real reason she'd brought it.

"Oh, I don't know... it's not finished. I don't usually show people until I'm satisfied."

"That's alright." Persuaded George. "Just show us some bits you are happy with. What do you think Anna?"

"I'd love to see some." Anna dropped the book she was snoozing over. "If Cate's willing, let's do it."

She led the way to the study and they pulled chairs up around the desk where Cate could perch her laptop. Cate very much wanted to impress Anna. She was determined to get an interview with her eventually. It had been made clear at lunch that they would not discuss their current mutual interests, or indeed, anything which might pertain to the trial. But afterwards, when it was over - well, that was a different matter.

"I'll show you some of the material I've gathered on the 'Nightmare Nurse' case." Cate said, flicking through the onscreen file. "I'm not sure how much I'll use in the final edit, but it is quite riveting."

She stopped at an interview with the mother of one of the Care Home worker's victims. The woman was wiping her reddened eyes and had clearly been weeping moments before.

"It was just impossible to believe," she was saying. "We'd known her ever since our daughter went in the home. She was so kind. Always going that extra mile. When Molly had a bad ear infection, she stayed late every night to put in the drops herself. Nothing was ever too much trouble for her, so you can imagine..."

Cate's voice was heard off camera asking how she, Margaret, had found out?

"My husband got suspicious. You know, when she... when she.." She clearly couldn't bring herself to say the nurse's name, "When .. that evil woman... was arrested for the other murders. Munchausen's they said.."

"Did the police interview you?" Cate asked.

"No, not then. To be honest, the police seemed to be having the same trouble we were believing it. It was weeks before we heard from them. But in the meantime..."

"You'd started to add things up?" Cate prompted.

Margaret nodded, her eyes welling up again. "We thought back over how Molly's death had been. See, she was so well, so healthy - she might have been challenged, but it didn't stop her eating! And she loved music, dancing"

"She could still have had a long and happy life..." said Cate.

Margaret choked into her tissue. "Exactly. I'll never forgive myself that she didn't!"

"But it wasn't your fault..."

"We should have seen the signs. That's what I kept thinking. I still do."

"What were the signs?"

"I suppose that she would always be with her when we visited. If we took Molly out, she'd say, "Oh, I'll come with you". I used to think - I mean, it sometimes crossed my mind - that's a bit odd, why wouldn't she want her break? Be grateful Molly was off her hands for a bit. Turns out she was the same with all the others, like they were *her* family..." Again she choked on the words.

There was another burst of crying, while Cate's camera took in the living room and conservatory of the comfortable bungalow. These people were modestly well off, middle-class - which made the story all the more unusual. Or rather, which confounded expectations on serial killings - weren't the protagonists always low-lives?

Margaret was back on camera, blowing her nose and continuing, "So then I'd be thinking, we should have visited more often. Insisted on having Molly to ourselves, then she might have told us... I don't know... She always seemed so pleased the nurse paid attention to her. Said she was her only friend."

"They play on the vulnerable. The loneliness of people..." Anna interjected at this point, shaking her head. "It's a 21<sup>st</sup> century problem.."

"We're all a bunch of face-booked desperadoes." Agreed George.

Cate said nothing. She was used to these disturbing social revelations.

The interview finished with 'Margaret' offering, as interviewees so often did, a cup of tea and thanking Cate for her interest. People were often just so grateful for someone listening. Something the police had - especially in this case, it seemed - woefully neglected. It was evidently hard for any branch of society to believe a carer would actually set out to kill. Particularly, a woman carer. A nurse - a supposed angel of mercy.

"It's raw stuff, alright." Said Anna, as Cate shut down the computer. "When will it be finished?"

Cate gave a short laugh. "I'm not sure. I could go on indefinitely. There are a surprising number of cases in the UK - though nothing beside South Africa or Russia."

"I'd have thought the USA?" Anna sounded surprised.

"Actually, Cate's quite right.." nodded George. "Countries in turmoil throw up far more. I often get called to Jo'burg for assessments. It's out of control there at the moment."

They all fell silent, considering a world in which serial killing was out of control.

Harry's cheerful voice calling them to dinner cut across the mood, and with signs of relief they all left the study. George put a hand on Cate's arm at the door and said, "It's very good. Full of empathy. Compassion. But then I should have known that after this morning."

He meant the fishes, she supposed. Or perhaps the otter. He kept his hand on her arm slightly longer than necessary and again she found herself wondering when they would end up in bed together. She realised with a small inward grimace that she was now wondering when not if.

Not tonight for sure - that would be giving far too much away. She didn't want to upset or offend Anna. Though she rather thought George wouldn't draw the line at doing either.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

### TWO YEARS EARLIER

The first set of bones they fully recovered from the Webb's patio did, as Michele had promised, belong to Alana. They were fresh enough for the DNA to be sampled and cross-matched to other items, like the young woman's slippers still sitting in Michele's clothes cupboard. The fact that they found three femurs meant that of course there were more sets, as Eddie's note had said. DCI Andrews had a terrible sinking feeling that there might indeed be nine (approx).

Work began on the cellar too, though it was a lot more difficult. Eddie had, it appeared, learned with practice and there were several layers of dense concrete to hack through.

Ruth meanwhile, was appointed a lawyer - a local duty solicitor called Roly Baring - and was remanded in custody charged with murder, which had occasioned another outburst of shouting and swearing. Dick Andrews hadn't been called a cunt so many times as far back as he could remember. Ruth insisted of course that she was innocent and that she was just being picked on, "Cos you've got no-one else now, you cunt!" Dick had to admit to himself there was more than an element of truth in her accusation.

Roly was a good man, solid, and dependable. Being local, he was able to talk to Ruth in her own language, albeit without recourse to the c-word. But having a client who might be a serial killer, was obviously as disturbing to him as to all the others involved in the case - it just wasn't what you expected in this small rural town. More than once he rued the fact his wife, Julia had been awake that night with a crying baby

and therefore able to take the police station's call. Ruth had retreated into silence. She'd been remanded to Holworth Prison and was to be taken there within the next day or two. Roly would have to add lengthy travel to his not inconsiderable problems.

DCI Andrews was down at the Bridge Street site most days. The weather continued hot and he had to wear the wide-brimmed summer hat usually reserved for Continental travelling. He started to feel like Harrison Ford in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, though less athletic. Most days, at least a couple of human bones were found. These were examined with intensity by forensic pathologist, Arthur Rowbotham, who - as he kept saying - had never seen the like. Under his tutelage, DCI Andrews found out more than he'd ever wanted to know about human anatomy. So far, the remains of at least four different bodies had been recovered - one set having been found in the cellar. A much larger force was now deployed on what had become a full-blown search in a serial murder enquiry.

Dick Andrews decided to excavate the possible burial ground of little Lucy himself. There was something too precious about a baby's remains - no matter how it had died - to consign to a brutal digger. He asked Arthur to accompany him and bear witness and the two men garbed in forensic suits began to dig with small spades in the area Michele had indicated. It was another hot afternoon and, with the ground baked in this sheltered and so far untouched corner, hard work - the boilersuits were soon sweaty and sticky. After an hour, Dick Andrews uncovered a small bone. He handed it to Arthur, who nodded. "Tibia." They both scabbled at the earth around the spot and quite quickly collected enough bones to roughly shape a small skeleton. Arthur stood and surveyed it from above. "About two years, I'd say." Bit old for a cot death, went through Dick's mind. Looking at Arthur, he knew he was thinking the same. Dick passed a hand over his dripping brow and said they should stop for a tea break. Arthur brought over polystyrene cups from the chuck-wagon set up in the street. They sat on the bank surrounded by nettles and Buddleia intertwined with Columbine - a strangely pastoral scene - there were even a couple of butterflies in the Buddleia - and sipped the reviving liquid.

"What d' you think then?" Said Dick, when the question couldn't be postponed any longer.

“Doubt it’s a SID. “Said Arthur, confirming Dick’s suspicions. “Don’t usually happen over the age of one. It would be about fifteen years ago, do we think?”

Dick nodded. Michele was fourteen and she’d said Lucy died before she was born.

“On a thorough examination, I may be able to find due cause. But it was most probably suffocation - whether by design or accident, we may never know.”

Dick Andrews had already surmised as much. Maybe he’d have another go at Michele, he was thinking, or Sue. Perhaps she knew more than she’d admitted. But if this baby had died by chance, or mistake, it might account for a lot of Ruth’s later behaviour, not least of all her depression.

The neat, navy blue, front door of the council house was opened by Sue Carter - her toddler, Scarlett, in her arms. Dick could hear a dog barking somewhere in the back. Sue knew he was coming as DCI Andrews had taken the trouble to call her. Surprise tactics, he felt, would be less likely to work in her case, especially after the events of the last couple of days.

Sue looked awful. The death of Andy and arrest of Ruth had clearly taken a terrible toll. Her face was drawn and her eyes bloodshot. She was wearing a black roll neck sweater although the day was warm.

“Hello there. Come in.” Sue was as polite as ever, though her voice was tearful. She ushered him into the hall after giving a quick look round outside - checking, Dick supposed, to see if the neighbours had noticed his unmarked car. In this quiet, suburban cul-de-sac unusual comings and goings would be noted. Andy’s ‘accident’ had been reported in the local paper.

Sue showed him through to a small but comfortable sitting room, with cushioned sofas and a big wide screen TV. “Tom.” She said almost apologetically, indicating the TV. “He likes his sport.”

“Don’t all we men.” Dick Andrews nodded. He accepted the armchair seat Sue indicated, having shoved a tabby kitten off it. “Mum’s kitten, Jack.” Sue said, brushing the seat. “He gets fluff everywhere.” Dick sat, thinking he’d have to de-lint his navy trousers afterwards and said thanks, he’d love a cup of tea. Put her at her ease, he thought, he didn’t have to drink it.

While she was in the kitchen, he looked round the room. On the mantelpiece, over the fake, coal fire were many family pictures. Dick got up to have a closer look. There was Sue as a young girl, with a smiling woman in a wheelchair - presumably her Auntie Betty. How was she related and on which side? Dick made a note to ask later. There was a standard school picture - Sue in uniform with pink bows in her hair - and another with some kind of school sports team, netball? There were several wedding pictures - Tom was a strapping lad, he saw, perhaps once a rugby player. One had the entire Webb family line up - even Ruth was smiling as she stood in a flowered dress and gauzy hat, holding a baby. That must be the youngest, Tyler, was it? Then there was a more recent one of Sue with Michele and Scarlett. They were in a park at a kids' playground - Sue was watching Michele push Scarlett on a swing. They were all laughing - a normal family having fun. Who had taken the picture, Dick wondered, Tom perhaps?

Sue came back with tea, saying sorry about the dog barking - it was Mum's beagle Kylie she was minding. Kylie was pining for her mistress, but she'd put her in the garden now with Scarlett in her playpen - it was such a lovely day, wasn't it? Hm, thought Dick, not for the business on which he was about to embark.

"I'm sorry to have to come back to you at a time like this Sue. My sincere condolences about your brother. It was a terrible thing to happen." Dick wasn't sure how much Sue knew about the accident - he'd instructed Shane to say as little as possible to the family. As for Ruth's arrest - that she certainly knew about and had taken clothes and a washing bag for her down to the police station.

"But it's the matter of little Lucy..."

"Lucy?" Sue looked confused.

"I wonder if you can think back to when that happened?"

"I was only about six myself."

"Yes. But do you recall any details? How you came to hear of what happened for instance?"

"Mum said to me one morning that Lucy had died in the night. In her cot, she said. And that Dad had buried her in the garden."

"Didn't you think that was odd? I mean, even a baby has a funeral when it dies..?"

“I wouldn’t have known the difference then. See we had pets - I had a white mouse and quite a few goldfish and they were all buried in the garden. I suppose I just thought a baby was the same.”

“And later?”

“Later, I must admit I did question it. Mum used to have this sort of ritual, on Lucy’s birthday? We’d all go to her grave with flowers and say nice things to her - like, tell her stuff about school and pets and days out - we’d have a sort of picnic there. One year I remember Dad video-ed it.”

You couldn’t make it up, thought Dick.

“You say later you questioned it?”

“Well - after a while Mum stopped. Marking her birthday, that is. It seemed to make her too sad. Or maybe, I don’t know, angry? One time I asked her how come Lucy was in the garden and not in the cemetery where we visited Grandad. She told me Dad said, under the circumstances it was for the best.”

“What were the circumstances?”

“Well, that Lucy had smothered. She said Dad thought the authorities might blame Mum. Say she’d been neglectful. They were always very wary about police and that. I think ’cos they both come from families who’d had trouble with the law?”

“And that’s all she said?”

Sue frowned, thinking hard. “She once said as how Dad held it over her.”

“What do you think she meant by that?”

Sue shrugged. “I imagine as how he could threaten her with it. You know, to keep her in line.”

Yes, that made sense, Dick thought.

“Did all your siblings think the same thing about Lucy? I mean there weren’t any other stories?”

Sue gave a tearful smile. “There were some awful jokes. About not behaving and being buried with Lucy. Mostly Andy would say that.”

Sue choked out a short sob and held a tissue to her face. Dick Andrews gave her some moments to recover.

“I’m sorry. I just can’t take it all in. It’s like the family’s - I don’t know - disintegrating.”

Faster than you think, thought Dick.

“Andy made jokes - black humour I suppose you’d call it - because we were all afraid of Dad. Even Mum, I think.”

“He was a difficult character, obviously. From what I understand, everyone had to do what he said?”

“Oh yes.”

“One more thing, Sue. Did Michele ever say anything to you about Lucy? Or anyone else buried under the patio?”

Sue shook her head firmly. “Michele said very little about what went on at home. She complained about being punished. Being strapped and that, but she never said anything, you know, worse. I always asked her if she was okay and she always said she was.”

Oh, the misguided loyalty, thought Dick, or the desire to protect others. He stood up, handing the tea mug back to Sue. He had drunk it after all. Sue led him towards the front door.

“Will Mum be allowed to go to Andy’s funeral?” She asked before she opened it. “She’ll be gutted if she can’t.”

“I’ll do my best.” Said Dick. The funeral wasn’t for another week, he knew. “She’ll be in Holworth by then, but I hope we can arrange an escort.”

Sue nodded, gratefully. Dick’s last sight was of her standing at the open front door watching as he got into his car. She took another swift look round the Close before she shut the door. If all the allegations against her family were true, it wouldn’t be long before the press were beating a path to it.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

It was Wednesday before George rang. Cate wouldn’t admit to anxiety, but did acknowledge to herself that by Tuesday she was wondering. She kept turning over the

events of the weekend - trying to find some meaning. Some more meaning. After the fishing expedition, the rest of it had passed pleasantly enough - lunch with a lot of wine was great fun. Vincent did impressions of Oxfordshire village life - including a previous visit when he'd gone to a fete and bought home made rhubarb jam which poisoned him. Eenglish cookeeng?

"Cheek," shouted Harry, who'd created another stunning feast, even incorporating the fish George and Cate had caught. "No, English witches!" Cried Anna and Cate almost simultaneously. They'd looked at each other afterwards with an uneasy, conspiratorial smile. George told funny stories about biking round the lanes - perhaps if the weather held they should go on one later? They didn't - later the Wyatts got busy with gardening - the clearing of winter waste, the removal of dead wood in the form of overhanging branches and leafless bushes, the dragging of the pond. Vincent and Muriel went back to bed, revelling in the glorious innocence of young love, but George and Cate joined the garden team - Cate particularly enjoyed creating the bonfire, turning over the smouldering pile with a garden fork and relishing the earthy smell of rotted leaves. George too seemed to be enjoying his closeness with nature, the two of them she noticed again, worked well together. That evening after rabbit stew - a tricky event for Cate, she didn't normally eat anything with which she might be friends; George's eyes, she knew, were upon her as she pushed the tasty nuggets round her dish, eventually hiding them beneath the spinach, he himself ate with an almost visceral relish - they played board games. George was immensely competitive, as was Vincent - and, more surprisingly, Anna. Harry fell asleep in the big armchair by the log fire and snored gently. Cate looked through some gorgeous, wildlife, coffee-table books, admiring the photography. At bedtime Vincent and Muriel were first up the stairs - Cate hoped the walls were sound-proofed - Anna woke a remonstrating Harry and hauled him off upstairs, leaving Cate and George alone. George poured them a brandy, which they drank without speaking. It was as if, Cate thought over the next few days, there was too much to say - they might go on all night if they started. Instead, George asked Cate if she had everything she needed, led her to her room and whispered she should have a good night and sleep well, while giving her the lightest of cheek brushes. Though Cate had resolved she wouldn't be indiscreet under Anna's roof - she was disappointed.

Court Four had broken for lunch when George called. Cate was hurrying out for a quick sandwich and coffee, having avoided Ethan's enquiring glance. She didn't want to get into a conversation with him about what had passed since their last encounter. There was nothing agreed between them after all, they were only friends with benefits - but still she felt guilty. She knew Ethan wanted more - he'd made that plain with his behaviour, if not in words - and sooner or later a decision would have to be taken. She was not by nature unfaithful, or one to play the field - a lack of boundaries disturbed her - but she was genuinely confused about her feelings. Ethan excited her sexually more than anyone she had known for years, but George offered something else: something both stimulating and stable - though why she thought so, she couldn't say. What little she knew of George's history with relationships so far, appeared to suggest neither.

"How's it going?" He asked. "Anna doing her stuff?"

"Oh yes."

The first day back had been odd. Cate was in her usual place when Anna entered to continue the case for the Defence. Cate almost expected some acknowledgement, but Anna as usual, swept the gallery without a flicker of recognition. God she was cool thought Cate, rather enviously. Anna began by grilling several neighbours and friends of Ruth, the police liaison officer, the forensic pathologist, the family and friends of victims and lastly Sue Carter. Sue became very upset on the stand and had to be granted a short, tearful break. No matter what the attitude of the witnesses, however, Anna maintained her straightforward, polite but relentless questioning. It was quite a performance thought Cate, with admiration - she could have been an actress.

"Would you like to go to the opera?" Asked George. "I've got tickets for La Boheme at Covent Garden. It occurred to me it might appeal to your spirit of melodrama."

"I'm not sure if that's a compliment or an insult." Cate laughed. "Do you mean tonight? It's a school night."

"Starts early. Press night. Have you in bed by 10.30." Promised George.

Cate wondered whose bed he had in mind.

“Thanks, I’d like that.” What a treat to go to Covent Garden, she was thinking - she couldn’t turn that down.

“Come straight from The Bailey?”

“But I’m not dressed for it...” Cate knew she couldn’t get away with jeans and Uggs for the opera.

“Be my pleasure to get you a frock - let me see, size ten? And shoes - a five?”

Cate’s breath was taken away - as so often with George. How bizarre to have a man do that for you - surely it was patriarchal, insulting? But despite her political concerns she was charmed.

“Meet me at the Covent Garden Hotel - say, 5.30? You can get changed there.”

Making her way there on the tube, Cate was consumed with curiosity about the costume George had chosen for her. What was the protocol for this? Did she pay him? Give the clothes back afterwards? Take them off in front of him?

George was waiting in the bar. He brushed her cheek with his lips, pleasantly dry, she observed, and handed her some expensive looking carrier bags - Browns, she fleetingly saw, and Manolo Blahnik. “Drink?” He asked cheerfully. “Glass of champagne?”

Well it was only proper for La Boheme, she had to admit.

“Shall I change while you order? I’d feel more comfortable dressed up in here.”

“Yes - why not. There’s some friends joining us shortly. Here.” George held out a keycard.

“I took a room so you’d be comfortable.”

“Comfortable now or later?” Thought Cate. But she took the key saying only, “Back in a jiff.”

In the room - a large double she immediately saw, she was beginning to feel as if she was on hire from an escort agency - she unwrapped a Jill Sander dress in a deep plum colour, perfect with her blond hair, and high heeled black suede pumps, there were even some gold chains and earrings. Couldn’t fault his taste she admitted as, after dressing and applying mascara and lipstick and a squirt of Chanel no 5 - thank goodness she always carried her cosmetic bag with her - she checked herself in the long mirror. She looked good. Not a bit like an escort. Back in the bar George was chatting to a Middle Eastern looking couple. He gave Cate an admiring once over, told her she looked terrific and introduced her to Jamil Arcadi, and his wife Alissa - old

friends from Iran. They must go right away, he insisted, couldn't be late on press night. Outside the hotel entrance they were swept off in a chauffeured Mercedes belonging to the Arcadis. Used as she was to premieres and festivals and film moguls spending absurd amounts of money, Cate couldn't help but be impressed. Whatever the Arcadis did, it was obvious they were very wealthy.

She found out more over more champagne in the interval. While George and Alissa discussed Puccini and the soprano's acting ability, Jamil told Cate he was an investment banker. His family had left Iran before the Shah fell; he now lived in Dubai, worked from New York and frequently visited family in London. They had a flat - he described it as a 'pied a terre' - in Number One Hyde Park. Encouraged, or perhaps amused, by Cate's investigative questions, Jamil explained in short order that Libya was 90% oil - that's why NATO had got involved; how gold was the only commodity worth having - Libya had the greatest amounts of that too, stock-piled by Gaddafi, who knew where; that she should forget banks, they were heading for another crash, if she had any cash, she should put it into property - that at least, bombs aside, remained standing. By the third act Cate's head was ringing, she barely heard the soaring arias, she was thinking that her next film would be about the other kind of psychopaths - bankers. When she could concentrate on the opera - the doomed love, the swoons, the death, she found herself distracted by the plan for later that night. Was she to have her own operatic climax? Would she and George be staying together in the comfortable double?

They had supper at J Sheekey's. Cate had oysters, which she loved, and a whole succulent lobster thermidor. It wasn't often she silently excused herself, that she got to dine so extravagantly. Jamil, she noticed, paid the bill. The chauffeured car was discreetly purring in St Martin's Lane, ready for the off; George and Cate were dropped back at the hotel and stood on the steps waving the Arcadis away. It was lightly raining and chilly - George pushed on the revolving door and guided Cate back into the foyer. Once inside, he stopped and looked at her. It was a long unsmiling look, which she returned. Then George put an arm round her and drew her towards the lifts.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

### TWO YEARS EARLIER

The hot weather broke and it rained on the afternoon of Andy Webb's funeral. Dick Andrews parked his car at the same time as the prison convoy arrived. Ruth saw him through the window of the Volvo Estate car. At least they hadn't brought her in a Black Maria, Dick was relieved to see. He nodded to her but she all but spat at him when she was helped out, handcuffed to a female prison warder. The chosen church was on the outskirts of town, in a wooded area down a lane from the main road. From the churchyard it looked like a country scene. The church itself was a pretty, early Victorian building with a nicely kept shrubbery and flowerbeds. Inside there were white lily arrangements and the faint whiff of incense. Thank goodness an effort had been made thought Dick. The Webb family, except for the youngest children, was in the front pew. Sue and Tom were there, sitting next to Michele and after her, Carly, Lisa, and Zac. There was a second row of assorted older people on the other side - other relatives assumed Dick, they had a distinct look of Eddie about them. Ruth was brought in with a warder on each side of her and led to sit in the pew behind her children. She was already crying noisily. Apart from Dick Andrews, there were no other mourners. The service was brief, as though the vicar was keen to get it over with and there were no hymns.

The rain had temporarily halted and birdsong could be heard through the stained-glass windows. The only other sounds were the occasional snuffle and Ruth's heaving sobs. From time to time Sue turned round and patted Ruth's knee, comfortingly. Watching from a couple of pews behind Dick thought he detected Ruth moving away from her hand. Michele remained mute - she stared straight ahead, not even acknowledging her Mother.

The body was to be taken to the crematorium and only Sue, Tom and the older girls would accompany it. Straight after the service finished, Ruth was allowed a very quick hug with Lisa and Carly. She did not attempt to embrace Sue, who looked dejected, Dick saw, or Michele, who looked merely sullen. Then Ruth was ushered out, her shoulders shaking, into the waiting car and driven away, leaving the rest of the

family forlornly waiting on the church steps. As the hearse drew round to the front to take Andy's coffin, Dick Andrews approached Michele. He put a hand on her shoulder and instead of shrugging it off as he'd half expected she turned towards him.

"Thanks for comin'. I s'pose you has to?"

"No I don't. But I felt it was right. How are you doing Michele?"

Michele checked on her siblings, but locked in their own emotions they were not watching.

"Okay." She muttered. "I want to go and stay with Sue. She says I can, but the social workers wants to foster me out."

Dick noted that he'd get DC Dawkins to have a word with them. He couldn't see why Michele, at least, shouldn't be with someone she cared for. They fell silent as the coffin was borne out of the church and loaded with sounds of effort into the hearse. Sue came up and put a hand out to Michele.

"Coming with us to the crematorium?"

Michele shook her head. Sue seemed about to say something more, but she caught Dick's eye and didn't. "I'll see you later then." She said, backing away towards the cortege. "The funeral tea's at ours, don't forget."

Michele nodded briefly. Dick Andrews wondered if she would go. He supposed so. Even in this family there'd be some kind of comfort in togetherness.

The cortege pulled slowly away, Sue and Tom in a Toyota hatchback with the rest of the children. Dick and Michele began to walk down the shingle path towards his car. The rain had left a feeling of freshness and the smell of summer blooms floated from the flowerbeds. Dick couldn't help thinking that though they'd dragged tarps over the Webb's backyard, the rain would have turned the sludgy soil into an unworkable goo.

After a moment Michele took Dick's hand. Hers was warm and dry and very small in his large, rather calloused one. He held her fingers lightly in case she should want to escape, but felt touched that she apparently looked upon him as a friend not just a useful police officer.

"D'you mind if we talk a bit?" He said.

Michele shook her head.

"About Andy. Did you know he was seeing Carrie?"

Michele nodded.

"She told me. She liked him."

“What about your Dad - did you know he too was...”

“Shagging her. Yes.”

That stopped Dick for a moment. He squeezed Michele’s hand and looking down at it saw she’d got a crudely inked tattoo, obviously home-made, on her knuckles. LOVE it said.

“Me Mum went potty about it. They ’ad a row. She din’ want my Dad to keep shaggin’ her. She was furious that Carrie was goin’ to have a baby.”

“Did she realize it was your Dad’s?”

“He like, denied it. But she din’ believe ’im. She said it had gotta be got rid of.

“You heard her say that?”

“Yeah. She said that baby’s got to go. And so ’as she.”

Dick released her hand and groped in his pockets for his Gaviscon. At this revelatory rate, his ulcer would be back in no time.

“You’re sure that’s what she said - ‘she’s got to go’?”

Michele nodded.

“When was this row - d’you remember, Michele?”

Michele pondered for a moment, turning over wet leaves with her boots. New, biker-like with big buckles, Dick Andrews saw. He wondered where she’d got the money.

“About a week maybe before... you know...”

Before Eddie hung himself, he supposed she meant.

Michele looked up at him. A calculated look, he thought - measuring what to say next. How much to tell him. She seemed to take a decision.

“An’ then after, I heard me Dad on the phone to Andy - they was talking about Carrie. Dad kept sayin’ to Andy to take her to Upthorne - thass the park like, where she was found - and he’d meet them there. They was arguing. I could tell ’cos Dad was getting more and more loud, shoutin’ ‘Do as I tell you! I says take her there! Tell her I’m going to settle it. Yeah - I’ll settle it all right.’”

“Did you think he meant money?”

Michele shrugged. “Maybe. Sounded like it.”

“And that conversation was soon after the row with your Mum?”

“Yeah - I know that ’cos she was in a right rage all day and I got the strap for not peelin’ the potatoes.”

It was just as he'd suspected, thought DCI Andrews, though there was little comfort in that. Poor Carrie, thinking she was meeting with her lover - the one she cared about. She was going to have a night of bliss with the man she wanted, only for the ogre of a Father to appear at the end of it. Dick tried to imagine how the takeover had been managed. Did Andy stay with Carrie until she fell asleep? Did he leave her there for his father to find? Or did he call her and arrange to meet, telling her she'd get money from his Dad, only for Eddie to turn up instead? Worst of all - did Andy actually join in with the killing? Hold her supine body while Eddie put a hand over her mouth? Dick shook the images away sucking hard on his tablet.

"So when the policeman came around, PC Amble? And he asked you about Carrie and her boyfriend..."

"I already knew she was dead." Michele interrupted, flatly. "Well I mean, I thought she most likely was - you know, what with the others. In the cellar."

"But you couldn't say anything, because..?"

"Because me Mum would've killed me. Ow many times do I 'av to tell you! " Michele looked furious herself now. For once, it wasn't hard to see she was Ruth's daughter. She turned away and stomped down the path towards the lych-gate, her legs looking like straws in the big clumsy boots. Dick Andrews caught up with her.

"Come on." He said, "I'll drop you at Sue's."

Michele shook her head. "I ent goin' there. I don' wanna be with all them family." She sneered the word. "You can give me a lift into town, though."

Alarm bells rang in Dick's head - she was a kid after all, and in care. "Where are you going?"

"Meetin' some friends." Michele avoided his searching look. "I'll go back to the care home later, honest."

She'd had a tough day and Dick decided to give her the benefit of the doubt - at least temporarily. But he'd speak to DS Dawkins pronto about re-housing Michele with Sue. The girl needed looking after.

*This form of the dream was always the worst. Damage to herself she could take, but damage to her children... Her baby was dead. No, her baby was being taken away. Snatched from her arms and she was powerless. As always in the dream her*

*limbs were heavy and hard to move, it was like struggling through mud, sludge, sinking sand. Who was taking the baby? He was. She could never see the face. He had taken all her babies, one by one. She gave birth to them in agony, without any help and then he came and grabbed them no matter how much she clung on. No matter how much they screamed. She screamed. Sometimes she had even killed them herself. Before he could get to them. Before he knew they were there. She was cunning. Covered up their birth. Hid them in her bed. Held them close. Too close, so they smothered silently. But at least they felt no pain. They were too little to know. Their lungs were hardly formed. Just born, they could barely cry. That's when she did it. She'd snuggle them into her breast. Rock them. Hum a lullaby. Then as their eyes closed she'd cover their noses and mouths with her shawl. A feeble arch of the back. A tiny kick. And they were gone. That would teach him. She almost laughed. The baby was saved. She'd won. Until the next time. Then he'd come again - unless she, unless she, unless she... what? She didn't know. She always woke up at that point.*

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

Thursday night was sleepless for Cate. Her bed was large and comfortable - the most luxurious item in her flat and the only thing on which she'd spent serious money aside from film equipment; her cat curled peacefully against her side, a warm, calming presence - yet still she lay, awkward with tension, staring at the ceiling. The images revolving in her head and projecting onto the dark window blinds were all from her previous night with George. 'My night with George'. Wasn't that the name of a musical? If not, it should be. The thought made her giggle. But she couldn't dismiss the vision of George rearing above her - his freckled face suffused with blood, an

almost demonic look turning his eyes black. His cock was like the rest of him, chunky and smooth and surprisingly long given his relatively short stature. He had plunged into Cate as though starved, having spent good time taking care that she was equally eager. After a ferocious few minutes she had come with a long high-pitched scream, leading George to re-double his efforts and climax with an even louder holler. Whatever George's failings as a husband being bad at sex certainly wasn't one of them. They fell back and lay still for some time afterwards, both stunned by the power of the their encounter. He didn't fail in the post-coital stakes, either. He kept his arm around her and as they recovered, kissed her tenderly on the cheek and enquired if she would like a cup of tea? Then he got up and made them both tea - bringing it back to the rumpled king-size along with the hotel's allocation of chocolate biscuits. Perfect. Yes, she couldn't fault him on aftercare. They slept comfortably spooned together and at some point in the early morning made love again. Cate awoke to find George's cock sliding into her from behind. His hand was on her cunt massaging gently. They stayed locked in that position as quickly and heatedly they both came, again with loud and painful pleasure.

The morning after a one-night stand - but was it? She had no idea - was always a little tricky. Cate could hardly believe that after almost two years of celibacy she'd now had two such episodes in as many weeks. George, however, managed the wake-up with grace, offering breakfast after Cate had showered and when she declined, calling her a cab to go home and handing her into it with the bags of clothes and another warm kiss. Later, when Cate arrived at The Bailey she bumped into Ethan, literally, in the revolving doors. To her surprise she'd felt a frisson of desire as they collided - it was as alarming as it was exciting. What on earth was going on, she pondered now as she stared at the draft-stirred blinds. It was the trial, she concluded. There was an erotic malignity about it that was affecting everyone involved. Six degrees - like her film. No wonder the tabloids were lapping it up - it was pure gold to them. TV companies too, were lining up to grab their share of sensation. There were rumours Sue Carter had already been approached to tell her story. In fact, Cate had spied a TV rival accosting Sue after she'd given evidence. It was annoying. They had no scruples and mashed up the pitch for more honest, more thoughtful assessments. By the time Cate got to interview family members - something she would never try to do during the trial - the media would have had its field day.

Committed now to being awake, Cate got up and, slipping on the Moroccan djellaba that served as dressing gown, went to her computer and reviewed her notes from the day. Anna Wyatt was questioning Sue Carter, called for the defence and clearly a helpful witness.

Anna: Did you ever suffer abuse, either physical or sexual at your Mother's hands?

Sue: Never.

Anna: Did you ever witness any of your siblings being abused?

Sue No... but... (She halted)

Anna: But?

Sue: Michele often complained about being slapped and strapped by Mum (Sue shot her mother an apologetic glance. Ruth ignored her.)

Anna: But you never actually saw that happen, is that correct?

Sue: (Quietly) Yes.

Anna: Did you ever see marks on Michele? Bruises?

Sue: Not as such...

Anna: So you only have Michele's word for it. Did you know about the sexual practices in which your Mum - and Dad - were involved?

Sue: I knew Mum... like, saw some men.

Anna: Did she talk to you about that?

Sue: No. She never talked to me about much.

Anna: So how did you know?

Sue (Quietly) Michele told me (She looked at Ruth again here. It was a begging look Cate thought)

Anna: It seems you got most of your information about what went on in the household from Michele?

Sue: I s'pose.

Anna: Did you ever doubt anything she said?

Sue: (After quite a pause) No.

Anna: What about her accusations that your Mum was involved in the sex play and torture of these young women?

Sue: (Very quietly) The sex maybe.

Anna: But nothing else? Not the torture?

Sue: (Louder) I can't see it.

Anna: And their murders?

Sue: (Firmly) No. Never. She was kind to those girls. Looked after them. She always said the house was a refuge.

Anna: A refuge. Do you think she tried to stop your father and brother from doing what they did?

Sue: Most likely. She was scared of Dad I think (mutters) we all was.

Anna: I'm sorry Mrs Carter can I ask you to speak up? You just said..?

Sue: We was all scared of my Dad. Everyone thought he was a laugh. A joker. But he could turn very nasty, very quickly.

Anna: Thank you. And you think this was what your Mum tried to protect the girls from?

Anthony Farrow: Objection. Leading.

Anna: I'm sorry. I'll rephrase that. Why do you think your Mum was nice to the girls and gave them, as you put it, a refuge?

Sue: She wanted to protect them. She saw them as family, I think.

(A convulsion of suppressed mirth went round the courtroom. What could be worse in the Webb's case than being seen as 'family'?)

Anna: So to be clear, Mrs Carter - no matter what other members of the family did, you don't believe your Mum was in any way involved in the abuse and murder of these young women?

Sue: (After a pause) That's right. (She looked at her Mother for the last time. Ruth was now looking back at her, but there was little warmth in her stare.)

Cate left the computer and went to make herself a cup of coffee. Her cat followed, eager for breakfast though it was still only 5.30. The kitchen window still showed dark outside. Cate sat with her cat on her lap nursing her hot mug of coffee as she stared out, waiting for the winter dawn to arrive.

Anna too had a sleepless night; though hers was less to do with erotica. What on earth to do about Ruth was the 4am worry. And the 5am and 6am. She tried reading

but couldn't concentrate on the US, best-seller crime-fiction - its Gothic schlock seemed laughable by the side of the real thing. The book fell to the floor, the place-mark slipping from it as she turned over for the umpteenth time. The real thing. Anna sat up. Ruth. To put her on the stand, or not to put her on the stand? After rebuttals and counter rebuttals - they could go on like this for weeks, she had already called Sue Carter to try to balance Michele's testimony - Anna knew well she had little choice. Her case for the defence could only properly rest after Ruth was seen to stand up and deny all charges. Roly and Dan were wary; what if Ruth started to shout and swear - worse still, froth and fall on the floor? Anna agreed it was a danger. Ruth had often stormed furiously around the cell, shouting that she, 'weren't going to be given the lie by that cunt' (DCI Dick Andrews). nor questioned 'til she was blue in the face by that condescendin' twat' (Anthony Farrow QC). Still, even she could see that the trial wasn't going her way and no amount of pink blouses, flowery skirts and sparkly-rimmed bi-focals were going to change that. Was she prepared to risk all in front of the Jury? What did she have to lose, really?

Anna had to admit the trial had arrived at the point where she just wanted it over. It was more relentlessly horrid than any in which she'd ever been involved and, what's more, it was having a terrible effect on her home life. She was short tempered and unable to concentrate on the family - bad mothering, especially as the exam season was almost upon them. Every time she and Harry tried to make love awful images of what the Webbs had done - well, Eddie anyway, she quickly corrected - rose up, like bloody ghosts, in front of her. She wasn't very happy with George either and the fact that he'd brought that journalist down to stay. It was potentially compromising. Were they sleeping together? And what did she care if they were? Surely she wasn't jealous? Was she? Anna leaned against the padded bed head and looked at the sleeping Harry. Would she have been better off with George, she sometimes wondered? She would have been poorer financially - George didn't earn what a good surgeon did, though he wasn't short of a bob despite his alimonies - but maybe richer in intellectual life? Harry bless him, couldn't read a book to save his life and even now had fallen asleep on page twelve of a biography he'd started a month ago. Anna smiled. He looked so sweet asleep, boyish almost with his blond curls rising softly from his forehead on every breath. She put out a hand and brushed his hair gently back, loving its lively texture and the moist skin beneath. They must try to get back to some kind of normality. When the trial was over - when, oh when would that

be? - They would go away she promised herself. Just the two of them. It was time to rediscover their reasons for being together – apart, that was, from their three children, two houses, car, camper van and cat.

There was an awful row on the phone that night. Roly told his wife that he would not be coming home that weekend and Julia lost it completely. It was the break down of the washing machine and the non-appearance of the plumber who'd called in 'sick', which set her off on this occasion. Roly couldn't blame her, as he kept saying - trying to keep his own tone reasonable while she ranted and raved about having to 'go it alone'. He knew he'd been worse than useless at home the last few weeks. The trial took his every waking moment and most of his fitful sleeping ones. Although now heavily pregnant and not especially well with this one, Julia kept everything running - tried to maintain a safe, calm source for him to return to. But even she, with her powerful faith, was severely challenged. The children, she shouted, barely knew him any more. It was true they were odd with him - either distant or attention seeking. Sian was the worst, using Roly's appearances as a trigger for obsessively needy behaviour - clinging to him when he left, crying and throwing wild floor-kicking tantrums. On occasion Roly was reminded of Ruth. Perhaps that was her problem - not enough floor kicking when she was little?

There was no help for it though; the defence had to prepare for Ruth's day in court. That meant even more rifling through papers and from them, the creation of some kind of strategy. Roly knew he couldn't possibly do that in his loving but dishevelled home. In fact, was it even loving any more? Lately he and Julia seemed more and more estranged. In different worlds unable to connect, almost on different planets. It was driving Roly to drink. Or so he said. Julia was scornful of his excuses - it was dealing with the depravities of human kind that was doing that, she countered. And if that was the case, why had he abandoned church going? Roly had no answer for that. Now was hardly the time to say he'd lost any faith he'd ever had.

He put the phone down reluctantly. Julia was crying but what could he do? He wished yet again that he didn't live so far away. There was no just jumping on a train and coming back in time for court in the morning. Perhaps he should throw a sickie? Everyone else did. The idea that a solicitor in the middle of a murder trial would just

not turn up, was of course, laughable. With a heavy heart Roly went down to the hotel bar, vowing that next time around he was going to be a plumber.

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

A large Asian woman stood on Sue Carter's doorstep when she opened the front door. 'Selling energy' was Sue's immediate thought - this door-to-door lark was getting out of hand. As she started to say she wasn't interested, the woman held out her hand and introduced herself.

"Hi I'm Durinda Shah. Dudie. It's Mrs Carter... Sue, isn't it?"

"Yes," Sue agreed, surprised. Dudie? Did she know this woman? She wondered if it was someone from the council.

"May I come in for a moment, Sue?" Dudie put her foot over the doorsill. "I'm sure you don't want to talk on the doorstep."

Confused, Sue opened the door a little wider and in a second the woman was inside the hall and shutting the door behind her. The hall was narrow and Dudie was bulky so Sue backed off towards the kitchen. Dudie followed her, saying, "Shall we have a seat. Oh, what a lovely kitchen."

Kylie, the beagle was instantly on her feet barking, Sue shooed her out into the garden and shut the kitchen door. By the time she turned around, Dudie had sat herself at the kitchen table, shrugged off her coat and taken out a laptop. Sue switched on the kettle automatically and stood beside it with her arms folded, determined to snatch back the initiative.

"How can I help you?" She asked in the most unhelpful tone she could muster.

"I'm a TV producer. I run a very well known and, though I say it myself..." the woman gave a self-congratulatory snigger, "highly successful, independent production company."

Still smiling brightly, Dudie handed Sue a printed card and pointed out, "That's me, Executive Producer - and that's my company, 'Reel Films'. Good title isn't it?" Dudie's toothy smile flashed again.

"What do you want?" Sue's back stiffened. Every alarm bell was ringing.

"Just to talk to you a bit." Dudie was already typing. "I'd like to get your impressions first hand. I don't want to report anything inaccurate."

"I told that girl at the court I wouldn't be saying anything." Sue's hackles were now well and truly up. She was astounded and intimidated equally by the woman's effrontery.

"Okay. Well, she was nothing to do with me. Some hack reporter, probably. We are a bona fide - and very well respected - film company." Dudie paused slightly. "We made the Ripper Diaries?" Seeing Sue's blank stare, Dudie hurried on. "We'd like to make a TV drama based on the material of this case..."

'Material' Sue thought furiously, she's talking about my life!

"We would want it to be a hundred percent truthful and absolutely fair. Which is why it would be incredibly useful if you would work with us."

"Work with you, how?"

"Tell us... tell me, all the things you couldn't say, or weren't asked in court. I don't think the full story has been told, has it?" Dudie's smile had gone. She looked pointedly at Sue, her black eyes narrow.

"Betray people?" Said Sue, very quietly. If Dudie had known her at all, she would have seen the lowered voice as a danger signal. "That's what you mean, isn't it?"

"Betray! That's a big word." Dudie typed frantically. "Why would you see it as betrayal? If what you said in court was true, you believe your mother to be innocent. See, all we want is a broader picture than a court can ever show. A fuller, you might say, understanding of life inside that house. Your childhood, for example, why you were really sent away. Your brothers and sisters, what happened to them, what they think now. It would be great if you could get us access to them?" It was barely a question. When Sue didn't answer, Dudie looked up from her keyboard. She pursed her mouth as though judging the situation. "And of course," she continued after a moment, "we could offer money."

"No amount of money would make me talk to you!" Sue managed to stutter through her rage. "How dare you come here and force your way into my house!"

"Whoa - I didn't do any forcing - you invited me in."

“I did no such thing. You just took advantage. You think I’m too stupid to stop you.”

“Honestly, I don’t think that in the slightest...” Dudie gave an uncertain laugh, clearly rattled.

Sue swept up the boiling kettle and seemed about to lunge with it. “You’re a vampire. A leech!”

“Now, just a minute...” Dudie put up her hands in defence. Sue’s body language, as she hung over the table, was certainly threatening - a chip off the old block, Dudie appeared to realise. She stood up sharply, gathering her props.

“That’s right! Get out. Get out now! And don’t you ever come back!”

Dudie grabbed her coat and scuttled for the door. Sue pursued her, brandishing the kettle as if she might chuck the boiling water over her intruder’s head. Dudie fled up the corridor, tripping slightly over the rug. She got to the front door and flinging it open, ran down the path. A passing neighbour walking his dog stopped to watch with disbelief as a fifteen stone woman crammed herself into a banana-yellow Mini. Dudie’s departing view, as she backed the car jaggedly away, was of Sue - kettle aloft - braced for action. In this iconic stance she looked like an avenging angel outlined against the darkening sky.

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

On the way into court on Friday morning Cate saw Ethan in the marble foyer by the lifts and agreed to meet him that evening. She left court early, bored by the Defence’s pedestrian parade of witnesses in support of Ruth’s good nature. They’d got to come up with something else, she thought as yet another neighbour stood up to say

that Ruth was a good sort, a friend in need, a wonderful cook, always turned her kids out nice and - more surprisingly - a champ at line dancing. The last 'friend' - with whom she played Bingo - said Ruth was always the life and soul, had knitted her a great jumper for her birthday, had never to her knowledge appeared with bruises, or mentioned there was trouble at home in the ten years she'd known her. It was all too good to be true, thought Cate as she slipped out of the press gallery - signalling to Ethan that they should speak on the phone later.

She was interviewing a Community Psychiatric Nurse over at HMP Holloway that afternoon, but had just time to fit in a trip to the gym before hand. She usually went to a local branch in the Barbican, but had been neglecting it lately. She stripped off quickly and dressed in shorts and a tee-shirt hurried up to the circuit training equipment. She started with the bike, which was tedious but stretched all the muscles, then moved on to the rowing machine. She raised the bar to the highest figure and began her usual practice, smiling to herself as the rowing reminded her of the boat race and George. What would happen with Ethan tonight, she wondered. Would she tell him about George? Would she end up in bed with him, put out that, yet again, George had failed to get in touch at the appropriate moment? Perhaps Wednesday really had been a one-night stand? Would she go to bed with Ethan anyway, turned on by the situation - and to be honest, by his young, buff body? It was interesting that for a woman who considered herself as so in charge, she felt unable to steer events. Instead of grabbing the initiative she was drifting flotsam at the mercy of fate. That too made her smile but as she put some effort into her heaves, she was annoyed to see a bullish man with a squashed nose staring at her. Did he think she was smiling at him? In any case he came over and standing very close to her machine said, "Don't shake the bar like that love, you'll hurt yourself."

Cate glanced up, startled. "What?"

"Look see - you've got it on way too high. You're not strong enough for that. I only set it at a six and I'm an ex-boxer."

That explained the nose thought Cate.

The ex-boxer leaned over her and changed the effort setting. Cate gaped at him, furious. What on earth did he think he was doing? And why was she letting him? Did she give off a sign now that this sort of approach was okay? Was it her night with George - his treating her like a tart - which had changed things? Made it permissible?

The ex-boxer grinned at her. "Don't mind me love. Tell me to piss off. It's just - I'm used to training people, see. I like to see them use their energy right."

"That's fine," said Cate huffily.

Perhaps if she let him have his way he'd go away. Then she could change the setting back. The ex-boxer did eventually leave the next machine and go off to the weight lifting section. Funnily enough by then, Cate had got used to the new setting and was finding it both easier and more calorie crunching. She left the setting as it was until she'd finished. The encounter had made her uneasy though and wouldn't be dismissed while she was negotiating the Holloway Road, finding a place to park, getting her equipment out of the boot. She just couldn't become that kind of woman. The kind that George was used to. Like the wives she'd met at the boat race and the opera. Controlled by another, vapid, dependent. When she saw him again - if she saw him again - she would have to say so.

The case too was all about control issues, she thought. Was Ruth the puppeteer, or was it Eddie? Mouth set, Cate heaved the Hi-8 camera onto her shoulder - by far the easiest way to carry it - and set off to the prison entrance.

The CPN Cate was interviewing, Marlene, was a buxom redhead who looked able enough to wrestle strong men to the ground. As it turned out she had, during her lengthy nursing career, done a fair amount of wrestling - though not always with men. Marlene had spent time in just about every high security unit and prison in the country. As part of her role at Holloway she was an advisor to local community services and the police. Just this morning she'd been called in to get somebody sectioned. No novice on camera - she often, she explained, had to appear on local news programs - she was quite at ease and free with what she said - which included a warning that the effect of the work could be toxic (not the first time Cate had been warned of that) and that she, Marlene, made sure she took frequent holidays in warm and relaxing places. She did indeed have a deep tan and, considering her stressful work, looked surprisingly bubbly and healthy. Cate asked her if she would describe a typical working day to camera.

"A typical work day. Let's see. A day, a typical day, might be; get called in early because someone's had a freak out. They happen quite often.

“What are they about?”

“Could be anything. Someone’s nicked their hair gel, through to beat them at Scrabble, or tried to shiv them. Most often, some type of relationship break-up.”

“What would you do?”

“Depends. Might have to help get the offender into a padded room, a straightjacket even - may be give her a shot to calm her down.”

“Okay. What else?”

“Er - could be called down town if someone’s been picked up and they think she’s got mental health problems. You know, could be an alkie or a schizophrenic off the meds. I have to go down and assess the situation and most likely bring her back here in a police van or ambulance.”

Wow, thought Cate, no wonder these services cost the tax payer so much.

“Then, well - that’s probably lunch time. I go to the staff canteen here. It’s pretty good actually - all subsidized. I might have a spag bog say, for about two pounds fifty. After lunch I might have a clinic. That’s dealing with people coming in with their emotional and mental problems. I can give counselling or medication. There’s quite often a group session and I would facilitate that. They can get very heated - you have to watch out. Women are especially down on other women who’ve killed their kids. More than once I’ve had to arm-lock someone out of there.

Occasionally, I’ll be one-to-one with a detainee who needs special care. Say they’re really vulnerable - capable of suicide? I might read to them - it’s amazing how many can’t read - Harry Potter, they love. Or play board games. Monopoly’s a big one. Especially with the embezzlers.” Marlene gave a full-throated, genuinely amused laugh. Cate couldn’t help joining in - though it would ruin the take.

After half an hour a picture of really disturbed women had emerged. According to Marlene they were all capable of prolonged and deeply dangerous violence though their attacks were mostly upon themselves. There was a lot of cutting up and other sorts of self-harm. Head-banging the walls was a favourite. Marlene had an arsenal of drugs at her disposal. Of course the prisoners knew that very well and often faked illness to get at them. There were other scams - including a time when Marlene had been threatened for morphine. The woman demanding it had insisted her husband on the outside knew where Marlene lived and would be round to ‘get’ her. Marlene laughed that off too. But Cate detected that the laugh wasn’t quite as carefree.

After almost an hour's filming Marlene looked at her watch and said she had to go now - she had to escort a prisoner to hospital.

"What's wrong with her?" Asked Cate.

"Cancer. She's having chemo."

Cate could imagine few things worse than being in prison and having cancer.

"Poor woman. What's she in for? "

"Murder. Stabbed her lesbian lover 45 times. Once for each year of her age, she said.

"Blimey."

"I know. I play her music during her treatment, to calm her down - Mahler."

Cate shook her head. The human condition was strange; Mahler with his own tortured soul, calming the spirit of a murderer.

George rang as Cate drove back towards The Bailey. She'd agreed in an earlier phone call to meet Ethan in their favourite wine bar near by the court.

"Cate."

"Oh. Hello."

"You okay?"

"Fine."

"Busy tonight?"

"I am, actually." Cate was pleased to be able to say.

"Ah." There was a pause.

"I'm driving." Said Cate. "I can't really..."

"No, of course. So - what about the rest of the weekend?"

"I'm not sure..."

"How about Sunday? I'll make you lunch. I'm a very good cook."

Having seen him eat, Cate did not doubt it.

"I may have to work on Sunday."

"You're angry with me." It was a statement rather than a question.

"Not at all."

"I'm sorry. I should have called. I had to go to Brussels."

You have a mobile, Cate thought.

“Out of the blue - had to profile somebody.”

“A paedophile serial killer?”

George laughed. “I’d get you to come for lunch then, wouldn’t I? So I’ll just say yes, it was.”

Cate laughed too. “I may not be a forensic psychiatrist, but I can tell when you’re lying.” There was another pause. “Alright then,” said Cate, torn between the desire to punish him and the desire to continue their conversation, “I’ll come for a late lunch - about three? Text me your address?”

“Delightful.” said George. “Three pm. Address coming your way. Dulwich village, but you can park right outside.”

“Are you not serving wine at this lunch, then?”

“Ha. That’ll be the day. Come by cab. I’ll pay for it.”

There he goes again thought Cate, but all she said was, “Bye for now George. I’ll see you Sunday.”

## Chapter Thirty

It was with huge sighs of relief that everyone involved thanked God it was Friday. For Anna, Roly and Dan it would be a working weekend and - sympathetic as ever to his abandoned plight - Anna invited Roly to stay. Back at his B&B, Roly packed a small bag with pyjamas, sweats and wash kit and took a taxi to Anna’s imposing house, hoping he wouldn’t have to cope with too many other smart, intimidating, professional visitors. As it happened, he needn’t have worried - Anna had banned everyone from weekend activities except family, and even they were few. Deia was away on a study weekend, Marnie on a sleepover and Jake out clubbing - he’d finally arrived at the age when this was allowed on a Friday. By the time Roly arrived, Harry

had ordered Chinese takeaway - apologising to Roly for not waiting, on the grounds that he hadn't had time for lunch and had got home 'starving'. Roly said he was fine with it - he loved Chinese. They didn't have it often at home anymore. Monosodium Glutamate was apparently bad for pregnant women.

They had an early night after dinner - both Harry and Roly fell asleep watching a serial killer crime thriller on television. Anna grimaced when they wanted to turn it on. She couldn't take any more horror she said, and opened her book. But she too was nodding off by the second chapter.

On Saturday Dan came round and they all worked till late, the large table in the study piled with books, case histories, laptops and scattered hand-written notes. Dan was fidgety, too young to sit still for long periods, but Anna and Roly had by now acquired a quiet harmony and a communication shorthand. The children came to say hello but after kisses and a few words were quickly banished to other rooms. Harry brought them a sandwich lunch. Anna's cat strolled in and made itself at home on a pile of very important papers. That evening, in the background they could hear Harry tinkling on his baby grand. He started playfully with Scott Joplin but as the night drew on, changed to more serious fare including Debussy. He played lyrically and with passion. Anna looked up once or twice, clearly moved by the performance. Roly wondered if that was how Harry made love. He glanced at Anna's face, which was unusually relaxed with pleasure - and yes, with love, he thought. He would call Julia in a minute. Remind her how much he loved her. And the children. He might even consider going to mass in the morning.

Friday night was disastrous for Cate and Ethan. They met in the wine bar as arranged and quickly downed a bottle of Rioja while talking over the week in court. In comparison with their normal spirited exchange they were both strangely glum, as if even talking about the events was exhausting them. They barely touched apart from a quick cheek brush in hello - each wanting, it seemed, to keep their distance. Though their chat was friendly and familiar enough, Ethan kept shooting Cate enquiring

glances, as if expecting an explanation of her evasive behaviour. On the 2nd bottle she gave it to him.

“Ethan - I should tell you, I’ve been seeing someone else.”

Ethan looked shocked, but at the same time not surprised. He frowned, running his hand roughly through his curls. Clearly Cate’s news was disturbing - and unpleasant.

“I thought so. Is it..?” He stopped, as though he didn’t want to admit the word.

“Serious?” Cate finished for him.

Ethan shrugged.

“To be honest, I don’t know. I don’t know anything at the moment. This trial seems to be skewing my judgement.”

Ethan gave a rather bitter snort. “Well, at least that explains why you’ve been so hard to get hold of. I thought I had body odour or something.”

For a tough crime journalist he was taking it quite badly, thought Cate.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I don’t even know why I’m telling you. It’s not as though we’ve got any agreement. I just feel it’s unfair not to.”

“I should thank you for that, at least.” Ethan stared at the plate of olives. As a waiter passed he caught his arm and asked for the bill. They drained the rest of the bottle while they waited in silence for it to arrive. Cate put her hand over Ethan’s as it lay on the table. He let it lie there but didn’t respond.

“I suppose that’s it, then.” He said as they paid the bill, scrupulously dividing it in half.

“Only if you want it to be. In a way nothing’s changed.”

Ethan raised his eyebrows.

“Do you want me to come home with you?” Cate asked, suddenly sorry she’d told him. She hadn’t expected him to be so upset. And she did, now she’d had a drink, really fancy making love with him.

“Do you want to?”

“Ethan. I’m trying to be straight with you, that’s all. I like you. I fancy you. A lot. But I’m not sure it could ever be more.”

Ethan suddenly gave his lopsided, wolfish grin. It lit up his face and lifted his mood. “I’ll settle for that.”

Cate had to smile. How like a boy he still was.

“So that’s a yes then?”

“Yes,” said Ethan - “let’s go.”

They kissed in the taxi - and that was fine. Their tongues tango-ed wildly, while their hands explored each other’s body - knowing now the tender points, the places where a touch drew gasps. But back at Ethan’s flat, out of nervousness they drank another bottle of wine - hence the disaster. By the time they got into bed they were both very drunk and after a few unfocussed fumbblings, both fell into a comatose sleep. There was no Saturday morning sex, either. Cate awoke with a staggering hangover, to the sound of Ethan retching. He came out of the bathroom looking pale and sorry for himself and climbed back into bed, groaning. Cate got up to find some headache pills, but after a search in all the obvious places concluded the flat was completely free of them. She offered to go to the corner shop but Ethan didn’t know where he’d left his door keys. Cate looked for them without success while Ethan put his head under the pillow. Giving up on the morning and eager to get home & feed her cat, Cate made coffee. It was a bitter cup - Ethan had run out of milk - and after gulping it without enjoyment, they said a grumpy goodbye. Nothing was discussed about their future.

There was a planned Girls Night Out on Saturday but, still suffering, Cate called to cancel it. Her friends were annoyed. “We never see you any more!” Wailed Katya.

“Do you really want work to take over your life?” Asked Em.

“You’re going to lose an awful lot of friends!” Warned Sylvie.

Gemma was just contemptuous. “Don’t you ever have any fun?”

That made Cate cross. Gemma lived her life for fun and was, in fact, one of the paparazzi-style journalists Cate so despised. She worked for a celebrity magazine and would have been a candidate for a good trashing, if they hadn’t been at Uni together. But Cate had to admit Gemma was fun - and a great source for tabloid zeitgeist. Cate swallowed her pique and promised they would meet soon. “Date. Diary. Now.” Was Gemma’s riposte, and Cate found herself scheduling drinks for the following week. She could always cancel later.

Sunday began better. It was another lovely, spring day; bright with chilly sunshine. Cate went for a brisk walk up the canal towpath, enjoying the new growth of reeds and eruption of busy Moorhens. She got back to shower and change - she chose carefully, a red wool dress and modestly heeled boots - in time for her date with George. She decided she would drive over. She didn't want to give him any excuse to think she would stay, or accept a cab fare home.

Her Satnav directed her to a pleasant tree-lined private road just off the high street of Dulwich village - a chichi neighbourhood, she saw, with the signs of plenty of money. George's actual house was a large 1930s villa with a circular, bush-bordered drive broad enough for several cars. The BMW recently washed and gleaming stood by the front door porch. Cate's ancient Renault looked very shabby as she drew up beside it - the contrast made her smile. George came out to meet her with his sleeves rolled up, wearing a large apron tied round his waist and cheerfully waving a wooden spoon. It was endearing, thought Cate, that unlike many men, he didn't mind looking domestic.

"Come in. Come in." George ushered her into a gracious, mosaic-tiled hall with a large staircase winding off it and the very appetising smell of roasting game birds coming from the glass-roofed kitchen beyond. "You don't mind the kitchen do you? Got to do a bit of basting."

Cate didn't mind at all. The kitchen was a fascinating mix of ancient and modern - family photos on the walls - just how many wives and children was it? Cate wondered as she fleetingly checked them - along with Art Gallery and Covent Garden posters testifying to a rich cultural life, and what might, judging by its speckles and stains, be an original Warhol print. Even less did she mind when she was handed a large gin and tonic sparkling with ice and lime and shown to a comfortable wicker armchair at the conservatory end of the room.

"Won't be a tick - then I can leave it while we enjoy our drink."

George bustled off looking ever more like an eager TV chef - Anthony Worrall Thompson perhaps, or Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall. Cate used his absence to take in the surroundings more fully, noting the stainless steel larder fridge, brightly veneered Italian bar stools, big stripped-oak table, cushions in fake fur, curtains in comfy Liberty prints - George was undoubtedly a man who loved the sensual and the stylish. But that much she already knew.

After a few moments, George came back with his own G&T. "Tour of the castle?" He offered.

It was impressive. As George showed off his salon, dining room, office, bathrooms, bedrooms, all full of expensive, comfortable furniture and funky décor, Cate couldn't help feeling his wares were being laid out for her. Especially when they arrived at the master bedroom and its king-sized four-poster - an almost joke creation, rich with crimson velvet curtains, massive lace covered pillows, satin and fur cushions, its piece de resistance a bed-head console which controlled the lighting, music, and even the raising and lowering of parts of the bed itself. George demonstrated this testament to sexual high jinks with the glee of a child showing off his toys. Cate was sure he assumed she'd be enjoying it later.

The lunch was as splendid as she'd expected. The pheasants were perfectly cooked and came with a ravishing array of sauces and vegetables, including a buttery Salsify, which Cate had never tasted. George had even made zabaglione - insisting on sharing he recipe - and Cate had two helpings, all the while protesting that she never ate pudding. Afterwards, completely stuffed, they relaxed with coffee, their feet up on the comfortable conservatory loungers, and looked out at the spacious garden - acre and a half, said George - which was already beginning to display green shoots. There was a Blackbird pecking at the lawn and a small, persistent Robin chirruping in the budding lilac.

"Was that okay?" Asked George.

"Okay? It was magnificent. I haven't eaten so much - or so well - for months!" It was terribly sweet, Cate thought, that George needed reassurance. Though of course, it could just be a ploy to disarm her.

"I learned to cook when my wife left me."

"Which one?" Cate couldn't resist.

George laughed. "Fair enough. Actually, the first. It was a struggle - I'd never done more than baked beans before. But I had to make an effort for my son."

"You had custody?"

"Joint. He often came to stay. At one point he even lived with me for a while. Not here..." he gestured round, "I didn't have this then, it was over twenty years ago."

He was older than she'd thought Cate noted.

"I started very simply. Delia - how to boil an egg. But I soon got bored and graduated to more complex recipes."

Mm. Thought Cate. Easily bored. She must remember that.

"Otto Lenghi's my current favourite."

"Where's your son now?" "Cate couldn't prevent her interviewing technique kicking in. She wasn't interested in discussing cookery, but having seen the photos she was curious to know more about George's life.

"Travelling. He's left university, Cambridge - without his degree, I'm sorry to say, silly lad - and went travelling. He's interested in the Charity sector. He's somewhere in East Africa."

It sounded a bit distant, thought Cate. Perhaps George didn't enjoy a close relationship with his children.

"What about the others?" She nodded towards the pictures on the wall.

"Wives, or children?" George raised his eyebrows.

"Both"

George laughed again. "You've got your professional hat on."

"I'd like to know more about you, obviously."

"Mm - you'll have to tell me some things about yourself in return."

Cate just smiled.

"My life." said George, sighing slightly. "Well, there's a story. My second wife was Irish, a student of mine - oh dear, bad George, smack, smack - she left me after two years and went back to Ireland. She lives in Cork with our daughter Daragh, who is fifteen."

"Do you see much of her?"

"As much as..." George paused and his face lost some of its habitual humour. "As much as her mother will allow. We had a very acrimonious break up. But yes, Daragh comes to stay for a few weeks every summer. She's a gorgeous girl. Very pretty and smart as a whip."

"That's good. Do any of them take after you?"

"D'you mean professionally? Actually, my youngest - Raoul, who lives in France - is interested in becoming a doctor. At ten he's probably a bit young to decide, but it beats wanting to be a footballer."

"All boys want that."

“Actually, he’s rather good. I was a Rugby man...” Cate had figured as much from his build.

“ Does Raoul come to stay?”

“Oh yes. We’re great mates.” George paused and again Cate detected a troubled history. “But I tend to go there because of school and Caroline’s work - she’s a forensic consultant. Also they live in Paris, so any excuse to visit...”

It was true, then, that George’s family were scattered and perhaps even a little estranged. It was clear he minded.

“Your turn.”

“I can’t stay much longer...” It was a good opportunity to warn him.

“Coward! Not fair! You’ve got to give me something.”

“All right.” Cate laughed. George looked so comically upset. But I need more coffee then.”

George got up to attend to the espresso machine, leaving Cate to wonder how much she should tell him. He was, after all, a psychiatrist.

Belgian chocolates arrived with the coffee and though Cate never ate those either, she found herself biting into a divine violet cream. “The only good thing about having to go to Belgium,” said George, tucking into several. “Go.” He commanded, when they both leaned back sighing.

“ I...” Cate stopped.

“That’s good so far. But I need a little more to go on.”

Cate shook her head. “You see that’s the problem. You’ll want to analyse me.”

“Huh! You can talk.”

“Long story short. I had a mother I didn’t get on with, a stepfather I hated, a younger sister from their marriage - of whom I was, I suppose, jealous - and I lived with my grandmother from the age of fourteen.”

“That’s very short.” George gave her a quizzical look. “Was your stepfather the one who took you fishing?”

“Yes.” Cate’s answer gave nothing more away. But her mouth had tightened to a line.

“I see. Was he abusive?”

“What makes you say that?”

George shrugged. “It seems to fit.”

Cate gave him a sharp look then said lightly. "You're trying to fit me into your 'ladder' aren't you? How bad on a scale of one to ten is her psychosis?"

George laughed. "Well? How bad?"

Cate's mouth twisted into an ironic smile. "Let's just say, I ran away. That's when I went to stay with my Grannie. But I really don't want to talk about it any more."

George nodded sympathetically. He was obviously kind to his patients, Cate thought.

"There is something else I do have to tell you though.."

"Mmhum?"

"I can't go along with what you seem to want from this relationship. There again, I feel a fool even calling it a relationship - I hardly know you. But fun though it's been, I have to say I'm simply not the right kind of woman for you."

"Why is that?"

George looked genuinely puzzled.

"I'm not like your friends and their wives. I can't just let you - decide things for me, run my life, buy me things. Buy me."

"I'm not trying to do any of those things. I don't think."

He sounded hurt. Cate put out her hand and touched his knee.

"I don't mean to upset or offend you George. I think you're lovely. Funny and clever and fun to be with. But, it's just... I don't know. Wrong for me. The way you treat me makes me feel less somehow. I'm a strong independent woman. I've fended for myself for years. All my life, really. You'd think I'd be glad to get a good offer. A good man. But I can't just give up my autonomy." She paused. "That's it really."

George looked as though all the puff had been kicked out of him. His face sad, he nodded slowly. "You remind me of my second wife." He said. "Don't laugh. I know I've had too many. She was very independent. Resented the fact that I was older and more experienced. And, of course, that I earned much more money. I'm not suggesting that's how you feel," he added quickly, seeing Cate stiffen. "I know you're proud and resourceful. I'm sorry if I've done things to make you feel I don't respect that."

Cate stood up. "I'm going to go now, George." She said. "I feel bad and ungrateful, especially after that splendid lunch. But I've got to save myself. That's what it is, really."

George stood up, too. He put a hand on Cate's shoulder. "I do understand." He said. "That is, I mean, I'll try to. And I won't try to dissuade you. But I'm sorry, very sorry, because I really like you Cate. I hope at some point you'll reconsider."

Cate picked up her jacket and bag and George walked her to the front door. They stood for a moment on the step and looked at each other without smiling. George leaned forward and kissed her lightly on the lips. Cate felt a surge of desire for him, which she resisted. If she gave in now she was lost. She drew back and said, "Goodbye George. And thank you. I hope you find what you're looking for."

"You too Cate," he said softly, as she got into to her car.

Cate took the quickest route home, almost oblivious to the beauty of the day, the wooded lanes, the fox crossing the road, the families out with pushchairs. Had she done the right thing? Ethan was charming and under his flippant wit, quite serious; George, for all his disasters of the heart, a grown-up and what's more, offering a readymade family. From two lovers to none in less than two weeks, she thought ruefully. That would be something to crack Gemma up. How did she do it?

## Chapter Thirty-One

On Monday Anna Wyatt QC pulled the rabbit out of the hat. To a hushed Court Four she announced her last witness for the Defence, Ruth Webb. This - though not entirely unexpected, the Bailey twitter-sphere had been loaded with rumours - was still enough of a coup to send waves of jittery excitement around the oak-panelled room.

Ruth mounted the stairs to the witness stand, looking tense but composed. She'd had her hair styled softly and was wearing, the twitterers noted, a heather-mix, tweed skirt, leather boots with a Cuban heel and a crisp white blouse with broderie anglaise collar.

What the court did not know was that Anna had helped Ruth choose her costume from a pile of clothes Sue Webb had brought in specially. Ruth clutched the blouse to her chest as soon as she saw it. "This is my favourite. I done that," she pointed to the embroidery, "when I were pregnant with Tyler."

At the weekend Anna toyed with the idea of contact lenses, but Roly said no, they'd be too obvious a ploy. The jury was used to the glasses and would be sceptical about the change - but they should go for a lighter pair. Thank God thought Anna, rushing there on Monday morning, for Specsavers. The glasses she chose were mildly framed in pale blue – to bring out the best in Ruth's hazel eyes. As she surveyed her client, now gripping the edge of the witness stand rail, Anna was not displeased with the effect. The Clerk of the Court went through the now familiar ritual and Anna stood to begin her questions.

### Ruth's Story 1

Name: Ruth Sylvia Webb

Age: Forty two

Address: 39 Bridge St, Kelveston, East Anglia.

"How do you plead?"

"Not Guilty."

"What you've heard about me from people... well, that's only half the story. That's their half, you might say. My Mother for instance - yes , my Mother. We never got on. She was a hard woman. Though nothing like as bad as my Dad. He might have had a lot to do with how she was - I don't know - all I can say is how I was the youngest of five and by the time I come along she was very depressed, she had given up caring. When I was little she never looked after me. I was always hungry. My Gran would come and bath me and change my clothes. She'd say to my Mum, "Look at the state of this kid! How can you let her get like this, Dottie - you're a disgrace." My mum just ignored her. She didn't like her mum you see. I didn't go to school much. My mum couldn't be bothered to take me. At first my Gran did that too, but then it got too difficult for her - she couldn't do the walking with her arthritis. I'd stay at home and

look at picture books that my Gran got me. I was always hungry. I'd steal biscuits and things when my Mum wasn't around. She was often in bed in the day. Some days she just din' get up at all. The pantry never had much in it - some bread and cheese maybe, I din' know how to cook. The others, my brothers, they'd come in with chips an' that, and sometimes I'd get their leftovers. My Dad - and my brothers - started meddling with me when I was about two or three? An' using me for full on sex when I was about six. My Dad was the worst. My brothers just followed on what he did - they didn't altogether understand what they were doing. Until later, that is, when we was all fully grown. In a house where the mother isn't doing her duty as a wife, y' see, that will happen. I was brought up to think it was normal. That it happened in every home. I just didn't know no different. It was only when I did start going to school - after the social got involved - that I realised it wasn't the same in every family. I knew I had to keep quiet about it, though - or get something even worse. My Mum told me that, when I tried to tell her what was going on. She said I was a wicked liar and that if I didn't shut my face terrible things would happen. I'd be taken away. Or my dad would go to prison. But my Mum - most of the time - she just pretended not to know.

I was thirteen when I first met Eddie. He was that much older and quite a glamour boy round our way. He had a motorbike and wore leathers and had his hair long in a ponytail. He was very good-looking. He worked in town, where I was from the backwoods really. It was all fen farmin' round us. He called me his little bumpkin. I met him at a line dance in the village hall. He wasn't dancing, he just come in with some other biker lads, for a look. They had a bike garage nearby like, it was a place they hung out - with a greasy spoon type of caff an' everything. I saw him as soon as he come in - I thought, ooh he's a bit tasty. After the dance he give me a ride on his bike. He said he'd take me home, but we just roared about the lanes for hours. We didn't have crash helmets or anything. I was hanging on round his waist and his hair was flying in my face - it was dead exciting. We stopped in the woods and he fetched a bottle of cider out of his pillion seat. We drank it all, then we had sex. I'd never had it with anyone I fancied before. He was much better at it than my dad and brothers. Really bothered that I was liking it. We lay under the trees for quite a while and he told me all about himself. His Dad was a builder in Ipswich and Eddie was apprenticed there, his Mum worked as a dinner lady. He had three brothers still at school. I didn't say much about me - well, how could I? He took me home and asked me if I'd meet him again. I said I would. That summer he took me all over. Even to pubs - he said I

looked old enough. You've asked me if it was a romance - and I say, it was. I'd never known anyone like Eddie - who really cared for me and took care of me. He treated me like a princess. One book I remember having when I was little, was Grimm's Fairy Tales - and it was like that. Like I was in a fairy story.

Eddie never come to the house at first, so it went on for a year before my Dad found out and then he was furious. He locked me in and refused to open the door to Eddie, when he come to take me out. But eventually Eddie talked him round - he was a charmer was Eddie. It turned out him and me dad followed the same football team, Colchester United, and Eddie would get tickets off of his mates in construction and take me dad to the game. They'd have a laff together like and then me Dad didn't mind Eddie seeing me. Mind you he carried on just like before - me Dad that is. Now he'd want to know what I got up to with Eddie. He'd make me tell him all the details when he was doing it to me.

After about two years - I was coming up sixteen, Eddie asked me to marry him. I said yes, of course. I wanted to marry him anyway, but to be honest it was as much to escape my home as anything. I'd never told Eddie what went on there. In later years I came to think my Dad had told him though, because of the way Eddie was with him. He never minded when my dad came round to ours and wanted to be with me - in fact, I think he liked it.

It was all okay really, until the babies started coming along. I was just gone seventeen when my first one Susan, was born. I never knew for sure if she was my Dad's or if she was Eddie's. I know it sounds odd - but neither of them never used protection. There'd be some weeks, when I'd have sex with them both on the same day - in the same hour even. Anyway, I was quite ill after the birth and I never - I don't know, what do they call it - bonded with her? When she was a baby, she had colic a lot and I didn't know what to do with her. I hadn't had no mothering myself like I said, so it was all new to me. My Gran was still with us then and she tried to help. She often had Sue to stay with her, like she'd had me. When Sue was a toddler, I had Andy and then less than a year later I had - I'm sorry, I'm welling up, it still makes me cry - I had little Lucy. Well it was all too much and I couldn't cope. My sister-in-law, Betty, she got pushed down stairs in a fight with my brother and she broke her back. She was in a wheelchair and she needed help when he left her, so Susan got sent to stay with Betty. I sometimes think it was the best thing that could have happened to her.

Things went on as before with me and Eddie - we moved into a bigger flat and then after - after Lucy was born - we moved to Bridge Street. It was quite a wreck. Hadn't been touched in years. The idea was Eddie would do it up himself - well, he had all the skills like. That was all right except it meant living with two small kids on a building site - every night and every weekend there'd be banging and drilling and smashing down walls. It got so I couldn't hear myself think. I think it was then when I started with my first bout of depression. I had an - etopic is it? - pregnancy and had to get that sorted and when I come out of hospital I was put on prescription medication. I didn't like it. It made me fuzzy like. Sleepy all the time. I could just about get up and see to the kids, but all the time I was exhausted. I went right off sex, which made Eddie mad. And me dad, come to think of it.

Anyway, one day when Lucy was nearly two, Eddie was out and Andy was with him. I fed and changed Lucy and I put her down for her sleep and I went back to bed. When I woke up, Eddie was standing over me shaking me awake. He kept asking what happened? What happened?! He shouted that Lucy was dead in her cot and I must have killed her. I rushed in to see. There she was, the poor little mite, all snuggled up in her coverings, but with her face under the pillow. I screamed and fell on the floor - that was the first time I had one of them sort of, fit things. I think it was the medication. Eddie was shouting at me that it was all my fault, I didn't know what I was doing, I was a mong, I was a retard, and that...

He'd never spoke to me like that before. I was frightened. He looked so angry and threatening. His fists bunched up like he was going to hit me. He said he'd better bury Lucy in the garden. If the authorities found out I'd be blamed and done for being a baby killer. I'd get prison. Life even. That really shocked me into waking up. I shouted back and I swore I hadn't done anything to Lucy. She was fine when I put her to bed. Not even a snuffle. But Eddie refused to believe me. He just kept saying burial had got to be done right away, and he'd got to do it. He let me kiss Lucy and hold her for a few minutes and then he took her away and buried like he said he would, in the garden. I wasn't even allowed to see where, but then he did show me later.

I cried and cried. I must've been in bed for a fortnight after. I just kept going over and over it in my head. What had I done? Lucy was fine - a kicking, laughing baby one minute and the next she was gone. I couldn't understand how it had happened.

Over the years I got to believe that Eddie had killed her. Suffocated her with the pillow so as to say it was a cot death. He wanted to have something to hold over me.

Something to stop me leaving. Something so terrible that I'd keep my mouth shut forever, in case of what might happen to me.

I soon got pregnant again. I think I needed to be - you know - I needed a replacement. Eddie wasn't pleased at all. He said two was enough - they was expensive to keep. Besides he didn't like it when I was nursing - he liked me to be just for him. He'd often push the baby off when I was feeding, so he could suck on me. He'd want to have sex all the time when I was carrying. I had to pretend to be up for it or he'd get angry. And when he was angry he could do anything. That next baby was Michele. My little Michele - she was so lovely then, a real little girl with curls, all in pink. Not like now. Butched up from bein' with them biker dykes. I don't know why she hangs around them - they always treat her rough when they find out who's daughter she is. Anyway, Eddie was sort of okay with her at first. But soon he started looking around for another foster family - like with Susan. I said no, I wasn't losing another baby, that wasn't fair after all I'd been through, five pregnancies and only two kids left. But it was hard making Eddie take notice. Still, by the time Michele was two I was pregnant again - Carly was my Dad's baby for sure - she even looks like him. Eddie wanted me to have an abortion. He threatened to do it himself. I told my dad then, so he'd make sure Eddie wouldn't do anything.

After that Eddie seemed to get resigned to having a lot of kids. It wasn't as though he did anything to stop it. He never knew for certain if they was his - I made sure of that. For some reason he never wanted to cross my Dad - so that was the way I got him. But, getting his own back, he soon made his plans for me. He started hiring me out - not for money, I don't mean - but letting his friends come round for sex and Eddie would watch. He liked that. I'd be in the bedroom he made specially for it with a big bed, and I'd be moaning and groaning - he liked a lot of noise - while some bloke was having it away with me and Eddie would be watching through holes in the wall. He put them in different places so he could see from all angles. Sometimes I'd hear his heavy breathing through the wall - I'd have to smother me laughs, it was such an act for me the whole thing."

The lunchtime break was a welcome relief for everyone. Though it was said in muffled asides that Ruth was holding up very well - remarkably well in the circumstances. She seemed assured, warming even, to her tale. Perhaps it was what she'd been waiting for - a chance to tell her side, make her plea. Certainly she'd said so to Anna and Roly when they'd primed her the week before.

"They need to hear my side. No one's ever asked me before. Except that bloke of yours..." She nodded to Anna, "The one who said it wasn't just me who's a monster."

"George," sighed Anna. It was his fault really, that they were having to test Ruth in the dock. But maybe, all in all, it wasn't a bad thing.

So thought Roly, as he lurched out of Court to find respite and a sandwich. He didn't want to be with anyone from the case. See anyone, even. Well versed in Ruth's testament - he'd prepared it with her after all - he hadn't expected to feel so overwhelmed when he actually heard it out loud. It was shocking and banal in equal parts. Worst of all, it had a terrible, dark humour about it. Once or twice members of the court had had to repress sniggers.

The day was mild with a weak sun struggling through blue-patched cloud, so Roly grabbed a Prêt sandwich, walked briskly to the Lincoln Inn Fields and found a bench to sit on. He gazed at the trees bursting with new life and inevitably thought about Julia, due to give birth in just a few weeks.

He'd tried to give thanks for that when he'd gone to mass yesterday. There was a Catholic church just down the road from Anna and Harry's house. He'd noticed it in the taxi. Without mentioning it to anyone, he got up early on Sunday, let himself quietly out of the door - wondering as he did, how he would get back in without keys - and walked through the still, dark morning towards the bell tolling from the black silhouette. Inside, the church was remarkably warm and bright with candlelight. Not a bit like the freezing one of his youth he thought grimly, when at 5am he'd been the altar-boy, first in to light the candles and help robe the Priest. Father Kelly was a nasty old man - it was a wonder, after their encounters, Roly's faith had survived as long as it had. Now the horrid revelations of child molestation, so reminiscent of his own at the hands of the Father, had coalesced to shake it from him.

He wasn't going to admit any of that to Julia - whose attitude remained staunch no matter how great the tests. Make a gift of your suffering; give your pain to God. Roly had tried, but this trial, with its strangely parallel family, had knocked the ability out of him.

He'd sat in the pew for quite some time making the muttered responses required. When it came to confession however, he just couldn't do it. To what would he confess? To bad dreams? To being horribly titillated by the pornographic details emerging? To having dark thoughts about his own family? Ridding himself of them? Running away? To despair about human nature - his own included?

After a while, he gave up and let himself out of the pew careful to disturb no one. He left behind a surprisingly substantial congregation of bowed heads and whispering voices. No one seemed to notice him go. It was as if he'd never been there.

He had picked up croissants and fresh bread for breakfast from a trendy little French bakery nearby. By the time he got back, Harry was up and making coffee in the kitchen. Still wearing a rather grubby towelling dressing gown, he responded to Roly's knock on the door saying, "Goodness, you're up early on a Sunday. I'm impressed."

Roly embarrassedly laid his offerings on the table. "Thought I should contribute." He said.

"Splendid!" cried Harry. "That's our favourite bakery. Anna will be delighted."

Well, that was something achieved by his effort, thought Roly - at least he'd delighted one other being.

## Chapter Thirty-Two

## Ruth's Story 2

“Eddie got more and more into having other people round for sex games. Into me having sex with them, that is. Every time I got pregnant he'd up the game like. It was my penalty. If I wanted another baby I'd got to do more of what turned him on. I had Lisa next - she was Eddie's. By that time we needed nannies - Orpairs like. Eddie'd get 'em from Chester house. Pick them up like. They might be thumbing a lift. Or waiting for a boyfriend. There was pub down by the docks where they was dealing weed - you know, Maryjane - lots of young girls went in it. Eddie was always down there. He'd listen to some hard luck story - some kid who'd run away from home, or been dumped, or got in trouble with the authorities and next thing he'd be bringing them home. We had a lot of rooms 'cos that's how he'd done up the house, lots of dividing and putting up fake walls. And then there was the cellar. I'm sorry, I've got to stop a minute - can I have a drink of water?

So as I was saying, we had all these young women - girls really - through the house and they'd look after the children. Some was better than others at that, but at least I could get the laundry done and go out now and again without worrying. They might not do the cooking, but one thing they was all up for was sex. Eddie would get them into threesomes with each other - he had holes in their bedroom walls too - and with us. He wanted me to play with them - go down on them and that. Sooner or later it was full on sex. He loved that. He used to call it 'lemon meringue pie'. To be honest, it were a lot less bother than the men he made me do. I even quite enjoyed it. The girls were nice, pretty - and they loved me because I looked after them. I'd make sure they got fed, bring them little gifts - from the market or whatever - lend them clothes, give 'em a bit of pocket money. Eddie never knew about that. His attitude was we're putting a roof over their heads for nothing - that gives us rights. It was like he owned them. Thing is they didn't seem to mind. One or two even told me they was in love with him. Like I say, he could be a charmer when he wanted.

Jealous? I wouldn't say I was jealous, no. Sometimes I was a bit resentful, I suppose. If I thought Eddie was paying one a bit too much attention. Leaving me out, like. Look - I couldn't have him walking out - I had five children.

You've asked me about when he started diddling *them* - his own children. The answer is, I don't know. It might have started back with Lucy - I was so out of it then I wouldn't have noticed. Or later may be, with Michele. Like I say she was a very pretty kid. Apple of my eye - and Eddie, he was jealous. He might have started on her to get his revenge, or keep her in line. But that story she told - about him sticking a dildo in her - it wasn't like that at all. When she was about eight he told me he was going to do her. "Break her in" was what he said. He wanted me to help him. Well, I was revolted. I fought him over it for weeks, but then I got pregnant again with Zac - he was from a friend of Eddie's, a Paki - and Eddie said he'd abort it by force if I didn't play 'is game. I had to give in, but I said I wouldn't allow him to have sex with her - she was only little, he was too big - he'd got to do it gently, by degrees. I said he could use a dildo I had. Yes, that's right "for my own pleasure." I was trying to help. I was trying to save her. When I held her down to stop her struggling, it was so he wouldn't do anything worse. I knew he could hurt her bad, tear up her insides, rape her if he wanted. I tried to help her and afterwards I bathed her and put on ointment and made her favourite smoothie for her - banana and chocolate. Whatever she says now, she knows I did care about her. I did!

It was like Michele was the start. After that Eddie always wanted it with the kids. Including the boys. I said to him he was a poof - goaded him really. Anything to get him to stop, to try to protect them. But Eddie didn't care. He'd changed completely from the man I married. Now all he cared about was the sex. He had to have it every day, sometimes more than once and with anyone and everyone who come his way. He was like an animal, a wild beast, as though he was on some drug - and I don't mean Maryjane. I dunno what got into him.

When the others got old enough - the kids I mean - he'd even get them to join in. With Andy say, it wasn't rape more than the first few times. After that Andy was okay with it. Then he, Andy, started up with Michele - course that was Eddie's doing - but still Andy was more than willing. Chip off the old block you might say.

I couldn't do nothin' to stop it. I had terrible turns of depression. I was on all kinds of medication. They put me in that 'Talking Therapy' once - but of course, I couldn't say nothin'! The therapist thought I was dumb for a week. I tried suicide I

don't know how many times. I ended up in casualty so often I could keep up with every celebrity magazine. Some of the nurses laughed and said that was the only reason I overdosed. The one thing I lived for was having the babies. It got so every time a really bad thing happened I'd have to get myself pregnant again. That was my only comfort.

When Andy was a teenager, he and Eddie went behind my back. They started having sex with the nanny girls together. Without me. Eddie thought I didn't know and I never said anything. To be honest, it was a relief. By then I'd had enough - I was exhausted. You try washing, ironing, shopping, cooking, cleaning, taking kids to school and then every night having sex with all and sundry! That was when Eddie did up the cellar. He made it like it was some sort of club. Red lights and music and that. And he sound-proofed it, so him and Andy could do what they liked without no-one hearing. They'd sneak around getting the girls in when I was in bed and take them down the cellar. They got more bold with it, though. Sometimes I'd hear them going down there when I was watching telly. Then the music'd go on under the floor and after that you wouldn't hear nothing, except maybe a bit of banging. But then Eddie might come up and say, "make us some tea love, I'm working on some carpentry," or such like.

No, I never went in. Never. It was like the cellar was their domain. And mine was the nursery.

Michele - she says I knew what went on. I didn't. I thought the girls had just moved on. They was like that - floating about, a bit lost. You never knew when you'd see them again. If I asked Eddie he'd always grin and say, "They got what they asked for."

One or two I got closer to. Alana - she was a nice girl. She was staying in a room upstairs and she just left one day without saying goodbye. I was upset over that. But nothing compared to Carrie. Carrie was a beautiful girl and very good with the children. She'd been thrown out by her dad and lived at Chester House but she'd often come and stay over. I got very fond of her. She was like another daughter - but older, more like a mate. Like Susan might have been if only she hadn't... Anyway, Carrie and me would go off on girl's nights out. We'd go to the pub on karaoke night, or to Bingo, or line-dancing. I hadn't had a close friend for years and she really liked being with me. Course Eddie had to ruin it. He couldn't bear me to have anything separate from him - even though he had plenty of secrets. He wanted to muscle in on Carrie for sex. The funny thing was, she didn't mind. She was ready to have sex with us both - I think it was, you know, for that 'bonding', as much as anything. She thought of us as her

family. The sex was really good. I felt things for that girl I'd never felt for anybody - not even Eddie in the early days. I was in love with him for sure, but I was never really that keen on the sex. Me and Carrie had quite a thing going. And then along comes Eddie and ruins it by his, let's do this and that and taking photos. Then he gets Andy involved. Well, that was it. Carrie really fell hard for Andy. He was very good looking, was my son. All my kids... It's our curse as a family.

Eddie wouldn't leave her alone though and I know him and Andy had sessions when they was both with her. Next thing is she tells me she's pregnant! Well I was furious. I asked her whose it was? She says she wants it to be Andy, but she thinks it's Eddie. I offered to help her get rid of it. She says she'd never do that, she was an unwanted child herself and she couldn't do that to another baby. I says that's stupid - it's not a baby, it's just a blob. But I have to admit I agreed with her - I wouldn't never get rid of any of mine, no matter what.

I says maybe she should tell Andy and make a go of it with him. She could always say it was his. I know she did do that, tell him she was pregnant at least, 'cos I was with her when she phoned him. But Eddie wouldn't let go. Turns out he really wanted Carrie - was 'in love' with her he said. He said the baby was his and he wanted her to have it. Him and me had a terrible, terrible row. He threatened to leave me. Just go off with Carrie. I said she didn't want him, anyway. He was just a dirty old man to her, it was Andy she fancied. I screamed out all the awful things he'd made me do over the years. I threatened to tell the police. He got so mad I thought he was going to kill me. Then he just stormed out. It was a Saturday. He didn't come back until the following morning.

Course, I realise now that's when he - you know - when he murdered Carrie. I don't know why he did it. Maybe she said she wouldn't go with him. Maybe she said she wouldn't have the baby. Maybe he just wanted to get back at me - he knew how much I cared about her. Or wanted to drop me in it, leaving her out there like that. At least with the others he buried them.

Whatever he done it for, he couldn't get over it. The night before he died - yes, hung hisself - he said to me that he couldn't live no more with what he'd done. I thought he meant to the kids, and the sex games - and maybe, after I found out about it - what he'd done to Carrie.

I didn't have no idea he was talking about bodies under the patio. I was completely shocked by that note he left. I thought he was joking. And when they was

discovered, I still didn't believe it. I suppose he left the note so they would be found. But I don't know if he wanted me to be blamed, or if he thought by admitting it all he'd save me from being arrested. From being here, now.

## Chapter Thirty-Three

At the end of the Court day, Cate hurried out. She nodded to Ethan who was in the row behind her but didn't stop and talk to him. Things needed to settle down before they could move on - be friends, or whatever. Besides, the day's information had been so hypnotic in the other-world chasm it had uncovered, she just needed to get out quickly. In fact she needed a drink - so it was as well this was the evening she'd agreed to meet Gemma. She went to the usual wine bar and ordered a glass of Chenin while she waited. Sitting at a window table she opened her notebook and quickly added some extra recollections. More moments came back to her as she sipped the wine.

'Sound-proofing' she wrote. 'Enough to drown out cries of agony?'

'Music in the cellar when they were torturing the girls.' What would it have been? RnB, Michele had mentioned. Cate squeezed her eyes shut against the picture of orifices being stuffed, sewn up, ripped apart, while Gangsta rap played. Limbs being sawn off to Alicia Keys, "New York, New York.."

Could Ruth really not have known? Her story was very compelling. Tomorrow Anthony Farrow would cross-examine. That should be riveting. She didn't envy him.

Gemma wheeled breathlessly through the revolving door in a flurry of fake fur and stilettos. Cate smiled and waved. Daft Gemma might be, but still irresistible - so 'Samantha' from Sex and the City.

"So - tell me everything!" Gemma demanded as soon as she'd summoned a waiter and ordered a bottle of fizz. "Oh, come on girl - it's not often we get to meet these days, let's celebrate! Go on - off the record."

"As if!"

"Cross my heart, promise."

"I'll hold you to that. It's all going in my film and I don't need you doing a spoiler."

"Not my scene." Gemma waved an airy hand. "Much too dark and dangerous. Although come to think of it, some celebrity revelations are pretty gross."

Cate quickly recounted a fairly anodyne version of the day in court. Gemma mostly wanted to know what Ruth was wearing. She shuddered when Cate told her. "Why do they always look like psychos?" She complained. "All the pictures I've seen of her, she's the dead spit of that 'Misery' character. Maybe they could get that actress for the feature film version."

"Feature film?" Cate gave an incredulous hoot. "D'you really think there'll be one?"

"Bound to be, darling. How could the Cohen Brothers resist? Look at that 'Monster' one with Charlize Theron. She's gorgeous but they made her look like a bag lady."

"You're terrible!" Cate scolded. "Anyway, mine's the film version. The true film version. Ruth will be dressed as herself."

Gemma mimed putting a finger down her throat and made a retching noise.

"Come on! She could hardly appear in court done up like a fashionista."

"Why not? She needs to be styled. For a fee, I'd do it."

"You nutty woman. See-through lace, teetering up the steps to the dock in her Louboutins, I suppose?"

They both giggled and sipped their wine. Cate noticed Roly Baring entering the bar. He looked troubled, which was hardly surprising.

"It is fascinating though, what it brings up in oneself." She said, thoughtfully, "You know, the comparisons with your own life? We're all just victims of moral luck,

good or bad, really. There's no such thing as good or evil - less and less do I believe in that."

"Twin-sets are pretty evil." Contradicted Gemma. "Though according to Paris, they're back for the spring. Mine will be strictly cashmere."

Cate couldn't help laughing. Perhaps Gemma's frilly froth was exactly what she needed.

"You are a hoot." She said, as the champagne arrived and Gemma poured it liberally.

"Darling, someone's got to keep the boat afloat. All that serious stuff you do just sinks it."

"I don't agree, of course."

They clinked glasses and drank. Gemma emptied hers on first quaff. She refilled.

"I'm only teasing - you know that. I agree though, that we are lucky if we're born middle class and - preferably - wealthy."

"Hmm. I'm not so sure. Terrible things happen in middle class families too."

"You mean boarding school?" Gemma's tone was faux-innocent, as she batted mink eyelashes.

"I mean marital abuse, child abuse, affairs, alcoholism."

"Okay, okay."

"To say nothing of what happens in other cultures. What about honour killings, kids denied education, forced marriage - what's being married off to someone you don't want and don't love, but rape? How's that for 'family values'?"

"That film you made on Bangladesh?" supplied Gemma. "I remember thinking I was glad to be British."

"But they are British." Cate was becoming earnest. "Girls are worth nothing in any culture. Except what they can fight for."

"Maybe Ruth Whatsername, didn't fight hard enough?"

"She fought in the only way she knew how. The only way open to women with no education, no moral compass. With her body."

"Dearest. Have another drink!" Gemma generously refilled the glasses. Cate was sipping at hers when she saw Ethan enter. She started slightly. Now she was no longer with him she could see again how handsome he was, with his pale skin and dark hair

and eyes. Ethan looked round, spotted her and not seeing she was with someone, wove towards her between tables in the now filling bar.

He perched on an empty bar stool at their table and Cate had no option but to introduce him.

“Gemma, this is Ethan, a... a colleague. Ethan, my friend Gemma, also a journalist.”

“Oh sorry,” said Ethan taking Gemma’s crimson-tipped hand, “I didn’t realise you weren’t alone.”

“More the merrier, darling.” Cooed Gemma, giving him a long look from under the lashes.

“Let’s get another bottle.” She waved at the waiter. “Are you on this wretched trial too? If so I forbid you to talk about it, I’ve got serial killer fatigue.”

Ethan laughed, returning her flirtatious glance. “Me too. So - what shall we talk about?”

Well, thought Cate, this is going to be interesting.

The day had been torture for DCI Andrews. He could see his case going out the window - as he said to Pamela on the mobile while on his way to the station. She replied by asking what time he would be home - it was her Pilates night and she wanted to know about supper.

Dick Andrews sighed as he snapped the phone shut. Pamela was, he was well aware, at the end of her tether with him. Not just with this trial, either - though she now refused to have it discussed at home - but with the whole way of life his being a high-ranking officer entailed. She’d had years of it, he had to admit: late nights, early mornings, calls in the middle of the night, unexplained disappearances for days, short temper, stress, anxiety, heavy drinking, Masonic events - though those she quite enjoyed - having to be polite to his colleagues and worse still, their wives. It was endless. She’d stood by him all these years. Brought up the kids more or less by her self. Been his rock, really. He’d make it up to her, he promised himself for the umpteenth time. She deserved something really special.

On the train as it sped through the neon, rain-lashed outer city, he reviewed the day. Did people believe Ruth’s version of events? Poor Michele, if that was the case.

Ruth had explained everything away very convincingly. Dick gave a grim smile - catching sight of his own face in the darkened window. He knew better, but what could he say? Unless he was recalled by Farrow, that is. He didn't think that would happen now. The trial had entered its terminal stage - that was plain.

Roly sat at the busy bar with the Evening Standard and ordered a glass of Burgundy. He was tempted to get a bottle, it would be cheaper in the long run, but he didn't want the clientele of the bar - some of whom attended the trial - to see the defendant's solicitor succumbing to a bout of solitary drinking. His mobile rang - a quick check told him it was Julia. He put the paper down and took the call.

"Roly!"

"Hello my love. Everything okay?"

"No it's not. I'm not feeling good."

Roly was immediately alert. No matter how exhausted or sick she got, Julia rarely admitted to feeling it.

"What sort of 'not good.' "

"I think I'm having contractions."

"What? No you can't be..." Roly did a rapid calculation, the baby was still five weeks off surely?

"I shouldn't be, I know, but that's what's happening..."

"Is there anyone there? Anyone who can get you to hospital?"

"Mum's on her way round. She'll have to stay with the kids while I drive myself."

"Don't be silly, you can't drive like that..." Roly looked at his watch, no matter what he did he couldn't be home for hours.

"I'd call an ambulance, but you know how long they take..."

"These contractions - how frequent?"

"Not very, yet. I had one just now and that was about an hour after the last. It's been going on all afternoon."

Oh God, thought Roly. By this fifth pregnancy he knew enough to realise that, ready or not, the baby could be coming.

“Hang on. Let me call Janice and get her round to look after the kids, then your Mum can go with you to hospital.”

“Not Janice, please.”

Janice was Roly’s PA at his firm of solicitors. She and Julia didn’t get on.

“Julia, be reasonable. There’s no one else who can be there so quickly. Look - I’ll call her now and get straight back to you - stay by the phone. With your feet up!”

The law offices were on speed dial and within a few seconds Janice answered the phone. Roly explained what was happening and Janice, delighted, as ever, to hear from him, said of course she’d go straight away. Roly’s house was five minutes by car from the office.

“Thanks Janice - you’re a pal.” Roly was aware that Janice wanted to be more than a pal. Hence Julia’s wariness.

“No problem. I’ll make sure she gets to hospital toot sweet and call you back as soon as there’s news.” Janice sounded excited - she loved to be part of a drama, which was perhaps why she was a legal secretary.

Roly called Julia back, but the phone just rang and rang which alarmed him. He scrolled down to find her mother’s number, surely Kay would be there by now?

The phone was answered, but not by his mother-in-law. A small voice said,

“Hello?”

“Sian, is that you?”

There was a breathy pause then the small voice said, “Yes. Sian.”

“This is Daddy. Is Granny there?”

“Granny’s with Mummy.”

“Okay. Can you get her for me?”

“Granny or Mummy?”

“Either.”

There was another pause, then Sian said, “I don’t think so. Mummy’s lying on the floor and Granny’s trying to pick her up.”

Oh my god, thought Roly, panicking now, what on earth was going on?

“Sian, listen to me. Are you listening?”

“Yes.”

“Tell me what happened to Mummy?”

“She’s making a funny noise. Granny said she called a ambulass.”

“She’s called an ambulance?”

“Yes.”

That was something, thought Roly. Hopefully, it was already on its way. Again he cursed the distance between them.

“Listen Sian. My friend Janice is on her way round. She’ll be there any minute..

“Janice.”

“That’s right.”

Roly could hear the doorbell going at the back of the call. That must be Janice. “Sian - open the front door to Janice. She’s going to stay with you, while Mummy and Granny go to the hospital.”

“Hospital.”

Now in the background Roly could hear a siren wailing.

“Can you hear that Sian? It’s the abulass. Let them all in, there’s a good boy.”

“Let abulass in.”

“Okay. Tell Mummy I love her..”

But Sian had gone...

## Chapter Thirty-Four

“Mrs Webb, Ruth - may I call you that?” Opened Anthony Farrow.

“Orlright.” Ruth paused. “As long as I can call you Anthony”.

There were surprised titters from the press and public galleries.

Farrow gave a drily amused cough. “In that case, I’ll stick to Mrs Webb. So - Mrs Webb, let us consider some of the things you have said in your testimony so far.

You said, and I am quoting, “I screamed out all the awful things he’d made me do over the years.”

What exactly did you mean by ‘awful things’? What had Eddie made you do over the years?”

“Well - like belting the kids. I’d have to punish them for things he said they’d done wrong.”

“Mmhum. That’s bad, of course, no one should hit their children - let alone ‘belt’ them. But it doesn’t sound too terrible on the scale of things. Not something you might tell the police. What else did Eddie, ‘make you do’?”

“Making me go with men. Men he’d choose, like. I’d have to do what he said with them so he could get his rocks off.”

More titters from above. Anthony Farrow wiped his brow with a sparkling white handkerchief.

“Well again - unpleasant of course, but hardly a ‘police’ matter. What happens between couples in the bedroom, provided it’s legal and hurting no-one else, should in my opinion, be left in the bedroom.”

“ Oh, yeah - are you thinking of what happens in yours?”

The titters spread into rippling giggles. It was well known that Farrow was gay and although he didn’t flaunt it - apart from in his signature, natty ties - he certainly didn’t hide it either.

No Mrs Webb, I am thinking that unless your husband was making you do these things under duress, you would have no reason to - as you say - to tell the police,”

“Under Durex? He’d never allow them. He liked it bareback and so did his friends.”

There was now full-blown laughter in court. Many assumptions had been made about Ruth’s character over the weeks - but who knew she was witty?

The judge banged his gavel and demanded silence. He told Farrow to re-phrase the question and directed Ruth to answer it.

“Certainly M’lud, I’ll re-phrase. Mrs Webb, did your husband force you to have sex with other people?”

“Force. Hmm. No I s’pose not. But he made it difficult to say no.”

“How was that.”

“He’d threaten me with things. Like killing my pets, or taking it out on the children.”

“So - again I put it to you - that if, for whatever reason, you were doing it ‘willingly,’ it was hardly something you would tell the police.”

“I might tell them about him forcing the kids the have sex with him. They weren’t, like you say, willing. Certainly not my girls anyway.”

“Very well - that is something you could report him for. But you implied there were other, more serious things. What about the young women who stayed with you - your nannies and au pairs - what did Eddie do to them?”

“Like I said, I never knew he did anything beyond having all sorts of sex with them.”

“So what would you be telling the police?”

Ruth did not answer.

“I ask you again Mrs Webb - what exactly would you be telling the police?”

Still silence.

The judge turned to Ruth and pushing his half-glasses up to the bridge of his nose, looked over them, a long look, and required that she answer the question.

“That he was forcing them girls, too. That he was like a wild beast with the sex and anyone who come in his path was in danger.”

“In danger of being killed in his Bacchanalian frenzies?”

“His Baccy frenzies? Well, he was a smoker, but I don’t know about no one ‘cept the smoker being killed by that. They’ve not really proved it, have they - that passive smoke thing like?”

Again there was laughter. Loud this time. Judge Solomons frowned and gave his gavel a resounding smack. A whispering silence descended. Anthony Farrow adjusted the neck of his gown, hanging onto the lapels as if for dear life.

“You said on another occasion,” - he consulted his notes - “that ‘Eddie got so mad, I thought he was going to kill me.’”

“Yes,” Ruth conceded. “I often thought that.”

“Why?”

“What d’you mean, why”

“I think it’s clear what I mean - unless you knew that Eddie was violent and had in fact killed other people - why would you think he would kill you?”

Ruth shoved her own glasses further up her nose and surveyed Farrow through their magnifying lenses.

“Husbands and wives often says things like that. Everyone does. I bet you’ve said it. You know, he made me so angry, I could’ve killed him? I bet you’ve said it to your own wife.”

“I am not married, Madam.”

“Well, lucky you.” There was unsuppressed laughter at that. “But, excuse me then - if you’re not married you don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Farrow passed the handkerchief over his brow again. He was looking pale now and distinctly queasy.

“One does not need to be married to know the level of violence that can happen between man and wife.”

“I didn’t mean that. I meant you got no idea what goes on inside a marriage. To be honest, no one does. You’re always doing things just to keep the other one happy. Anything for a quiet life. And to keep something worse from happening.”

“So I ask you again - what worse could have happened?”

“I don’t know.” Ruth’s mouth was now set in a stubborn line.

Farrow looked at his notes,

“Perhaps that this husband - this man you’ve described as, ‘like an animal, a wild beast, as though he was on some drug’ - might be murdering the young women in your care? Is that what you mean by ‘something worse’?”

“No. I don’t know. It was just a feeling.”

“I suggest that you knew perfectly well what was going on in that cellar. You took trays of tea down to them.”

“So what. They was down there hours sometimes. I thought they’d be thirsty.”

“Indeed, it’s thirsty work butchering.”

“I never knew that was what they was doing.”

“I suggest you knew perfectly well that Eddie, perhaps with Andy’s help, was killing those young women and disposing of their bodies. That he was using building tools to chop them up. Sometimes even your own kitchen knives. And that he was burying them under your patio.”

“No, no, no, I never...”

“And more than that - far from just supplying thirst quenching tea - on many occasions you helped him. You were part of the sex games. Part of the brutal torture. You may have been the one in fact who instigated it, out of jealousy.

“Jealous? Of what? As if!”

“Disposing of their bodies was a big operation - one which would require the help of others. I suggest you were the one who put the parts in the dustbin.”

“I never..!”

“No? Was that because they wouldn’t have fitted?”

“That wouldn’t be no problem - we ’ad a wheelie bin.”

Horrified gasps ran round the room.

“Very well, then. You disposed of the body parts in your wheelie bin!”

Anthony Farrow seemed beside himself with rage. Ruth too was quivering. A deathly hush had fallen on the court now, but it was a hair’s breadth away from mass eruption.

Ruth looked down, her fringe brushing the top of her glasses.

“I never did none of those things,” she muttered.

“Really? - As far as your daughter Michele is concerned - you had an active and participating role. You’ve told us yourself you supplied the tea. ”

“She’s lying.”

“Why would she do that? Your own daughter?”

“She was the one who was jealous. She wanted Eddie all to herself. She was besotted with her dad and she wanted his whole attention. She wanted to have sex with him - it made her special.”

There was another noisy rustle around the room. In the press gallery, normally sleepy or indifferent journalists were leaning forward, almost panting. This really was too good to be true.

“So, let me get this clear. You are now alleging that instead of being targets for your husband’s obsessive sexual needs, your children were compliant - complicit even, in your husband’s sex games? That far from being victims they were eager participants? In which case, I ask you again - about what were you threatening to ‘go to the police?’”

Ruth stamped on the floor with apparent frustration. She almost shouted her response.

“Nothing. It was just something I used. I don’t know.”

Anna and Roly gripped the arms of their chairs. This was what they had been dreading. Farrow responded with equal fervour. "I think you do. I think you knew perfectly well about the young women whose bodies were buried under the patio and in the cellar. That's what you were threatening Eddie with and that's why he hung himself."

"No! No!"

"All right then. Here's another possibility. Eddie hung himself so you wouldn't have to take any of the blame. That was what you agreed, when you and he had the row that night. If he disappeared from the scene, the other bodies might never be discovered. You didn't reckon on him leaving a note though did you?"

There was nothing from Ruth in answer to that but a volcanic silence.

"You thought if he got rid of Carrie in a very obvious way and then just hung himself that would be the end of the story. Your part in it all might never come out. This statement of yours," Farrow looked again at his notes and read in ridiculously precise English, "The night before he hung himself - he said to me that he couldn't live no more with what he'd done,' was a complete fabrication on your part. It was - as had been made with others in your family group - a 'deal' between you."

Ruth was shaking her head violently from side to side - her breathing was heavy and froth had appeared at the corners of her mouth. Her glasses flew off as her head jerked back and she slumped to the floor writhing and kicking. Anna and Roly leapt up and hurried towards the dock as court attendants rushed to Ruth's rescue.

## Chapter Thirty-Five

Ruth's epileptic fit effectively put an end to the case for the Defence. She was taken back to Holloway to the hospital wing and there remained under observation

while the case was rested, Judge Solomons summed up and the jury was sent out to deliberate. It took them the rest of the week, locked in the cheerless jury room, to come to a conclusion. In the end, it was possibly only the threat of further enduring each other's company in a hotel for the weekend, which forced them to a decision. Late on Friday afternoon they shuffled back into the Jury pews - heads bowed as though ashamed of their respective roles in the decision. The court rose and Judge Solomons asked the jury's spokeswoman if they had come to a verdict. She said they had. The clerk of the court read out the charges again and asked the spokeswoman how they found. There was a tense silence.

Everyone edged forward holding their communal breath as the Jury spokesperson looked down and in a subdued voice pronounced the words, "Not guilty. On all counts."

A wave of shock went round the courtroom and a kind of roar erupted, causing Judge Solomons to thunder down on his gavel. Paying no attention to it, journalists rushed for the exit almost falling over one another. Anna could hardly believe her ears. She and Roly exchanged a wild glance as they turned away from the court to shake hands - Dan had slumped sideways, one hand to his forehead. An air of relief, and disbelief equally, came off their bench. Anthony Farrow QC just looked stunned. In fact, he sat down rather heavily.

In the press gallery Cate gathered her things more slowly. She didn't want to bump into anyone, least of all Ethan, on her exit. He however, was hovering just outside the door. They looked at each other with raised eyebrows.

"Well!" Said Ethan

"Indeed!" Replied Cate.

"What you expected?"

"Not at all."

"But you said she wasn't guilty."

"No. I just said she should have a fair trial. And that she wasn't getting one."

Ethan nodded slowly. "So what do you think now?"

"Not sure. A lot of questions remain unanswered."

"Surely you're pleased, though?"

“I am if she’s really innocent. At least she got a chance to tell us she is.”

“Hmm.”

“Drink?”

“Celebrate or commiserate?”

Cate smiled. “Whichever.”

Ethan gave an uneasy smile in return.

“Actually, I’ll have to take a rain cheque. I’ve got er... I’ve got a lot on. I just wanted to get your take on it. ”

“Gladly. Some time over the weekend?”

“Well - I’ve got to do my summing up for the Sunday edition.”

“ Ah - of course. I imagine it’ll be rather special?”

Ethan gave his old, friendly grin. “Pages one, two, four, five and six - with pictures.”

“Good luck with it.” Said Cate, a little resentfully. Since when did Ethan get to turn her down? Since the other night in the wine bar she supposed.

She watched him hurry towards the lift, a heavy feeling in her chest. Regret? She wondered. He was a good catch and she’d thrown him back. Now someone else had snared him. She smiled wryly and gave herself a little shake - get home and make her notes before she forgot a single moment of the extraordinary proceedings.

The verdict was received with silent despair by DCI Andrews. He gripped the bench in front as it was announced and then hung his head, breathing deeply. His ribcage thumped - he wondered if he was having a heart attack. It was enough to bring one on. After a few moments his heart subsided and he slowly staggered to his feet - a seasoned policeman should be used to this. He was of course, in general, but this case was different. Michele fleetingly went through his mind. Her pinched, frozen face stared accusingly at him. What would she think? He’d let her down. He’d promised her justice if she came to court and he’d let her down catastrophically. He was just another in a long line. That endless line of people who’d betrayed her. What would she do next? What would he?

He saw DI Dawkins on the way out. The younger man clapped him sympathetically on the shoulder. “Sorry Guv. What a bummer.”

Dick nodded dumbly. Just now he couldn't even take commiseration.

Somehow he got out into the street, which was thronged with journalists causing pavement obstructions. He noticed that documentary girl - Cate was it? - talking to a group. He saw Shane Dawkins approach her. They shook hands and smiled. In no time Dawkins was chatting away to her as though nothing unusual had happened. Dick Andrews kept his head down and pushed through the crowd. The promise of spring had receded and it was cold and threatening rain. How apt Dick thought, as he entered the dank tube station. He wondered what Pamela would say. Probably nothing - she knew better than to offer verbal solace. She'd just squeeze his hand and whisk about in her busy way getting the dinner.

She deserved a break. They both did. He'd take some leave. It might be rough today, but it was nearly spring, after all. They'd go off with the caravan. There was that lovely campsite on the nearby coast. Yes, a few days in Norfolk - Cromer crab, a nice bottle of Chablis, walks, birdlife, seals. Dick grabbed a copy of the Evening Standard as he hurried down the steps. On the front page was the sulky photo of Ruth and the headline, 'Reprieve for Tea Lady'. He sighed. Could he really put it all behind him? Because Dick Andrews did believe in good and evil. And he was in no doubt which Ruth Webb was.

Roly Baring left the court after swift goodbyes and was soon hurrying through the packed street to the station, mobile clamped to his ear. It had been there most of the day - Roly snatching whatever moments he could to follow the upsetting events at his home. His mother-in-law, Kay answered as he was about to give up.

"Sorry Roly - had to come outside to take your call. Are you on your way?"

"Just getting to the tube. Phone'll go dead for a while. I'll text as soon as I'm on the train."

"Julia's been asking."

"How is she?"

"Well - all right I think."

"Have the contractions stopped?"

"Yes - they've got her flat in bed with her feet propped up,"

"Her feet higher than her head?"

“She keeps laughing and saying she’s in your favourite position.”

Roly gave a short bark, at the same time thinking that was rather too much information to share with his mother-in-law.

“Glad she hasn’t lost her sense of humour!”

“She’ll be all the better for seeing you.”

“I’ll come straight to the hospital. Who’s with the kids?”

“That colleague of yours? Janice? She said she can wait ’til I get back... but Roly...”

“Yes?”

“Julia’s got to stay in hospital until the baby’s born. I can be here for a while, but you’ll have to make proper arrangements...”

“Don’t worry,” Roly tightened his jaw. “I’ll be doing that all right.”

Yes, he thought grimly to himself, as the crammed, rush-hour tube jolted him towards Liverpool Street, they couldn’t go on like this. The case had brought to the surface all the unresolved conflicts and troubles in their situation. One thing he now knew for sure - he loved Julia and his kids more than anything else in the world: more than career, money, his own salvation even. His family was by far the most important thing in his life - without it he’d be nothing. He would surely be making some changes.

The evening papers were full of what many called the ‘scandalous’ verdict. There was a picture of Anna smiling - she was in wig and gown, someone must have taken it while they were still in court. Others carried the frumpy photo of Ruth with lowering fringe and black-rimmed glasses and the caption, ‘The Tea Lady’. For once Anna took a cab. She couldn’t bear any more human inter-action - it was bad enough that she had to deal with Ruth in Holloway. She tried to imagine what this news would mean to her client - pushing away the uncomfortable thought, yet again, that Ruth might be guilty. Was Anna about to release a mass murderer into the community? She couldn’t go there. It was too awful. Anyway, it wasn’t her fault - she was after all, only doing her job. If the prosecution had made a stronger case, the verdict would have been different. Concentrate on the practical she told herself - getting her client out of prison. Now that was done - bugger the paper work, it could wait until Monday - she’d go home and relax. She’d already called Harry, who said he was finishing work early.

He bellowed congratulations and with his usual joie de vivre said he'd go food foraging at once - get something fabulous and celebratory! He sounded very relieved, Anna thought. She supposed she had been a pain. She'd make it up to him. She smiled to herself. She always promised that. She had yet to deliver. Harry was one client who could look after himself.

Her friend, the warder Gill, came into the infirmary to see Ruth as soon as the call came through. Ruth was sitting up in bed flicking through the 'Heat' magazine Gill had left for her at lunchtime. She held it up to show Gill a picture of Angelina Jolie looking ravishingly skinny and surrounded by children.

"Silly cunt." She opined. "Look at 'er. Don't look like she's had a square meal in years. As if she could be a fit mother!"

Gill nodded agreement - she rarely contradicted Ruth - but on this occasion had more important things to discuss than appropriate mothering. She had some news to impart, she said.

"Oh yeah?" Ruth dropped the magazine, giving her friend a beady stare. "Whass that, then?"

"The verdict came in." Gill paused for effect. Ruth sat up straight, every pore in her body alert now.

"Well?" She demanded, scowling. "Wha' is it?"

"Not guilty!" Gill almost shouted, her excitement at being the bearer of good tidings overtaking her sense of status.

"No!" Ruth seemed pole-axed. Clearly this was not the news she was expecting. She leaned back against the pillows and rubbed a hand over the beads of sweat bursting from her forehead. There was a long pause then she croaked, "Not guilty. You sure? You're not 'avin me on like?"

"No." Gill reassured. "Honestly. We just got the call."

"What'll happen now?" Ruth had gone very pale, all aggression leached from her. She pulled the sheet up to her chin, seeming uncertain of how to respond.

"You'll be released. There's papers to sign and that. Your lawyer's on her way."

"An' then what? Where'll I go?"

"Well, home of course."

“Don’t be daft. I ’ent got no ’ome. They’ve dug it up.”

“Oh yes.” Gill had in truth, forgotten that Bridge Street was a virtual wreck.

“Sides, I woun’ want to go back there. What’ll the neighbours be thinkin’?”

She had a point. How about her daughter Sue, Gill wondered. Ruth’s lip all but curled.

“She woun take me in. An’ I woun go there. Not if it was the last place left on earth.”

There was obviously some unresolved, bad blood there. Gill didn’t want to delve too deeply though. In this job you had to protect yourself.

“Look...” she offered, “we should celebrate. How about I make some tea?”

“Tea?”

“Why not. I kept some chocolate biscuits back.”

“Tea!” Ruth seemed to find the idea hilarious. She burst into raucous laughter, so prolonged Gill start to worry about another attack. “Tea!” She kept shouting, “Tea!”

She was still chortling and choking out the word when Gill came back with a tray of Irish Breakfast and McVities.

*That night the dream came again but this time it was different. This time she was free. Chains were lifted from her. Manacles undone. Her wrists hurt but she didn’t care. She was skipping across a garden or park, dancing, jumping, twirling. Now she was running up the side of a building. She was leaping from roof to roof - like that strange sport beloved of young men - was it Par Kour they called it? She’d seen it in a film, she remembered. Her hair streamed out behind her - she lifted her hands to catch it, loving the joyful feeling of the breeze riffling through it. She laughed out loud - free, crazy laughter that sprang from her mouth and up into a sky, cloudless and cornflower blue - like a frock she’d once worn. She was on a cliff now - running along the chalky edge, far above turquoise waves churning with foamy white caps. How lovely, how lovely, she kept thinking - and singing. Freedom!*

*Suddenly her foot slipped and she stumbled. She caught at the bushes at the edge, her fingers slipping on the shiny, sea grass. She couldn’t get a purchase - the chalk rock crumbled beneath her hands, pebbles flew off around her. And then she fell - down, down, down into the cleft ravine leading to the lethal, pointed rocks with the*

*sea crashing upon them. She hit the water with nuclear force, her body slicing through the waves like a butcher's cleaver. Her hands clutched at seaweed as her lungs filled with salt. Her legs were heavy - she couldn't make them work. She clawed desperately for the surface, but it was too far away. No use - just like when she was chained and manacled, she couldn't move. A last gasp at life - glimpsing a sailboat in the far distance, an upturned shell, a patch of blue, and the seabirds wheeling above her shrieking guilty, guilty, guilty! And down again. Save me, please, save me, she prayed - but was anyone listening?*

## Chapter Thirty-Six

There was a good turnout for the BFI private screening of Cate's film. She'd worked incredibly hard for the last two months, barely having any social life since the Ruth Webb trial ended. Going out only for food and the occasional drink with friends - desperate sometimes for an escape into real life, real people - the sound of a human voice that didn't come from her screen. She saw Gemma quite often. She'd eventually forgiven her for the phone call on the Sunday after the trial finished, in which Gemma had informed her she'd spent the weekend shagging Ethan and was Cate okay with it? Cate had to laugh, furious as she was. It was so typical of Gemma to ask after the event. She quickly came to the conclusion that she was well out of it - particularly after reading Ethan's four page spread covering the trial in that same Sunday edition of his paper. His analysis was about as conservative as it could be - casting doubt on the verdict and citing 'unnamed' feminist sources claiming the trial had been a chauvinist charade and it had been clear from the beginning that Ruth Webb was innocent. She'd called him, in fact, on the Monday, to protest, but he'd sworn it wasn't him - that the article had been heavily subbed by his editor and wasn't at all what he had written.

Cate slammed the phone down in disgust. Yes, she decided, Gemma and Ethan were two of a kind - they deserved each other.

Still, Gemma was lively and frothy and full of great gossip - just the person guaranteed to take you out of a dark place. And it was a dark place, Cate had to admit. It was the darkest she'd ever been in, editing this film - throwing up so much about her own life, as it did. Thrusting back into her consciousness things she really didn't want to revisit. It was one thing to have nightmares - quite another to confront ancient fears in the broad light of day. She'd been close to ringing George a number of times - not so much for his company, though she missed that, but for reassurance that she wasn't going mad. It was on the tip of her tongue to ask him for analysis of her feelings - though their acquaintance was short he already, she felt, knew so much about her. It was strange, but as she acknowledged, right from the beginning she'd felt comfortable in the presence of his old soul. She resisted the temptation - knowing it would lead to more complications. Complications she couldn't deal with right now - if ever.

It was a bright, early summer evening, which no doubt helped the attendance figures. The air was still warm at 6pm with a fine mist coming off the quiet river and the bar outside doing a busy trade. Cate made an effort for the occasion - she had her hair put up in a stylish knot and dressed, for the first time since their opera night, in the plum-coloured frock George had bought for her. She'd been there from much earlier in the day talking with the staff, anxious that all should be not just ready, but successful. Channel Five's factual department had bought the film and were hosting the screening and the reception afterwards, but still...

Many of the people who appeared in the film had turned up, Cate was pleased to see. She waved to Roly, thinking the attractive woman with him must be his wife, while chatting to Marie Williams an early interviewee and her uncomfortable spouse, who, according to Marie, had been dragged away from Sky Sport to attend. Sue Carter, looking very nervous, came up to say hello - she was obviously ill at ease in this media company and Cate made a point of getting her a drink and introducing her to another interviewee, the community psychiatric nurse, Jenny, whom she knew would be sympathetic. As she spotted Michele enter with a formidably large, leather-clad woman, she was pounced on from behind by Gemma whose trilling voice demanded,

“Where’s the champers darling, aren’t we celebrating?” Gemma was hanging onto the arm of an embarrassed-looking Ethan. He and Cate hadn’t met since they parted at the Old Bailey and there was certainly a frisson between them as they said hello and awkwardly pecked each other’s cheeks. Cate was not going to allow anyone to rain on her parade however and pointing the pair towards the bar, swept on to greet others.

Roly Baring introduced her to his wife, Julia, who seemed a friendly woman and as they talked about the new baby, another boy, and how Julia’s mother was taking care of the kids tonight, up came Anna and Harry Wyatt. With a shock, not entirely pleasurable, Cate saw they had George Karlsson with them.

“I hope you don’t mind?” Anna was saying, “We invited George. He’s so interested to see what you’ve done - and the subject is of course, right up his street.”

This was more than disturbing for Cate. Not only was she wearing his dress – OMG how embarrassing – but she had no idea how much Anna and Harry knew about what had gone on between her and George. Maybe, she had to hope, nothing.

“That’s fine. Hello George.” She managed to say, though her tongue seemed stuck to the roof of her mouth. George smiled and took her hand, holding it warmly between his own,

“Hello Cate. I’m so glad you’ve finished the film. I’m really looking forward to it.” As he bent to kiss her cheek, she caught a waft of his expensive aftershave and was momentarily overwhelmed with sexual longing. She had been a long time on her own. Perhaps after - if he liked the film - if he said the right things about it - about her - she might...

He’d have to have changed his attitude, though. No more behaving like he owned her - especially after what he’d have seen. She might give him another go - she’d see how it went afterwards.

Moving swiftly on she encountered DI Shane Dawkins, who gave her a bear hug and standing with him, a stern-looking DCI Andrews, clearly still wondering why he’d given in to an interview. Dick Andrews introduced Cate to his wife Pamela, who looked neat and pretty and slightly disapproving. But she smiled pleasantly enough and wished Cate good luck.

Now they were being called in for the start of the showing. Cate was ushered by her hosts down to the front - there would be a Q&A session afterwards - and the theatre darkened until even the expectant hum was silenced. Up on the screen slowly emerged a picture of a beautiful English country scene - a richly green, daisy-scattered

meadow with a natural pond surrounded by bulrushes and surfaced with lilies and water Iris. An idyll, with just one grazing Friesian cow in the distance. There was an intake of breath from the audience as silently across this mild glory unfolded the title, 'A SHORT FILM ABOUT SERIAL KILLING.'

**Extracts from Cate's film: 'A SHORT FILM ABOUT SERIAL KILLING'**

SUE CARTER

*"I always felt that Mum held it against me. That I wasn't there for her. It was hard for her to think that of course, I mean she'd given me away. For whatever reason she done it - she always felt a bit guilty, I reckon. We had our run-ins over the years. I didn't like some of the things I was hearing - especially from Michele. I had words with Mum plenty of times. Well, it wasn't no use talking to dad about it. But if anyone could get it stopped, it was her - she did have influence over him. I don't mean - she wasn't involved in - you know. I know she was innocent of those terrible things - I went on the stand and said so.*

*She thinks I don't approve of her, though - she always thought that. See - I used to ask her sometimes why she went with other men? Did she want them or what? Why did she behave like a prostitute? She'd get very angry. Sometimes she'd cry. She'd say that dad demanded it. That she did it to keep him quiet and keep the family safe. But over the years, I do think she got to like it. I must admit, I sometimes accused her of that - being a tart and not looking after Michele properly. She probably hates me, though I've always defended her.*

*She won't see me at all now. She's moved in with that warder friend, Gill. You know - the prison warder? She says - Gill that is, Mum don't speak to me - that Mum's happy with her and likes being looked after. They've got a dog, Bingo. Mum hardly goes out. She stays in and knits or embroiders and watches daytime telly. She sees the other kids - they've all stood by her. Except Michele. She's on her own agenda. It's affected us all - the shame. We're notorious in the town because of what our dad did. It's ruined our lives - we can't go out without being pointed at. I do blame Mum, I s'pose, for not paying enough attention. For not stopping it. Still. It was the right verdict."*

MICHELE

*“I don’t care no more. I don’t care what no-one says. I’ve got my own life and – well - I’m goin’ to live it. I’ve got a girlfriend, Sal - that’s her in in the photo - yes, she is big, and tough - all the better to look out for me. I’m only little, see. Sal calls me her shrimp. She’ll say, what do I want when I come in? - shrimp on toast! She’s got a big old Harley and we go bombing round the lanes. It’s a larf - we go to pubs and meets all over the place. It’s amazin’ how many bikers there are in this country. I’m okay. I don’t let much get to me. I’ve got a job. Mechanic. Funny enough I work in the same garage where Andy used to be. They don’t mind me - I reckon they’re used to our family! I think they quite like it that I’m famous. If anyone gives me bother they all look out for me. It’s a life. Better than I had before anyway. But you know what - she’s as guilty as hell. My ‘Mother’ Ruth Webb. I don’t care what no one says, she done it. It was the wrong verdict.”*

#### DCI ANDREWS

*“I went home and straightaway put in for retirement. Yep - the very next Monday I put in my papers and that was that. No looking back. Happier? I don’t know about that. My wife, Pamela is though. She says I’m a different man. A better man, I hope she means it. Well, I have taken over the cooking. I love to cook - and Pam, well, she’s more, ‘put up with it’ than likes it. We go away a lot. In our caravan. Down to Cornwall to see family. Scotland, the Edinburgh Festival, I love their Tattoo, the Highlands, and Wales. We’re even going to Ireland this summer. Most years it’ll be France of course, for the mushroom season and wine harvest.*

*Yes, I am. I am, as a matter of fact, writing a book about it. Not just this trial - the whole thing - my life as a copper, you might say. I’ve never put two words together before - I shall have to ask your help, Cate! It was this trial that did it. It made me want to bear witness. I don’t mean on the stand - you can only answer what you’re asked. But really to say in my own words what I believe happened. You see - for me - it is all about Good and Evil. There are good people in the world and there are evil. I know it - I’ve experienced it first-hand. Human nature - it’s unpredictable - you never can tell what people are capable of doing. As that expert said in the trial - look at the Nazis.*

*The verdict? Dear me, I really shouldn’t comment. Off the record? - She was guilty as hell.*

*Oh yes, it was definitely the wrong verdict.”*

#### SHANE DAWKINS

*“I’m a lot happier. No doubt about it. A hell of a lot happier. So is my wife! Before, I was always stressed. I always felt the weight of the responsibility - you know, being in the force. Daft really, ’cos that’s exactly why I went into it. To be responsible. To give something back. That’s what a lot of we coppers would say. But the pressure - it does get to you. I’d be surly and short-tempered at home. I drank way too much. I only felt comfortable in the company of other police.*

*That’s what that trial brought to a head, I suppose. And dealing with that family - being the Webb’s liaison officer - their only link with the world outside, as it were. Especially with little Michele, who was so vulnerable. It taught me a lot. Showed me a better way, you might say. So I’ve retrained as a relationship counsellor. I’m just about to start up in my own practice. And like I say - I’ve never been happier!”*

#### ANNA WYATT

*“I don’t regret taking it on. Not at all. I’m a criminal attorney - it goes with the territory and it beats the hell out of fraud cases. Besides, I’m fascinated by the whole forensic thing - the building up of evidence. It’s better than a thriller - piecing it together. Sometimes I feel like a sleuth - like in those amusing television programs, where the lawyers always find the truth. I wouldn’t go that far, but finding the truth is important. It’s rather a gruesome game, really.*

*Ten years is burnout though, as the forensics - I think you interviewed George Karlsson? - will have told you. Your clients and their stories can seem more real than your own life. When your cases start invading your dreams, that’s when you have to take time out.*

*Yes, I’ve known casualties - nervous breakdowns, even a suicide. Colleague jumped off Beachy Head a few years ago. Of course he had other worries - marriage break up and so on. But still. I tell my students - go on holiday! So that’s what I’m doing. Harry - my husband - and I are going away. For six weeks! Longest holiday I’ve had since I was a student. And no - we’re not taking the children! My sister is coming to stay. She’s great with them - she doesn’t have any of her own - spoils them rotten. They’ll love it.*

*Bali actually - some friends, I don’t think you’ve met them, Vincent and Muriel? Oh yes, of course, you saw them that weekend. Well - they’re getting married there. They’re a lovely young couple, fresh and sort of, untouched. Unspoilt really - outside of all this sleaze and squalor. I hope they can stay that way - pure and romantically in love. Ha - what an idea! Well, for a while at least...*

*Anyway, Harry and I are going to their wedding and then we've got a little beach bungalow and we're just going to chill out together, afterwards. Get back in touch with our own romantic love. And purity."*

CATE HARRISON

*"I suppose I was drawn to make this film by stuff that happened in my own background. Stuff that happened to me. I was always a precocious child. I wanted to know things. Things I was told I was too young to know. But I'd go poking about, finding things out. That may have been my downfall.*

*My father died when I was little. My mum brought me up alone - which I loved, by the way - until she married again. Quite soon after she had another baby - my sister. That was okay, I liked having a baby 'toy', but I didn't get on with my stepfather. I suppose I saw him as an interloper - coming between my mother and me. As I got older I'd do things - unconsciously, I'm sure - well, I think, anyway - to make trouble between them. To drive a wedge, try to break them up. One of the things I did was to tease my stepfather. Sexually. I somehow knew he was open to it. I sensed it. He had a thing for young girls - perhaps that was why he'd gone for my mother in the first place. To start grooming me. He used to take me fishing. It was supposed to be our way of 'bonding' you might call it. Well, I hated fishing - killing the fish, at least - but I turned out to be rather good at it. He'd be very hard on me as a teacher, though. Nothing I did was ever good enough. It was like he was looking for an excuse to punish me, I think, for how I made him feel. He knew it was wrong. Wrong to want me. When I was about twelve, there was a nasty incident.*

*I'd been goading him during a fishing trip. It was warm and I took my tee-shirt off, so then I was down to my vest and shorts - my breasts were very small still, but they were there and I knew it. He was watching me. I could see out of the corner of my eye. I said I had to pee. I went into the bushes at the river edge and I pulled my shorts down. I was just pulling my school knickers down when he came in after me. He got hold of me and he pushed me down. He put his hand between my legs and felt me. He started to undo his trousers. The strange thing was I didn't stop him. I didn't shout or scream - I just let it happen. Almost as though I wanted it, expected it. He got his trousers down and he had his cock in his hand - he told me to touch it. Stroke it, he kept saying, stroke it - and I did. It was exciting, I remember that very clearly. In no time at all he came - it was all over me; my hands, my legs, my shorts and knickers. He cleaned me up as best he could with some paper napkins my mum had put in the*

*picnic basket. I still didn't say anything. I pulled up my clothes and then - how weird was this? - we carried on fishing.. We caught five trout and my mum cooked them for tea.*

*After that every time we went fishing the same thing happened. Soon he took to rubbing his cock against me, putting it between my legs or coming over my breasts. I liked it. That's the truth - I did like it. It was the most interesting thing happening in my life. I felt special. Loved, cherished. But after a while, he wanted to get inside me and I was scared. I wanted him to stop and that's when the problems started. He'd get angry if I said no or pushed him away. He'd be vile to me, say horrible things, hit me even. And he could still make me do it, anyway. He was that much stronger. He said if I told he'd kill me - I was sure he meant it.*

*That's when I ran away - to my Gran. The first few times they brought me back - but then I told my Gran what had happened and she warned them that if they didn't let me stay with her, she'd go to the police. I didn't see my mum for a long time after that - and him, I never saw again.*

*I was one of the lucky ones - I escaped. What if like Michele, I'd been in the Webb household? What if I hadn't had a home to run to and had become like one of the wandering lost girls in this story? I could so easily have ended up dead under someone's patio.*

*At the same time, I see what few choices women have. Did my mum know? She's always said not. When she found out - to be fair - she did get rid of him. I don't know if the verdict on Ruth Webb was right or wrong. But one thing she was - and is - definitely guilty of, is being a woman. That's enough to get you branded as a ball-breaker, bitch, witch, if you step out of line. That's what happened to Ruth - guilty or not of the crimes, she was branded. I wanted to use the example of her ordeal to try to expose some universal truths about women's experience. That's why I was drawn to tell this story.*

## Epilogue

**Beneath the shady palm trees, the hammock swayed gently in the warm breeze. The sand beneath it glistened white in the noon sun - here and there dotted with tiny silver shells. A few yards beyond, the sea, a brilliant lapis streaked with emerald and**

patched with sunbeam gold, lapped peacefully against the shore. What an idyll, thought Anna dreamily as she climbed into the hammock. Harry was stretched on a lounge close by soaking up rays. He had a greater tolerance for the sun than she did, but still she hoped he'd lathered himself well with cream. Judging by the sheen on his long brown body, naked save for a miniscule pair of trunks - he had. Their stay in this discreet resort on the gorgeous island of Bali had been magnificent so far. Everything was just as they had hoped and - in Anna's case - planned. Without the problems of everyday life, the stresses of career, home, finance - and indeed children, their enjoyment in each other had resurfaced. So had their sexual attraction - they'd made love more frequently with more care and on occasion more ferocity, than they had for years. Anna had recovered her deep affection for Harry - he turned her on and she loved his honest joy in life, his lack of complication.

Anna smiled - lunch soon and a couple of cocktails, then a long snooze, a swim, a walk along the beach to the friendly dinner restaurant... She idly turned a page of her book; she just had time to finish this chapter. She'd been a long time reading this book, a thriller - not usually her type of thing at all and bought mainly because it was about women deemed to be erring and had a 'creative re-construction' of the Salem witch trials. She'd started it back when she was defending Ruth Webb - didn't know really, why she was continuing with it. She struggled to focus on a description of a woman being ducked, but it was all too improbable in this paradise. Slowly her eyes closed and in a few moments her hand dropped over the edge of the string hammock and the book - "Wytch Watch" - dropped to the sand, the hand-embroidered bookmark fluttering after it. Turning onto his side, Harry smiled as he saw that the regular rise and fall of Anna's bikini-clad breast revealed she was deep in slumber. It was good to see her so relaxed, back to her old self almost. In their last two weeks of this special time he'd make sure she got there.

*Anna was dreaming. In her dream, she was floating on this calm Hockney-blue surface - the rippling water held her like friendly arms, supporting her weightless body and lulling her into sleep. It was a wonderful, gentle feeling, like bathing in warm milk - not that she'd ever done that. Still she understood how it might feel and it made her feel cherished.*

*Her eyes were closed so she didn't see the big wave approaching. Suddenly chaos overwhelmed her tranquillity. She was swirled under loud, grit-filled water. Panicked, she flailed wildly, gasping with shock. She tried to open her eyes but dense greyness was all she could see before water force pressed them shut. Her eyes, her nose, her mouth were full of the wet, salty darkness. She was dragged beneath the tumultuous ocean then tossed above it like a helpless strand of weed. Her arms and legs were flung about - thrust this way and that at the wave's monster volition. Each time she rose she tried to shout, but a hopeless croak was the only sound before her throat was closed by water. At last, exhausted, she gave up and let the water engulf her. Let them do their worst. She no longer had the will to resist. Guilty or not, she couldn't fight any more. As the same familiar dream possessed her and she was dragged down for the last time, one clear revelation fled through her mind. It was herself she had murdered.*

**THE END**