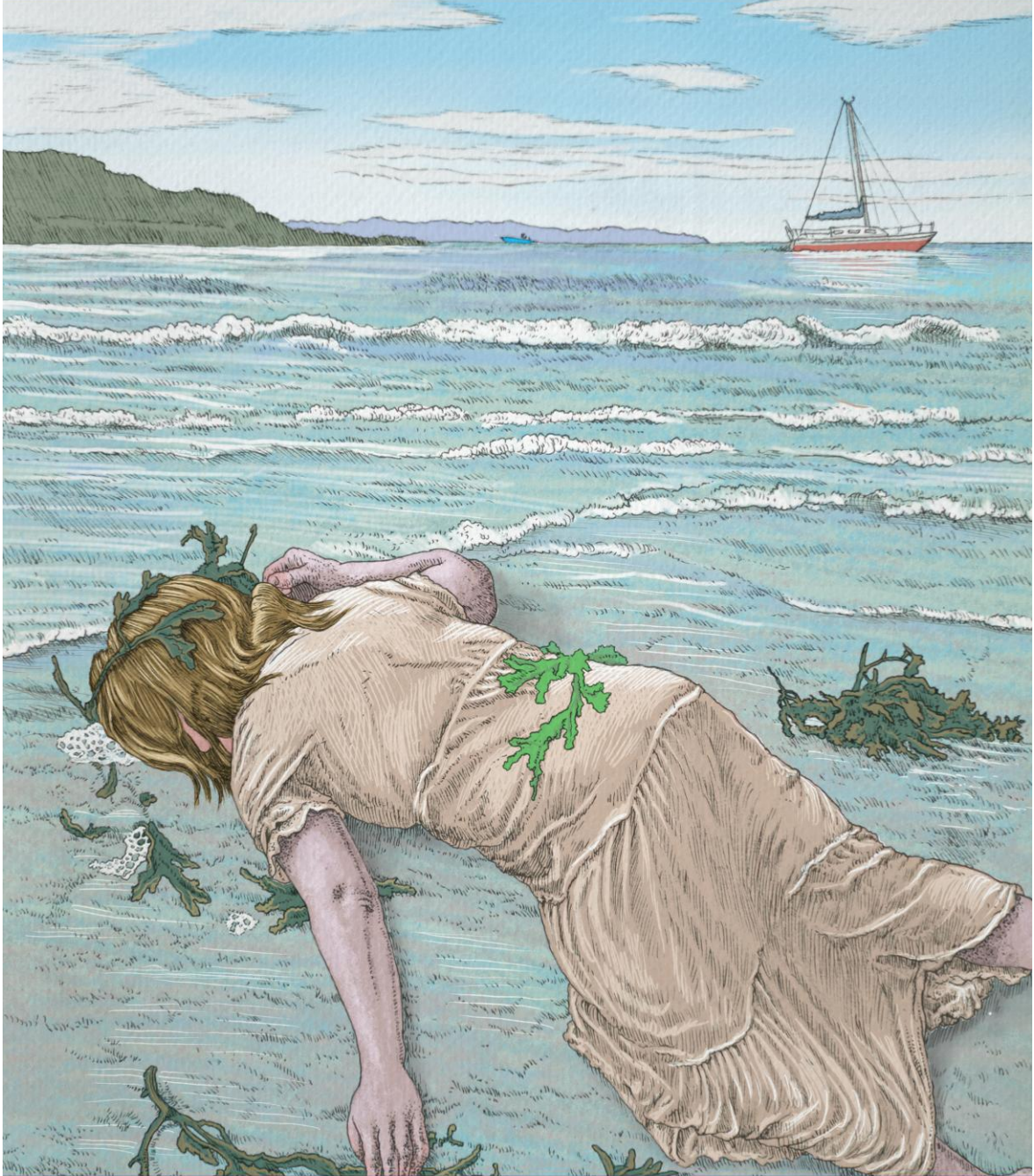


Painkiller



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text © Paul Sand 2025

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ONE Day 1 Saturday 24th July 2010

Murmuring that she was going for a walk, Sarah stumbled up a grassy dune, found a hollow in which to hide and plunged down onto the burning sand. Panic breathing took over.

Through strands of coarse sea grass, her eyes watched the hundreds of day-trippers and dinghies below, sailboats at anchor in the glittering bay, crowned by Sebastian's sleek white yacht, her prison for the past week.

A small blue motorboat scudded away towards Hayling. Beyond, lines of hills rippled in heat haze under a piercing blue sky. East Head, scene of her childhood summers. Sarah pressed her soft hot face into cold palms and shook.

At forty-two, she was face to face with failure. Having rebelled against her wealthy family in her teens, she'd dropped out of college, believing she had a calling to be an actress. Why actress? Her empathy for the human condition, her ability to look beneath the surface and see into the heart and soul of another person.

After twenty years of rep theatre and bit parts on TV, she had fallen out of the profession and, with the chance to have children almost gone, shackled up with Carl Logan, an ambitious young actor, who left her as soon as she became pregnant. What understanding of humans could she possibly have had?

On the day she miscarried, her brother Sebastian had contacted her for only the second time in twenty years, needing her help: Last family holiday, wife drinking, son openly defiant, daughter monosyllabic. He needed her to be there as a calming influence. They won't behave badly with you around, he'd said.

With nothing left in her life except debts, she had come to his aid. Now, kneeling head in hands, high above the others and out

of view, her anguish burst through. Thousands of evil thoughts glinted like fish eyes, truth devils mocking, feasting on her failure. Good judgement, the one thing she'd bet on, she did not possess. Her every decision had been wrong from the start.

With nothing to latch onto, no perspective to grasp, her mind cut loose. Her identity washed away, drifting unconscious in tides of continual flux, drawn to oblivion and freedom from thought...

Don't do that! snapped a woman behind her.

Sarah jerked her head round to see a small boy chucking sand in his sister's face and their mother whisking the girl up into her arm and tugging the boy on down the track.

There, on the other side of the dune, the beach was less crowded. Families clearing picnics away, dogs scampering between sandcastles and toddlers, a few swimmers braving the current.

She noticed a swimmer, further out than the rest, who seemed to be struggling, splashing and waving, calling and disappearing. Others began to run, wading out, diving in and swimming towards him.

Sarah knew all about the rip that side of East Head. Several times as a child she'd awoken to find that the anchor was loose and the boat flying out into the Channel. She remembered peering out of the cabin to see her father naked on deck, desperately trying to haul in the anchor whilst shouting instructions to mum in her nightie to get the engine into reverse.

Why had Sarah rebelled against all that? The rich boaty folk of south-east England, who waded in money on weekdays and splashed out on yachts at weekends. Brother Sebastian hadn't given it a second thought. Couldn't wait to be at the helm. And here he was, a generation on, with his fashion victim wife Yvonne,

stretched and botoxed within an inch of her life, fifty posing as twenty.

Sarah had tried to get close to Yvonne in the last week, had even thought she might confide, might tell her about the miscarriage, what a rat Carl turned out to be, her total failure as an actress, everything. But Yvonne only applied makeup, patted her frozen blond hair, rearranged her clothing and posed in elegant settings whilst drinking continuously. That and disappearing for days on end. And husband and wife not speaking. And Sebastian's business partner whisking him off into corners with laptops. And all the rest of the stiff upper lip brigade, hoisting the halyard while hiding behind their social masks.

It was a nightmare, but she must get back, fulfil her position as newly rediscovered maiden aunt, fulfil her promise to Sebastian to provide a quiet calming influence on this last family holiday, a family she scarcely knew.

The light was fading. What time was it? Sarah hauled herself up, brushed sand from her sundress and tried to replace her social mask. She meant to return to the family, but her legs walked her down the other side, where a crowd was forming around a group of incoming swimmers.

People were running to and fro in a kind of frenzy, mums grabbing children and pulling them away, fat dads on phones making vital calls. Without a thought, Sarah threaded her way down the dune and through the crowd.

In the centre of the mayhem, she found a man being tended. He was sobbing and shaking. She guessed he was the struggling swimmer.

She heard someone counting and turned to see two hands pushing down hard on a woman's chest. The woman did not

respond. Sarah became a part of the crowd, watching a human life in the balance. Each time the palms went down, everyone seemed to hold their breath. And between each attempt, the counting like a prayer.

The woman herself, middle-aged, slight, almost grey against the sand, seemed unharmed, the shadow of a fawn which might awake and skip away. Her clothing, twisted, stained by sediment and seaweed, was identical to that worn by her sister-in-law Yvonne. Sarah stared at the face: Without makeup or hairdo, without a drink in her hand, it was still Yvonne.

At the moment of recognition, Sarah ceased to be able to function.

A small plastic beaker was thrust to her lips. Told to sip, Sarah sipped. Thermos tea and sickly sweet. Beside her, a thud and Charlie Kipper's bristly face brushed against her cheek as he hissed in her ear.

We're not going to say anything about Yvonne's behaviour.

Seeing the blank look on her face, he was torn between spelling it out for the woman and the need to make haste.

About her going off, and all that, he whispered. Don't want to cause any unnecessary upset. Get this over with, eh? Anyway. Got to go.

He sprang up, gave a brusque little nod and was off along the shadowy beachhead.

Would you like a refill dear? asked a jolly moonfaced lady, reaching for the beaker.

Sarah handed it back. She didn't want any tea but couldn't speak. She was lying on someone's recliner, a towel draped over her. It was getting dark. She was at East Head. What had Charlie

said? Not to mention anything about Yvonne. The name triggered the memory.

Is she dead?

You'll be alright dear, here's your tea.

But is she alive?

The police will be along in a minute. I'm sure they'll explain everything.

Sarah saw the helpless look in the lady's eye and knew the answer at once. She sat up. Tea went everywhere. She swung her leg over the recliner and walked away as fast as she could, up the sand bank, to where she'd hid in the hot afternoon.

Sanctuary. A herringbone sky lit by the setting sun. Puddles of light across wetlands and reed beds. Paling fences in silhouette. Gulls wheeling and calling. Sebastian's yacht glowing pink in the sunset and two figures aboard, scuttling about, chucking things into the rib.

She recognised the wiry frame of Charlie Kipper as he swung down. The other man lowered himself gingerly. She heard the engine start, saw it lurch forward and swoop round to the sheltered side.

Charlie leapt out. The other man slipped and fell. As he picked himself up and stumbled out of the shallows, she recognised her brother's business partner Graham. He'll be spitting nails, she thought. The suit will be ruined. Sure enough, he stood brushing himself down while Charlie hauled the rib up the beach.

When Graham grabbed a suitcase and staggered off towards the car park, Charlie, laden with bags till he looked like Quasimodo, picked his way across the shingle and pebble spit just beneath her.

A motor launch roared in on the seaward side. A jeep was trundling along from the far end of the long beach. Emergency teams converged upon the scene of the tragedy. Police with megaphones, paramedics, coastguards, flashlight beams crisscrossing between dark huddled groups. An anthill in turmoil.

A helicopter thundered towards them, the sound of its rotating blades like an endless torrent of bullets. A floodlight lit up the ghostly yacht. A launch cruised over to the vessel and officials boarded.

On the anthill, pockets of people were being questioned. Sebastian and his adolescent children must be among them. She'd be questioned too, if they found her. What was she going to do?

From the ridge, cold and only half awake, Sarah viewed the scene as a symptom of her own nightmare. How could this be happening? She was the one whose life was over.

Sixteen-year-old Anne sat in the back of the police car. She was silent and would remain silent. Next to her was mad Aunt Sarah. Another alien.

Policeman driving, policewoman beside him. Gliding through the village of West Wittering, past drinkers crowded around a tavern enjoying another jolly Saturday night.

One of them winked at Anne as they passed. Sarah noticed. She glanced at Anne, blond like her parents and, at sixteen, as withdrawn as her mother, always quiet, always poised. Sarah put her hand on her niece's shoulder. Anne flinched and pulled away.

Alright back there? asked the policeman and, getting no reply, added: Not long now.

A florescent tube lit the stale deodorised room in which Sarah was questioned.

Did anyone return to your brother's yacht after you'd been ferried ashore?

You mean before what happened?

Yes.

Not that I know of.

Who was with you? Can you remember?

All of us. We were all together.

At what time did your brother's business partner arrive?

She tried to explain that she'd been out of contact with her brother for decades. She didn't know these people. She didn't understand what was happening. The policewoman was sympathetic, but they did need to build up a picture of what had happened, didn't they? Sarah nodded.

Now, how would you describe the relationship between your brother Sebastian and, er... the policewoman consulted her notes ...Yvonne?

Sarah closed her eyes and began to shake. She didn't know if she was acting. She just had to be out of there.

A hotel room and solitude. As she closed the door, her hands formed claws each side of her face and hovered there trembling like butterflies. Slowly, she forced her arms down to her sides and stood breathing deeply. After a while she walked to a chair and sat, as car headlights flickered at the window and time passed.

A gentle knock at the door, followed by a louder one. A third insistent knock. The handle turned. Michael's face peered in. Seeing his aunt sitting in the shadows, he closed the door behind

him and switched on the light. At first the eighteen-year-old sat opposite her on the end of the bed. Then, abruptly, he began pacing. Finally he turned to her.

I hardly know you, he said, his voice cracking. What was Dad like? When you were young. When you were children together. Did you know he was a monster? Did you know even then?

Swiftly, Sarah took the strapping boy by his arm, sat him back down on the end of the bed, perched beside him and took his hand in hers. Unlike his sister, Michael did not pull away. When he began to talk, she listened and, despite his accusations, didn't interrupt. Only when he'd talked himself out, did Sarah explain.

Your father couldn't have been responsible, Michael. He was on the beach, preparing the barbecue. You were helping him, remember?

Michael had helped for about ten minutes until stomping off after another set-to with his dad. An intense boy at the best of times.

Mum would never go near the side of the boat. Not even when she was sober. She didn't swim.

We were all ashore, darling, Sarah cooed.

Each time she tried to quell the flames tormenting the boy, they'd flare up somewhere else.

What about before, when she disappeared after the pony trek? Three nights! And why did Charlie say not to mention it?

Sarah hesitated. She remembered Charlie Kipper crouching beside her and saying just that. It was odd. Noticing her hesitation, Michael pressed what he thought was his advantage.

It's a conspiracy!

Sarah shook her head. She felt suddenly drained.

While your mum was away, we were all together, she offered.

Dad's business partner wasn't. They could've been in it together. That Graham got to spend more time with Dad than we ever did.

Sarah felt this was nearer to the heart of things for Michael, but she could hardly keep her eyes open.

Michael, listen. Let's talk tomorrow. We'll think more clearly after we've had some...

No! They're saying it was an accident. It couldn't have been an accident. What if she knew something and was threatening to tell? He could've spiked her drink or left something she'd see, something so awful she'd kill herself. Anything could've happened. What about when he went off to meet Graham? He could've swam over and done her in.

The words made Sarah laugh, an involuntary cackle which enraged the boy. He marched to the door and flung it open. She caught him by the arm.

Michael, please...

No. What if that was his plan all along? Kill Mum and have everyone there to prove it was an accident, even mad Aunt Sarah!

Glaring at her, he noticed the impact of his words and was both horrified and exultant.

Anything could've happened. Just don't tell me it was an accident. I know my Mum.

Michael shot off down the corridor. Sarah waited for a while then quietly closed the door, locked it, switched off the light and fell onto the bed.

She was the young girl running through opulent gardens, having burned her birth certificate, having told her parents she wished she'd never been born. She was the eager student realising that

her psychology course was more about pseudo-science than people and discovering that acting taught her more. She was the actress clawing her way from student performances to fringe productions. She was the woman in her thirties who suddenly wanted children, her conflict between career and kids personified by soft Peter who, when she accepted a season at a northern rep, could no longer afford the emotional expenditure and bid her farewell. She was the forty-year-old going to her agent to demand better parts, only to find that her agent intended to drop her, and then her begging... She was the pregnant woman just weeks ago, dumped by beautiful Carl and miscarrying and knowing it was her last chance gone. And days and nights plotting revenge and murder.

The thought stopped her. She had plotted murder. Knives, guns, it didn't matter. Anything to kill that bastard who'd killed her baby. She couldn't have done it though. Not calculating enough. But Sebastian is.

She opened her eyes wide in the dark. Is he?

Faces are soul maps, she thought. Easy to understand. All you have to do is watch. Their very attempts to disguise who they are, reveal who they are.

Sarah tried to look into Sebastian's face, but it wouldn't appear for her. Mad Aunt Sarah, blind as a bat. Perhaps she'd had some insight when young. But time passes and your own wants and needs warp the image. She had needed Carl, needed the baby so much, she was already drowning before she met him. That's why she couldn't see who he was and what was bound to happen. The image of Yvonne's dead face appeared and Sarah dived in.

TWO Day 2 Sunday 25th July 2010

At first light she awoke, grabbed her bag, tiptoed down the creaky stairs and out of the hotel. Plump little figure marching up the long flat road. Miles to walk. But Sarah was never so motivated as when she was running away. Get to the Grange, pick up her car. No other thoughts allowed.

She couldn't stay and deal with this crisis, not on top of her own. No one could ask that of her. She was running on empty as it was, it would send her over the edge! All that unhappiness. Children losing their mother. Accusations of murder, suicide... It was an accident, surely. Yvonne was pissed. She fell. The riptide carried her around the seaward side. They brought her in but couldn't save her.

Sarah's short legs pounded the tarmac. That's all there was to it. Natural for those involved to conjure up melodramas. Natural for police to investigate. But it was an accident. She knew Yvonne. She'd watched her. She was a drunk. Most unhappy woman she'd ever met.

Sarah came to a halt. Unhappy enough to kill herself? Stop it! Even if it was suicide, no one would ever know. Better for the kids if it wasn't. Anyway, not her business. Get back to her little Brighton flat, that was all...

Finches and blue tits chattered in hedgerows, splashed about bird baths on suburban lawns. Husbands washed and waxed their cars or set off to collect elderly relatives, or to supermarkets for newspapers or croissants and the makings of Sunday lunch. Cars passed towing caravans or small boats. Men and women appeared in their gardens, weeding, mowing, pruning or sawing wood for that DIY job they'd been putting off.

It was late morning by the time Sarah trudged up the gravel drive to the Grange. The vast rambling house, clad in ancient ivy and virginia creeper was where she'd been raised. Built by her great grandfather and extended by each succeeding generation, it was the family home.

For miles around there were other such houses, built by uncles and great uncles, brothers and nephews, all Merricks, builders of the empire. But Sarah zoned in on her own little red Smart Car. Just get in and escape. Its keys were already in her hand when a tall woman appeared around the side of the building.

Can I help you?

She spoke in a deep husky voice with a thick, east European accent and wore a shapeless brown dress bunched by a belt around her slender waist. Sarah was hot and anxious to be off.

I've come for my car, she said, over-enunciating.

The woman seemed unconvinced. She had a long sallow face and appeared to be looking down her long thin nose at the little fat English lady.

I'm Sarah. Sarah Merrick, she added, pulling rank if only to shorten this exchange.

Ah, the sister. So you were with them?

I'm sorry, I ...don't know your name.

The woman wiped her hand on her dress and held it out, forcing Sarah into a formal handshake.

My name is Mila. I keep house. Has Mrs Merrick returned?

Sarah felt her heart thump in her chest. ...Yvonne? Oh, so you know.

What I know?

That she was absent?

But she has returned?

...Yes.

Oh. I am glad.

Mila didn't look glad. She didn't look as if she could ever be glad. Sarah didn't want to answer any more questions but couldn't help asking: Was she here?

No. I never saw her. Couldn't be here. She is well?

Look I'm sorry, I've got to go.

Sarah almost fell into the car, turned the ignition and thankfully the engine roared into life. Mila knocked on the window.

Will the family come back today?

She seemed alarmed. Presumably she would have to get things ready.

I don't know. Please excuse me, I'm late...

The little red car shot off down the drive. Sarah, breathing deeply, gripped the wheel and concentrated on the road ahead. If Yvonne hadn't returned to the Grange, where had she stayed? She was absent for three nights.

They'd been pony trekking at a place called Haven Farm. Yvonne, Sebastian, Michael, Anne and herself. It was the one glorious moment they'd shared. A beautiful day when her brother's dysfunctional family had seemed at peace and Sarah had felt that things might improve, that the holiday might cast its spell.

She hadn't been on a horse for years. They gave her a docile old nag and she trotted along behind the others, taking a bridleway between fields of rape and barley. Anne was ahead of her, then Michael, then Sebastian. Yvonne, the most nervous, rode up front beside the trek guide, a monosyllabic man called Jacob, with a face like a furrowed field and bushy grey hair, who took her rein.

He added little by way of conversation but provided a sense of deep calm.

Described as an area of outstanding natural beauty, they clip-clopped through dense groves of ancient yew trees, past Viking burial mounds. One of those heady days in summer, rolling hills, heathland, grassland, scrub and forest, to the top of the South Downs and the breathtaking sea beyond. Dream time. Skylarks twittering madly overhead, views over the coastal plain to Chichester, along the south coast in the east and across the Solent to the Isle of Wight in the west.

Sarah had felt as if her heart would burst. Her life in ruins and yet this beauty. This paradise that was her home and heritage and which she'd abandoned to seek fame and fortune in the smoke, in the dark man-made warrens of windowless studios, theatres and dingy bed-sits. And she ached to end her life here, now, to ride forever along the crest of these glorious hills with the world all around her. And so, for a while, as they jogged along, the pain ebbed away and she lived in the moment, in the salt breeze and the birdsong.

When they stopped at some benches for a drink, she stood to one side, taking snapshots of the family. Anne sat with her father, neither speaking, looking out to sea. Yvonne and the trek leader at another table, also silent, also looking out to sea. Michael frolicked. He ran about, pulling up clumps of grass to feed the horses, who were having none of it, stroking their manes, posing for her pictures. At eighteen, he was far too tall and gangly for this behaviour. A man boy. She found herself admiring his energy, the freedom and vigour of his body, his youth, his beauty, until she had to look away.

Yvonne was the most transformed. The face, normally shut tight as a clam, opened. Her eyes shone, her complexion radiant, glowing. Sarah almost gasped. She'd never imagined that Yvonne might be beautiful.

That evening they went for a feast at the local hostelry. Not Yvonne. She remained on board. But Charlie came with them. Sebastian's business partner, Graham Fletcher, accompanied them as far as the pub but then left for London. They ate and drank. Charlie got riotously drunk and sat beside Sebastian, regaling the kids with tales of their daring escapades as if they were the Butch Cassidy and Sundance Kid of the high seas. All suitably censored for present company with many a nudge and a wink between. They seemed to have known each other a long time and there was a real trust between them. Michael was so excited to be drinking with the men that he started hugging everyone. Only Anne remained quiet, drawing strange designs on paper napkins. Sebastian enjoyed Charlie's stories and was the hero of many of them. At one point his beaming face looked straight at his sister. But as soon as Sarah caught his eye, he looked away. Could he not face her? Or did they share nothing? After twenty years, probably nothing. She was truly alone then.

On their return, Yvonne was absent. And that was the strange thing. No one said a word. Sebastian didn't seem to be alarmed. On the contrary, next morning he was wrapped up in his business work as usual, tapping away at his laptop. She wanted to ask if he knew where Yvonne might be. Later she did ask. He shrugged. Was she in the habit of going off? He said he'd called the house. They remained berthed at the local yacht club. Sarah played card games with Michael and Anne. Charlie Kipper buzzed about being cheery, rustling up beans on toast. On the second day Sarah tried

to insist that they inform the authorities. Charlie was adamant. Things would sort themselves out.

Sure enough, when they awoke on the third day, Yvonne had returned, was found asleep in the spare cabin, not a hair out of place. So skipper Charlie, on Sebastian's instructions, had upped anchor and set course for East Head. As they set sail, Yvonne appeared, immaculately dressed in an ivory silk blouse with lemon satin-weave pants, and perched at the bar, drink in hand.

But that was the day she died. And Charlie said not to mention her absence. Three nights she'd been away. Sarah had thought she must have gone home. But the housekeeper, Mila, said she hadn't been there. Where did she go? It didn't matter. Pointless now. She might have stayed with a friend or at a hotel. It didn't matter. No point pursuing it.

Sarah was lost. Where was the A27 to Brighton? She pulled over and switched on the sat nav. Intending to enter Marine Drive Brighton, she punched in Haven Farm Hants. From then on, she followed the machine's instructions, under the spell of the calm voice telling her what to do.

The sign, when she saw it, was lit up in sunlight: Haven Farm – Organic Produce – Farm Shop – Café – Pick Your Own Fruit – Pony Trekking – Pony Club. The purring sat nav voice announced You Have Arrived At Your Destination. She drove in.

Pulling up in the car park, she sat there dazzled by the number of people and vehicles. On Wednesday the whole place had been quiet, serene. A few hippy-looking farm hands going about their business. Sebastian having a word with the owner. What was her name? Danish woman. She'd never find her anyway. Not in this crowd. Mums and dads struggling towards their car boots with boxes of veg. The queue for the shop stretching halfway around

the car park. As she watched, hoards of Pony Club kids in their riding caps ran out to greet their parents. Children everywhere, jumping about and shrieking. Their joyful noise drew her out into the sunshine.

She leaned on the car roof. Even if she found the owner, what would she say? Rummaging about in her bag she pulled out her camera. There must be photos. Flicking through the small digital pictures, she came upon an image of Yvonne at the bar and another when they'd stopped on the Downs that day. Seeing Yvonne did something terrible to Sarah. All night she'd stared into that face until she had almost merged with a woman she hardly knew. She sensed that something was going on inside her, wanted it to stop but didn't know where the controls were. With the hot sun and noise all around her, she stepped away from the car and into the crowd.

The farm shop was decked with buckets of beans, broccoli, turnips and great globe artichokes. Baskets of lettuce hung around the door, cucumbers, tomatoes, strawberries. People were jostling, laughing and she wished that this joy would seep through her skin and heal her heart. She felt like the dark place inside a camera, where light enters only for a fraction of a second, producing a series of bright cold images of a warm world that can never be captured. Click. The fierce eyes and hooked nose of a man in a cagoule, pouring a sack of new potatoes into a bucket and shoppers immediately pouncing. Click. Blowsy fat lady pushing aside a small weasel man in the rush for spuds. Click. Forlorn dad following wife about, blond cherub on his shoulders, hanging on to his dad's thinning hair and laughing. Gorgeous little devil. Pain in the pit of her stomach.

Nudged along by the crowd, around the side of the shop, she came upon a paddock, a snorting pony being lovingly groomed by a girl with freckles and deep red hair. A medieval scene of country folk milling about in groups, discussing horses and harvests. A slight girl in jeans and a man's striped shirt stood in the centre of a training field, her gelding on a long leash circling.

Wandering around a great wooden barn, Sarah found a herb garden with fields beyond, where white rocks rose to the edge of a cliff and shone in the bronze sky. The barn housed the stables. Its doors were open and she could hear the horses whinnying and shuffling in their booths.

To the left of the doors were rough wooden steps. Down these steps came a pair of boots followed by dirty loose trousers, a khaki shirt and finally a head with bushy grey hair and beard whom she recognised as Jacob, their trek guide. He didn't notice her, but turned and walked towards a pub bench in the shade behind the café.

A large woman sat on the bench. She had a face like a baked apple and was dressed in rich autumnal colours. Sarah remembered her name, Dagmar, the owner. Jacob joined her. When he was seated, Dagmar placed her hands over Jacob's across the table. Something so tender. Click.

Sarah's feeling of empathy was followed by the sting of envy, bitterness that she had no companion. It made her back away. She shouldn't disturb them. She stood in the herb garden, hesitating. But the woman noticed her. Dagmar's big owl eyes, full of feeling, brought Sarah tripping forward, proffering her camera, like a courtier with a gift for the queen.

As she showed her Yvonne's picture and reminded her that they'd been on a trek last Wednesday, Dagmar stared at Sarah.

Sarah couldn't stop her nervous fluttering. Dagmar reached out and squeezed her hand.

Sit down dear, she said, in a deep calm voice.

Sarah did as she was told.

She heard Dagmar calling a young girl over.

Yes mum?

Lisa. Show this picture around to everyone. Ask if they've seen this lady since Wednesday.

Sarah was aware that she was being asked if it would be okay to borrow her camera, but couldn't reply. As Dagmar's hand squeezed hers, something within her fell to dust and a thought floated up: When you stop hoping, it gets better.

What is it my dear? asked Dagmar.

Sitting in the shade, with Dagmar's hand holding hers, a feeling of warm numbness took over and she heard her own voice speaking far away.

When I was a child, said the voice, I noticed that my parents were crumpled, thwarted people. They clung to what they had, leaning on me while reproaching each other. The stale smell in the house horrified me and I decided: Whatever happens, I won't be like them.

So I escaped. I set off full of energy and intent. Everything was possible and a little bird sang in my heart.

If someone lets you down, it doesn't matter. There'll be someone else. Pick yourself up. The little bird sings and you move on. If you fail at something, that's alright. Go at it another way. Still a magic to life, a path meant for you. And these small setbacks help. They clarify your thoughts. Here, is where you are. There, is where you want to be. Move on. The world is wide, your vision expansive.

You don't notice time closing in. Year by year you watch your friends drop away into private worlds of marriage, children and steady jobs. Some find success and wealth. Perhaps you feel a twinge of jealousy. But no, you tell yourself, don't feel that, it weakens you. Be glad for them.

But there are turning points along the way, points of no return. You don't notice at the time, but they resonate afterwards, with a dull pain. Don't go where you're bound to be hurt. Never try that again.

The great betrayals are the ones that strike when you're already down. You give your love when you've no love to spare. Hold me, you say, just for a moment, hold me. And they say yes when they mean no.

I told Carl I was pregnant. And he said how wonderful. Two days later a note on the kitchen table just said sorry. And I sat there and sat there, until the baby died in me.

And when the final love is betrayed, so is love itself. The love which gave you energy, purpose, turns on you and rips you apart. Until the little bird who always sang is silent. Crumpled, thwarted, you realise why your parents looked like that. Pummelled into submission. And all you want to do is crawl into some dark place and be allowed to exist, to breathe until you stop.

The voice stopped. Sarah blinked. Her camera was sitting on the table in front of her. Looking up she saw Jacob's eyes dripping tears, Dagmar's eyes full of pity, and realised with horror that she had just revealed her innermost self to strangers.

Grabbing the camera, she ran. Voices behind her made her run faster, bumping into people, until she reached her car.

Some miles down the road she pulled into a lay-by, saw a guesthouse ahead of her, marched up to the front door and rang

the bell. She heard somebody fumbling with locks and chains. When the door finally opened, she saw a small wizened man with pale blue eyes and insufficient detail in his face, who immediately explained that his wife was out.

I'm looking for my sister-in-law. She might have stayed here. Do you recognise her?

The man seemed unable to focus. Come in, come in, he said. I'm not allowed out on account of the agoraphobia. My wife will be back in a tick. We have vacancies. You can sign the register. My wife will be back in a tick.

He picked up a heavy book from an old sideboard in the hall, tottered back and thrust it into her hands. Sarah opened the book. The first thing she noticed was that people hardly ever stayed. There was an entry for the nights in question: Dr M & V Cardew. No single person. Spidery writing. An old doctor and his wife. Yvonne wouldn't stay here.

I'm sorry, she said, returning the book and backing away.

The wife'll only be a tick. Don't go. I'd never forgive myself. She'll be so angry. I'm always doing this. I put people off. It's on account of the agoraphobia. Do come in. She's only just down at her friend's.

But Sarah was off. She drove around, hour after hour, with no sense of direction. Each time she came upon a B & B, guesthouse or hotel, she went in and asked. Sometimes she rang and no one came to the door. Or if they did, the answer was no.

At a small guesthouse in Bedhampton, a lively Scottish lady with mucky playful kids told her that a woman had stayed on those dates. But she was nothing like the woman in the picture.

At a large county hotel, a whiskered gent behind the desk thought he recognised the face. The dates matched. Only the

name was different. Yvonne could've used another name. No, replied the gent, pompously. Guests are required to produce identification. Passport, credit card or driving license. Sarah pressed him further but he was unwilling to waste any more time.

As the light began to fade, she came upon a sign, A27 Worthing Brighton, turned onto the dual carriageway and put her foot down. Her speed increased. She didn't care. She swung into the outside lane to avoid a car. Lights flashed and she realised that she'd been caught by a speed camera. She lurched across the left-hand lane and squealed to a halt in a lay-by. She had no money to pay a fine. She had no money to pay her way. She had no money. She owed rent on her flat and knew the mess she'd left in her rush to get away. It was a place of despair, not a refuge. There was nothing to go back to.

Sarah sat there as twilight gave way to evening, plagued by thoughts that made no sense, images she couldn't place, other people's thoughts and feelings which had no home in her. Parades of hotel receptionists, voices explaining their agoraphobia, sounds of squealing children, abstracts ricocheting around a vacuum, as cars roared by and headlights flashed.

When memories of the previous evening returned, she became frightened.

Some time later, a hand reached out and turned on the ignition. Slowly, carefully, she manoeuvred the car onto the road and allowed the sat nav to guide her back to the hotel she'd left in the early morning.

Drawing up outside, she thought Sebastian might have let her room go. It never occurred to her that they wouldn't even be there. When the night porter told her that the family had checked

out, she looked at him blankly. Then she fished out her camera and showed him a photo of Yvonne.

Have you seen my sister-in-law? she asked.

When he said no, she turned and walked back to her car.

Charlie Kipper was just off to bed when he saw her pull up in the drive. He watched the headlights fade and waited. After some minutes he trudged out, opened the door, took her arm, guided her into the Grange and to bed.

THREE Day 3 Monday 26th July 2010

A gentle knocking at the door roused Sarah from her sleep. Charlie Kipper entered with a breakfast tray. First he rested it on a dresser while he cleared the bedside table, his every movement nimble and neat. He placed an old alarm clock on the mantelpiece opposite. He balanced the lamp on a wash stand in the corner. He was a wiry man, sprung like wire with hair like wire. When he set the tray beside her, his sun blasted face became a series of red, pink and yellow dots like a pointillist painting, with black and white stubble and small brown eyes almost disappearing in a sea of wrinkles. How old was Charlie? In his fifties? He could have been younger, or older. Aboard he'd been the cheery, tight-lipped nautical man. Now he seemed gentle, almost meek.

I've brought you some breakfast, he said.

Thank you. ...And thank you for last night.

He nodded. Your brother would like to see you.

Oh! Sarah flipped back the duvet.

No! he said, flushing even though she was fully dressed. When you're ready. There's no rush, have some breakfast.

Thank you Charlie.

I hope it's what you like.

His face broke into a shy smile, too emotional to release and he backed out of the room as quietly as he'd entered.

Sarah looked at the fancy gold tray. A boiled egg in an egg-cup with strips of buttered toast arranged on a white china plate. A half-grapefruit sprinkled with sugar in a blue Chinese bowl. An ornate pot of tea with a triangular yellow tea-cup on a brown saucer. Nothing matched. It was quite sweet really. Had Charlie fixed it? Or Mila, the housekeeper who'd accosted her the day before...

She fluffed up the pillows, brought the tray round in front of her and dunked toast into egg. Strange to be in her childhood home eating eggy soldiers. As if time had looped back and here she was again, without past or future, just breathing in the soft shadows of morning. This was not her real room. That was across the hall, by the back stairs leading to the little side attic where she had kept her secret things. This had always been the guest room. Different now. Used to be full of books.

A swift fluttered outside the window. There were always swifts in the eaves come summer. Raising a grapefruit segment to her lips, she drifted into a timeless state, home from school for the holidays and no work to be done.

When she had finished the grapefruit and swigged back the warm tea, it was time to see her brother. And she needed to see him, to touch base. Maybe there'd be a chance to walk in the garden and even the woodlands beyond. Maybe they could share a moment's grace.

Her bag was in the corner, but there was nothing in it she hadn't already worn. She felt dirty, smelly. Padding over to the

washstand, she turned on the tap, cupped her hands and splashed her face. Coming up, she caught her reflection in the mirror and gasped. She always imagined herself aged twenty, bright-eyed, sexy and clever. Recently, she'd taken to just looking away. Now she stared: She had never seen herself so old and blotchy, like a mouldy mushroom all podgy and grey. She eyed her bag. It would take more than makeup. What was the point? What did it matter what she looked like? It was just that she wanted her brother to think well of her. Ridiculous. He's just lost his wife. What am I thinking? – Thinking perhaps we can console each other. Give each other some strength. Yes. She pulled herself up, rolled her shoulders back, breathed in deeply, slapped her cheeks to give them some colour and set off down the corridor.

Descending the polished oak staircase, Sarah noticed that it had been carpeted in a vile lime-green, as if, one day, a river of sick had flowed down the stairs and filled up the beautiful reception hall floor. Its panelled ceiling and stained glass windows remained, but the rich Victorian wallpaper had been replaced by a vacuum of beige emulsion. She shouldn't feel snobbish, it wasn't her house. But who was responsible?

The dining room doors were open. She heard tapping sounds within. Hovering in the doorway, she watched Charlie and Sebastian. Charlie was tidying papers. Sebastian sat at their father's desk, tapping keys on his laptop. His fair hair was receding. His handsome face had weathered. He sat very upright, as self-contained as ever. Always something delicate about Sebastian, almost birdlike. Some people found him cold, but Sarah knew that he, like her, burned with an intensity born of rage against their awful parents. She hoped the fire was still alive in him at least.

Charlie noticed her and waved her in. Seb, it's Sarah.

Oh. Oh yes. He turned his clear blue eyes upon his sister and said nothing.

Hello Sebastian. How are you?

Oh. Fine. Yes.

Thank you for letting me stay.

He nodded by way of appreciation.

Charlie nudged him. That's what you wanted to talk to your sister about, isn't it?

Oh, oh yes. The thing is, Sarah, I was just wondering if you'd care to stay here for a bit. Just while all this is going on. I'm sure the children would appreciate it. A woman's touch.

Charlie nodded. Both men waited.

Sarah hesitated. She was very relieved. She couldn't face Brighton and yet there were bills and rent unpaid.

Thank you Sebastian. I'd love to stay.

Oh. Super. Well that's that. Good.

There's just one thing. I have a problem Sebastian.

Oh?

It's just that I have this little rented flat and well, things haven't been good and I'm in a bit of debt.

Oh, is that all?

I've got to sort it out somehow. I can't just pretend.

No problem. We'll sort that out for you. Just give Charlie the details, okay?

The relief she felt... Gratitude welled up. She wanted to kiss him or hold his hand and sit quietly with him. But Sebastian was tapping away on his laptop again, Charlie busying himself with papers. She was dismissed.

Finding herself back in the reception hall, Sarah felt light-headed, as if she might float right up through the stairwell. What was she supposed to do? Be a support to the children. But where were they? And she couldn't very well just barge in, wherever they were. She decided to collect her breakfast tray and take it down to the kitchen, to the housekeeper. Mila would fill her in and tell her where everyone was.

There are beautiful tiles beneath this carpet, she thought. Who would cover them in this slime? It must be Yvonne. She would be the interior designer. The house had been Yvonned. Sarah shuddered. Odd to be in a house decorated by someone who has just died. The place so quiet, everywhere carpeted, every step silent.

At the top of the stairs, a door opened. Sarah concealed her surprise. Michael drew her in. She stood breathless as her lanky blond nephew closed the door. This had been Sebastian's room, now it was Michael's. It too had been neutralised. In lemon. Perhaps citrus colours were supposed to suggest freshness. Long lemon curtains hung each side of the high windows overlooking the drive, lemon carpet, lemon walls. It was like being in a spleen. Furthermore there was an almost total lack of furniture: One single bed, one swivel chair, a bureau with a PC and various other black boxes with buttons and blinking LEDs. A line of empty Perrier bottles lined the mantelpiece. In the fire grate one large plastic tub advertising high protein whey supplement. A poster of two scantily-clad girls kissing. Another quoting Martin Luther King's I Have A Dream speech.

Michael had returned to his PC and sat drumming at the keyboard. Was this some sort of man thing? To invite you in and then sit at a wall of electronic gismos ignoring you?

The police were here this morning, said Michael, still facing the screen.

Oh.

Yes. They came for Mum's documents. I had to go and fetch them.

Sarah wondered why Sebastian had not fetched them, but said nothing.

Everything's in Mum's name.

Oh.

She's got life assurance, everything. Pensions, investments, share certificates, bank accounts. Loads of money. And nothing, not even the Grange, in Dad's name.

Sarah took this in. Michael pounded his keyboard with the virtuosity of a concert pianist and said nothing more. Was this it? Was she dismissed? Lines of indecipherable letters and numbers flew across the screen.

Why was it you who went for the documents? she asked.

I knew where they'd be.

There was an intensity to Michael which she couldn't permeate. The family trait. Good Lord his mother had just died. Better to be in a rage than subdued. On the other hand, if she was to offer support, she had better try to understand.

But your father, was he there? I mean...

Dad? Michael swung round. Dad wouldn't know where anything was. He hasn't been here for years.

Sarah felt queasy. She looked at the blond boy with piercing blue eyes. For a moment he returned her gaze.

Not since I was five, he said and, gripped with emotion, swung back to his computer.

Her immediate impulse was to fling her arms around the boy and hold him. But he was eighteen, she hardly knew him and what he'd said was shocking. If Sebastian had lived separately from his wife for the past thirteen years, why had he called Sarah and invited her on a last family holiday? If they'd been separated for thirteen years, what was the holiday about? Perhaps Michael was dramatising things.

You're saying your parents were separated.

Michael didn't respond.

That would explain why the house and everything is in her name, I suppose.

Still no response.

He must have been trying to get back together with your mother. The holiday I mean. He wanted to make a go of it. He told me that, if I was on board, there'd be less friction. He wanted it to go well, Michael...

Michael twisted round and locked his eyes into hers.

What if he was broke?

Sarah couldn't take the idea in, couldn't work out quickly enough what it meant. Michael waited for a moment, then leapt up and began pacing. The emotional whirlwind he created simply shut her down. She couldn't function, felt as if she was stuck in a cage with a lion.

Stop it! she yelled.

He stopped prowling and stared at her.

I don't understand, she said in a tiny voice. Help me to understand. Speak gently, Michael. I feel as if I'm on the edge. Treat me like a child.

He thought for a moment, then spoke in a soft voice, pausing between each statement.

If Dad was broke. If Dad had to get back with Mum. If she didn't want to. If she refused. If he was desperate.

Yes? If?

Sarah did understand. It was a motive for murder. At least in the eyes of a boy who felt rejected by his father. But it made no sense to her. Not that she was in any fit state to say why. Michael was staring at her and she realised that he'd guessed what she'd been thinking.

Okay, she said. So you think...

I think I want to find out.

Okay. How?

Dad has a small case which contains a laptop and various papers. He keeps it about him at all times.

Sarah had the feeling that Michael was about to ask her to steal her brother's things.

I couldn't do that.

Not you.

I couldn't be involved in that. He's my brother, Michael. Besides, he does have money. He's just offered to lend me enough to pay my rent. And he's asked me to stay and help. Is it possible that he cares, but just doesn't know how to show it? Why not give him the benefit of the doubt? It could be simpler than you imagine. Your mother did drink a lot. I don't mean any disrespect.

Sarah looked down at the lemon carpet and waited. When she finally glanced up, Michael was studying her.

It is simple, he told her. If Dad is innocent, you could help me prove it. If he's not, your loyalty is misplaced.

She saw the logic. She could only match it with honesty.

A lot of things have happened in my life, Michael, which I am having to deal with. I'm not on firm enough ground inside myself to start conspiring against others.

Michael fired back. Why are adults always in such a mess, they can never help anyone else? Wandering around with Do Not Disturb signs on their miserable faces. What about the truth for a change? If Dad has his own wealth, good, I'm wrong. If he's broke – well, what would you think?

I'd think I can't be part of stealing my brother's personal papers.

Michael shrugged and turned away. Sarah, hurt and angry, grabbed him by the arm.

Listen Michael. When things go wrong, people blame each other. I've a psychology degree. I'm an actress. I've studied human nature for over twenty years. When people can't face up to things, they attack each other, hurt each other. It's what people do. Don't do it Michael. Wait. Support your family.

He tried to move away. She increased her grip.

Listen to me!

It's you who aren't listening, Aunt Sarah.

He twisted free of her grasp and returned to his computer.

I do want to help, Michael.

He ignored her.

What does your sister think?

Anne doesn't think. She daren't think. And nor do you. You know so much about human nature, you can't even afford to pay your own rent.

Stung, Sarah stood there as Michael prodded away at the keyboard. Then she turned and left the room. All she could think was to get back to her own room and recover. In her upset, she

forgot that she was staying in the spare room and instead, flung open the door to her childhood bedroom.

She realised her mistake immediately. She had never seen such a mess. Piles of dirty underwear mixed with ancient unwashed dishes and cups growing mould. A large holdall spewed forth more dirty clothes. Art paper was strewn across the floor. A scattering of screwed-up paper and used tissues adorned everything else. In the middle of it, a sixteen-year-old girl sprawled on the floor, pen in one hand, spliff in the other. Anne was as surprised as Sarah.

Oh, sorry... said Sarah.

In her rush to hide the spliff, Anne knocked over a jar of black ink, which formed a lake on the fawn carpet.

I'm sorry Anne. My mistake. This used to be my room. Let me help.

No! screamed Anne.

But Sarah had already grabbed a roll of loo paper and begun mopping up the ink. Struggling to get her artwork out of the way, Anne tripped over a glass of water, which soaked into the carpet, merging with the lake of ink.

Look what you've done! Anne shouted, bursting into tears. I mean what am I going to do?

Get a bowl of water, sponges, cloths, said Sarah sharply.

For the next fifteen minutes they worked in silence, soaking up the watery ink, dabbing bras, knickers, drying each dripping piece of paper. At the end, they surveyed the large blue-grey stain.

There must be some bleach. If we water it down carefully...

No, said Anne. Leave it. I don't care.

I'm sorry. This used to be my room.

You said.

I couldn't have a toke on that spliff, could I?

Anne looked at her aunt suspiciously.

...Never mind, said Sarah, retreating.

Yeah. Course you can.

The spliff had burned a little hole in the carpet. Anne picked it up, handed it to her aunt and searched around for a lighter. Sarah found it, half-hidden under some tights, lit the joint, inhaled and sat down on the bed. Anne cleared a space, away from the damp patch and resumed her drawing.

You won't say anything, will you?

About this? asked Sarah, passing her the joint.

You won't tell Dad.

Sarah shook her head.

Or Michael. Or anyone.

No. Course not.

Okay then.

What are you drawing?

Just stuff.

Can I watch?

Suit yourself.

Is it for school?

Anne shook her head. Sarah watched her niece drawing in pen and ink, occasionally taking a toke. It was mesmeric. Details filled themselves out into larger forms, faces, scenes, all from strange expressionist angles. She'd noticed Anne sketching on the holiday. Compulsive. When Anne realised she'd finished the joint, she looked for an ashtray. Sarah found one, removed a dirty pop sock and handed it to Anne.

You can roll one if you like.

Thanks.

The makings are somewhere about. Probably in that drawer.

There were many things in the drawer – old chocolates, jewellery, condoms thankfully unused – but no dope. Sarah glided about, looking for the stuff. Not finding it, she began to sort things into piles: Dirty clothes, clean clothes, wastepaper, crockery and so on. Under a sheaf of A3 ink drawings she found Anne's stash. But it was the drawings that grabbed her attention. They were like comics, with speech bubbles coming out of characters' mouths and narrative under or around the images. Leafing through, she realised they told a story.

A greedy fat man guzzled cakes, served by two very thin women. Speech bubble: More cakes woman! Another: But we'll have none ourselves! Over the page, the women slaved in the kitchen making more cakes. Speech bubbles: If we give him all the cakes, we'll starve! – What are we to do? And bubble from off: Where are my cakes? The dialogue was rudimentary but the drawings extraordinary, surreal, gothic, full of dark energy. Sarah studied page after page. The fat man's wife and her sister hatched a plan. They wouldn't beg for crumbs anymore. They would feed him all he desired. This is more like it! he announced, tucking into pastries dripping with cream, served by the skeletal sisters.

A whole page was devoted to the vast man, lying on a sagging couch, gorging himself, his face dripping with sweat, his body quivering like jelly. In the next image he wore an expression of surprise. In the next he gripped his chest. Then he fell, in a series of silhouettes diagonally down the page. A final drawing revealed the sisters sitting on his corpse guzzling happily. The narrative below, read: From now on, the food's all theirs and the greedy girls can't get enough of it.

As Sarah sat on the edge of the bed rolling a jay, she felt concerned for this girl, who spent her time stoned alone, drawing

these ghoulish picture stories. She felt she should discourage it, or at least draw her out of her shell. That is, unless this occupation somehow protected her. It was obvious from the sheaves of artwork spread about the room, that Anne hadn't just started this since her mother's death. And Anne herself betrayed no inner conflict. Fair hair, pretty face, cool blue eyes. Petite and utterly self-possessed. Dressed simply in shorts and T shirt, white young limbs curled about her work. No tension anywhere, except in her drawing, which was full of it. So what was going on in her mind? Sarah wanted to say snap out of it, communicate with me. But the talent, the skill and energy in the work... Anne was sixteen. It was impressive, if slightly unnerving.

What would you call these? she asked. Comics? Graphic novels? Illustrated fairy tales?

Anne shrugged and continued drawing.

Have you always drawn pictures?

Yeah.

And stories?

Yeah.

You must have been drawing for years to get this good. When did you start?

Sarah heard herself. She sounded like an interviewer on an arts programme. Perhaps that's why Anne didn't answer. Sarah picked up another sheaf and began to read. This story featured a young girl who lived with a handsome wizard and an old crone. It was a battle for the girl's soul. A battle of spells and counter spells, ending with an evil incantation which rebounded on the old crone and the young girl escaping as the house went up in flames. Heavy going, especially as Sarah was feeling quite stoned. Nothing seemed to affect Anne's concentration, outlining, shading,

cross-hatching, image after image popping out of the page, as she lay on the floor, immune to the chaos around her.

There's a housekeeper called Mila. I met her briefly yesterday. But I haven't seen her today.

Dad gave her time off.

Oh, is she local?

She'll be in the annex.

Is she nice?

Anne shrugged.

Do you always spend your time alone like this?

Anne didn't reply.

You don't fancy a walk, do you? Clear our heads?

No reply. It was hard to work out if Anne was even hearing her. Standing up, Sarah got a head-rush.

I think I better go and lie down.

Anne said nothing as her aunt left the room.

FOUR Day 3 continued Monday 26th July 2010

Entering the guest room, she saw her breakfast tray and padded down to the kitchen with it. No one about. The whole kitchen area had been gutted and refitted with a showroom's worth of elegant top-of-the-range white goods. The door at the end, which connected to the annex, was locked. Sarah knocked but there was no reply.

It was baking hot in the garden, as she walked round and rang the annex bell. Peering in at the windows, there was no sign of anyone. She had thought that getting out might revive her, but felt stoned and still exhausted from the previous day.

Having wandered around the building to no avail, she made her way back in. Why did no one speak to anyone in this house? There was Sebastian, monosyllabic at best. Charlie hovering silently behind him. Anne in her room, Michael in his. And now Sarah in the room allotted her. Closing the door, she lay down drowsy and let her mind float.

Michael suspected that his father had murdered his mother because he was broke. Ridiculous. On the other hand, Sebastian and Yvonne were separated. She hadn't known that. Michael had been five, he'd said. That would make Anne just three when her dad left. Thirteen years. And Yvonne had her own wealth. They must have settled. Okay.

So there had been a world financial crisis. It was possible that Sebastian had lost his money. If he'd lost his fortune and Yvonne wouldn't bail him out, might he get desperate? Desperate enough to do something desperate? If it were murder and Sebastian stood to gain, he'd be the prime suspect. There'd be motive. And if, as Michael maintained, Sarah had been co-opted to somehow legitimise the situation...

She began to sift through what she knew about her brother. He had become a millionaire in his twenties. She hadn't been around but she had been aware. That Hampshire Life article her mother had sent, which had galled her at the time. Heralding the return of the prodigal son, who'd made his mint in the City.

What type of partner would this dashing young Merrick desire? She'd have to look good on his arm, have to flatter his self-image, proclaim his status. Other men's eyes would turn. They would respect him for having such a pretty young wife. A trophy wife. Perhaps that was all he'd need. Eye candy. Yvonne certainly

fulfilled that requirement. She would have wanted more of course. What did Yvonne want?

This isn't a house burgeoning with the fruits of her imagination, nor a merry home ringing with children's laughter. No muddy footprints on these carpets. This is a charming old Victorian house which has received an anonymous facelift. Did he sail away and break her heart?

Sarah loved her brother but realised she knew next to nothing about him. There was a rumour that he had caused their father to be declared bankrupt during the recession of the late eighties. Certainly Lionel had died soon after. Sarah had been in London at the time, working in profit-share theatre and as out of touch as possible. She hadn't even attended the funeral...

She didn't know how much of this raking-through-the-past she could stomach. Didn't even know what she was looking for. As soon as you realise how little you know about those around you, you realise there's no way you can understand them.

You can't see what's burning inside. You only know what they do and say when you're with them. What they do the rest of the time is a mystery. And what they say provides no clue. People don't want to be understood. They're always deceiving each other, and intentionally so. They lie. In a way, it's their only freedom. She had thought she'd known Carl. But he lied.

Sarah felt she had never used her ability to deceive, except as an actress. Though it occurred to her that perhaps she lied to herself, without even knowing it.

What if Michael had killed his mother? What if anything? She'd seen Yvonne drunk all the time. Apparently she wouldn't go near the side of the boat. But it could happen. Much more likely. Terrible thing to happen. That's why everyone's alone in their

rooms. Anne drawing, Michael plotting. Sarah would have to help. Sebastian had asked for her help. How would she help?

She lay there suspended. And felt she wouldn't mind if her life were suspended indefinitely.

One minute it was late afternoon, the next, stars twinkled in a clear night sky. Sarah awoke believing that she was curled up with Carl and pregnant with his baby. Finding herself alone in the spare room of the Grange, she jumped from the bed as if from the jaws of hell and leant on the window sill, shaking.

Someone was crunching up the gravel drive. She peered out of the window. A shadow passed beneath her. She checked the clock. Just after midnight. Who could be visiting now, the police? She tiptoed along the corridor in search of something to reconnect her and, standing unseen at the top of the stairs, watched Sebastian answer the door and Graham step inside.

She'd last seen him at East Head, when he'd slipped, getting out of the rib and drenched his suit. This was doubtless another suit. A fine linen suit in midnight blue with matching neck scarf. A soft leather bag on his shoulder, matching briefcase tucked under his arm. As he paused beneath the hall chandelier, she noticed that his hair was dyed. He took care of his appearance, did Graham. She wanted to dislike him, but there was something sympathetic about this ageing lothario with the reassuring smile. She decided she'd come down and say hello.

Sebastian closed the front door and turned. Both men saw Sarah, nodded and retreated into the dining room. What was it with these tight little nautical nods?

Soft pulsing music emanated from Anne's room. Sarah wanted company but Anne would be drawing. And vengeful Michael would

coerce her into betraying her brother. Grieving children, angry adolescents. No contact there for a needy aunt.

Nobody about. Was she so weak, she'd just give up and return to her room? At the foot of the stairs she heard the sound of a TV in the lounge and opened the door.

Charlie jumped up from the sofa as if he'd been caught choking the python.

I was just watching the regatta from Hawaii. Tweeler and Dimble out in front, just overtook the Americans. – Can I get you anything?

There was a bar in the far corner. Charlie raced over and began to reel off the names of alcoholic beverages before Sarah could even think.

Water, she said.

Charlie looked aghast. His eyes searched in vain. All the drinks in inebriated heaven and no water.

Just a minute. He fled.

Sarah gazed around the once grand room, now drowned in beige and featuring the very latest in horrible furniture. A vast stretched TV screen flashed up images of glamorous vessels in a shimmering bay, close-ups of tanned faces, taut with excitement and ambition. It might as well have been transmitted from Mars.

Charlie returned with a bottle of Perrier and a selection of biscuits which he placed on a minimalist table beside her armchair. She poured some and drank. The water flushed through her body, opened her eyes and woke her up.

Oh by the way, said Charlie. Seb asked me to give you this.

The envelope was full of fifty-pound notes.

I can't take this. Sarah was stunned.

Like we arranged, he said, pouring himself a scotch.

Charlie's face was red and crumpled, with salt and pepper stubble and crinkly eyes not quite focused. Altogether a bit the worse for wear. Another isolated spirit fighting his own demons, she thought.

Cheers! he said. One smart military swig and the liquid was gone.

There followed an awkward moment while he tried and failed to think of something to say. Then his eyes flicked between her and the screen. She was depriving him of his yacht race.

So what's this race? she asked.

Ah! he said, facing the screen and beginning an enthusiastic if endless explanation.

You're a fine sailor yourself, she interrupted.

He chuckled, embarrassed but pleased. Been at it long enough!

All your life?

No. Wanted to, mind you. Always wanted to. No. That was Seb.

Really?

Yes. Your brother. He got me into it. And I'll tell you something. I'll never forget what he did for me. Never.

Prompted by her questions, Charlie opened up. He'd been a raver, a rebel in the late seventies. Had his own band, Charlie and the Kippers. Sarah found it funny. No, he said, we did okay. Had a contract, everything. He'd been an acolyte of punk impresario Malcolm McLaren and even played bongos on the Bow Wow Wow album. But with rock and roll came drugs and, as they took hold, so did Margaret Thatcher. He spat her name out as if she were a glob of phlegm. She'd ruined everything. Party over.

I was in this pub in the City with this geek who worked on the stock exchange. Derek, his name was. Been kipping on his floor. Suited him, cos I was supplying him with gear, coke mainly. That

was the drug of choice for all those yuppy types, flashing their squids and acting so clever.

Sarah noticed that, as Charlie got into his stride, his accent dropped. Something more colourful and cockney took over.

Anyhow, that was where I first met your brother. Brilliant he was. Networking like crazy. All eyes and ears, like a startled rabbit. That was before he'd made his fortune. But you could tell he was going to. He wasn't on anything. Stone cold sober. In two minutes, at our table, he found out everything about everyone. When he found out I was an ignoramus, I thought that was it. But he asked what I was doing next day. And next day I was working for him. Just like that. Not that Seb had any real dosh to invest. Not till he came into his trust fund. Well you'd know all about that.

Sarah didn't know. She had received no trust fund. Wouldn't have accepted it, had it been offered.

No, it was all a dry run, said Charlie. But it amazed me, what he knew. The money world was like one big ocean to Seb, and he knew where every business, every player was within that ocean. He could chart their course. Anyhow, I was shooting up by this time and one night I passed out. Must've OD-ed, you know – thought I hadn't had any and got the needle out again. But Seb found me. He got me to the hospital and saved my life. Yeah. That's your brother. And I owe him everything, whatever happens. Want the other half?

Charlie refilled his glass. Trouble is, he said, wagging a finger at Sarah, how do you keep someone off heroin? Ever tried?

Sarah shook her head.

Can't. Less you're Seb. Night and day! And I had the shakes. Seeing blue meanies everywhere. Cold turkey, they call it. You don't want to know. Nice lady like you. This! – He raised his glass

and sipped. – This is nothing. Took months to get back to anywhere like normal. And the more normal things got, the worse it felt. I didn't like normal. Normal was a brick wall.

Charlie sagged back into the sofa, closed his eyes and was silent.

How did Sebastian get you into sailing?

Charlie smiled, opened his eyes and said: Boat. – I always dreamt of boats when I was a kid. Seb said if I could stay off the drugs, he'd get me one. City was booming in those days and Seb with his trust fund made a killing. One day he took me down to the coast in this Merc he'd just got. Close your eyes, he said. And there it was: Thirty-three foot X-Yacht. State of the art. Most beautiful thing I ever laid eyes on.

That summer we sailed her across to France and down into the Med. Dunno how we did it. Didn't know fuck all about sailing. Hung out at Puerto Benuz, mingled with the rich. Got to like the lifestyle. Golden summer. Piano bars with slinky ladies, schmoozing and boozing with tax exiles all eager for a word with this young wiz kid. Never forget it. Golden summer...

How did Sebastian meet Yvonne?

Oh. Later. Later. He bought a house. Sunnydale. Near here. Moved back to his family. Dunno then. Never met Yvonne. Not then.

You didn't move in with him?

Me? Naah...

What happened to the yacht?

Gave her to me.

Sarah was startled. He gave you the yacht?

Yeah. Said she was mine, that was the deal. Greatest friend you could ever have.

What did you do with it, Charlie?

I sailed her across the Atlantic. Single-handed. I knew a bit by then. In the Caribbean I rented her out to tourists. Began a happy career as a beach bum.

Grinning, he sipped his drink, as if he were sat on a chill-out log on some glorious beach.

Charlie? At East Head the other night, when Yvonne was found, you said not to mention her having been away for three nights.

Yeah.

Why?

Accident. Got to be an accident. Seb wants her buried in the family plot. Can't if it's suicide.

Do you think it was suicide?

Charlie shrugged. There's the kiddies to think of. Can't upset the kiddies.

No of course not Charlie. But listen, I hadn't known that Yvonne and Sebastian were separated. Why did he leave her? And why was he planning to return now?

A look of panic filled Charlie's baggy eyes.

I couldn't answer for that, he mumbled.

What exactly is Sebastian's business?

Charlie poured another shot, swigged it back and sat motionless, staring into space.

Charlie?

Slowly, he began to slide off the sofa. Sarah grabbed his legs, managed to swing them round in time and stuff a cushion under his head.

Sweet dreams Charlie.

In the hall, she disturbed Michael, who was eavesdropping on his father and Graham in the dining room opposite.

He put his finger to his lips. Ssh...

Self-conscious about the envelope she was clutching, Sarah fled upstairs. Closing the door to her room, she hid it in her bag, feeling guilty, as if she'd accepted a bribe.

The room was hot, even with the window open. She couldn't bear to wake up again believing she was still with Carl. Trick of the mind, so subversive. Retracing her steps, she knocked on Anne's door.

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Sarah awoke on Anne's bed, staring up at the foliated coving which framed the high ceiling and feeling utterly safe. Drawn by sunlight pouring through the open bay window, she went over to the window seat and gazed out on the sweeping velvet lawns, winding stone paths and flower beds heaped with colour. This was her childhood paradise. Pale billowing yellow showers of lady's mantle, pink fragrant candytuft, piercing blue forget-me-nots and love-in-a-mist rising to hollyhocks, meadowsweet, all woven through with honeysuckle and climbing rose.

In the distance, granddad's wrought iron pergola, an art nouveau gem like a scene from Oscar Wilde or Chekhov. Far to the left, the great willow, concealing her mother Jane's precious Japanese garden. And the bridge over the stream leading to worlds beyond, open woodland, places to hide and just be. If you grow up in a place like this, she thought, the outside world is bound to come as a shock.

Turning back to face what had been her childhood room, she noticed that Anne had plastered every inch of wall space with

photos, cuttings, National Geographic spreads of rain forests, deserts, birds wheeling, earth from the sky, art reproductions of every age from Bruegel to Stan Lee, all higgledy-piggledy with her own strange claustrophobic visions.

Sarah was again struck by the disparity between the small delicate girl with clear blue eyes and this gigantic mess. Sarah herself had always kept the room spotless, anything secret hidden away in the attic, lest the terrifying Jane appear unannounced, to inspect.

Did Yvonne not care how her daughter kept her room? Or was this a rebellion on Anne's part? Revolt against the revolting beigeness of her mother's décor. There was something witchy in Anne's face, something of the pixie, like an old soul in a new body. And this was reflected in her work. Cruel lopsided faces, bulging torsos, skeletal frames. No pity for the human condition. How to square this with quiet Anne, pure to the point of invisible?

Sarah had noticed a pack of condoms in the drawer the day before. Did this mean that Anne was sexually active? She felt in the drawer for the packet and pulled out a small book. It was a diary. Page after page of quick, spidery handwriting. An inner voice warned: Never look in someone's diary. Put it down! But she found the first entry and began to read.

The door opened. Flinging the diary back, she stood with a cheesy grin as Michael looked in.

Oh, you're up. Good, he said, entering.

Once in, he stood uneasily, an etiolated adolescent with jeans halfway down his arse, gossamer bum-fluff on his chin and shuffling from side to side, as if he had something to say, but didn't know how to broach the subject.

Already in shock, having almost been caught reading Anne's diary, it suddenly occurred to Sarah that Michael may have been peeping at her through the keyhole.

I know you think I shouldn't be doing this, he began.

Doing what? she asked over-brightly.

Well, snooping, prying...

Oh? What have you discovered?

Well, among other things, I've seen Dad's bank statement. Last night, when he went to open the front door for Graham, I nipped in through the window. He's got almost no money Aunt Sarah. ...I know that doesn't prove anything and I know you think I've got it in for Dad. But it isn't like that. Honestly.

He gave her such a pleading look, as if laying himself bare.

I'm just worried, in case you get caught, she lied.

Oh don't worry about me Aunt Sarah, I know every creak of the floor. I used to be able to climb round this whole house, just using the creepers and balconies.

If that was supposed to reassure her, it failed.

There's something else, he admitted.

What? she asked, nervously.

You know I was listening at the door.

Were you?

You saw me. Last night.

Oh, then.

Anyway, I overheard Graham telling Dad that everything was safe in his car.

Oh good.

So you know about it?

Know about what?

Michael paced up and down through Anne's mess, a dark brooding look on his face, like Hamlet.

Well, whatever it is, he said, it's something that needs to be safe. And not safe in the house! – And not because I'd find it, or you. But if the police were investigating, ...if they searched the house...

Michael!

Alright, alright, but just suppose something did happen on the boat. I know we were all ashore, Aunt Sarah, but I was thinking...

Don't do that!

Don't think?

Don't call me Aunt Sarah. I feel old enough as it is.

You're not old, Aunt Sarah, I mean, Sarah...

Thank you. So what are you saying, Michael?

...I'm just saying that if something did happen, all it would take was somebody to nip over afterwards and hide the evidence. And someone did – because Charlie turned up with our bags, didn't he? Our bags weren't on the beach before. So someone must've gone over in the rib, before the police turned up. And I'll bet they didn't tell the police. I mean, the police are holding the yacht, aren't they? It's a crime scene.

It's not a crime scene Michael.

Well I'm sure the police would like to know that stuff was removed.

No. It was just our belongings. I know. I saw them Michael.

Who?

Graham and Charlie. Charlie came over with our bags and Graham went off with his.

With his what?

With his case.

Graham didn't have a case on board, Sarah. He'd just arrived.

Well I don't know, Michael. I haven't even woken up properly yet.

So where did Graham go with this case? Off towards the car park?

...In that direction...

So you're saying that, after Mum's body was found, Graham and Charlie took stuff off the boat and Graham took a case up to the car park? Is that it?

Sarah wandered over to the sunny window. She just wanted to look at the garden.

Did he? ...Come on Aunt Sarah!

Yes!

She turned to face him. He looked her in the eye.

And you think that's what's in the car? she asked.

He shrugged. Fancy a cup of tea?

Yes, she said.

They walked along the corridor.

Where did Anne sleep last night?

My room.

And you?

Yours.

Where are the others sleeping?

Charlie's in here, he said, opening the door to the small box room over the stairs.

All she saw was an unmade bed, an old cardboard suitcase with some rumpled clothes and a bible.

I've got to wash my clothes, she remembered.

This is Mum's room.

Sarah had no desire to enter but, as Michael flung the door open, she was sucked in, as if by a vacuum. A four-poster bed hovered in the shadows, shrouded in virgin-white drapes from ceiling to floor. A womb of white gossamer. Heavy white curtains crowded the high window and glowed with faint light from a world outside. A thick shag pile carpet, also white, gave Sarah the sensation of treading through clouds. This was obviously some kind of haven for Yvonne. Palace of the ice maiden, throne of the faery queen, fantasy in white, eternity. Here time stopped. Sarah could hardly breathe.

Michael flipped a switch and tiny recessed ceiling lights twinkled like the heavens and a dazzling dressing table, fit for a Hollywood star lit up like a fairground. Next, he swept back a long white curtain, revealing a wall-to-wall wardrobe, full of designer clothes and endless rows of elegant footwear.

Why was Michael showing her this? Because he wanted to remind her that Yvonne was real? Because he believed his mother had been... But there was no evidence, was there? And this room, this gilded cage... so oppressive.

She stepped to the window and drew back the curtains. The window itself wouldn't budge, so she stood, looking out through the glass at the radiant lawn, trying to overcome a terrible sense of futility.

Dad and Charlie are out chivvying authorities. They want this over and quick, said Michael, as if that were in itself suspicious.

Of course Sebastian would want this over, she thought. Wouldn't we all?

Acclimatising to the light and the heat coming off the window pane, she noticed Graham, sitting beneath the oak tree on the west side of the lawn. He was wearing the same blue linen suit

he'd arrived in the night before, except that he'd hung his jacket on the back of the chair. Was he writing something? He kept glancing up at the silver birch to his left. He was sketching.

Two people drawing at the Grange. Her parents would have been horrified. The bricks and mortar mentality of the Merrick clan wouldn't countenance artistic pursuits. Perhaps that was why she'd chosen acting. Perhaps that's why Anne took to drawing.

Sarah tried to picture the case she'd seen Graham carrying off towards the car park at East Head. She could picture him, sopping wet, struggling up the side of the dune. But it was too dark, too far away. She couldn't even work out what size it might have been.

Michael could be wrong. Graham could have left a case on board. He had been on holiday with them, until the night Yvonne disappeared. She stared at the man sketching in the garden.

Mum has a huge life assurance policy, you know.

Sorry Michael?

His hand grasped her arm and swung her round.

Why shouldn't we try to understand what's going on?

I'm an actress Michael, not a detective.

He thought for a moment.

Doesn't that mean you're trained to get inside other people's heads and understand why they do things?

Yes.

Well, do that then.

He stared at her until something in her eyes acquiesced.

Okay?

Okay, she said.

At least, this way I can bond with Michael, she thought, and fulfil Sebastian's request to provide a woman's touch.

They both stood, looking out at Graham.

Either he's interested in art, said Michael, or he's one hell of a poser.

Sarah giggled.

In the kitchen, Michael made tea. Sarah sat in a kind of limbo. She'd agreed to investigate other people, to get inside their heads and learn who they were. Did this include Michael himself? Anne, who seemed to exist in a dark fairytale of her own design? Sebastian, Graham, Charlie? How could she, when she couldn't even get inside her own head?

Bad feelings of betrayal vied with new feelings of purpose. She felt an affinity with Michael, as if he might be a strong spirit calling her back into the real world. But she would be bound by whatever she discovered and she couldn't get Yvonne's ivory tower out of her mind. The whole house oppressed her.

Michael reappeared with armfuls of washing and began to load the machine. Sarah sipped her tea, unable to focus, feeling distant, even from herself.

Dirty washing, Michael explained. I took the liberty of collecting yours.

Thanks.

As the washing machine began to whir, she suddenly needed to be out of the house.

Sarah?

I'm just going for a walk...

She almost raced onto the lawn. With the house no longer bearing down, space swallowed her up. She had no being, inside or out. There was just a whirl of colour and radiant heat, sucking the moisture from the earth and the air from her lungs.

She was heading for the shade of trees, when Graham waved her over. She'd forgotten about him and had an odd sensation, as if free will had left her and she was automatically bouncing from one predetermined moment to the next. And here was the next: Graham, his white linen shirt open at the neck, his bronzed fifty-something I'm-still-handsome face welcoming her.

What had been in the case he'd taken from the Princess? That was what Michael wanted to know. But she couldn't just ask him that.

Beautiful spot this, he beamed. May I get you a chair? They're just over here.

She saw three remaining wrought-iron chairs around a wrought-iron table beneath the old oak.

I notice you're sketching. Are you an artist? she asked, sitting on the chair provided.

Glass of wine? Only one glass I'm afraid.

He proffered a glass of sparkling white wine. A man who likes champagne for breakfast, she thought.

Maybe later, she said. So, are you an artist?

His face wrinkled into a disarming smile. I dabble, he admitted.

She glanced across at his drawing and was surprised to see a perfectly accurate representation of the silver birch, every shade and contour of its patchwork bark, branches and glittering leaves delineated in fine pencil.

That's amazing, she said. I took you for a businessman.

Ah! he said, still smiling. That too...

You dabble in both.

I've done all sorts, my dear. I've knocked about the world, as it were.

Sounds fascinating.

I've had my share of excitement, he said, almost lasciviously.

Sarah realised he was flirting. How could this immaculately-presented man-of-the-world be flirting with a dumpy depressed forty-two-year-old who hadn't washed or changed her clothes for days?

Excitement, she said. Yes. Most of us lead such dull lives. Our TV screens light up with adventurers, millionaires, but...

Darling I've known them all. From billionaires to beach bums, tax exiles to terrorists. One day I may write it all down. But for now, it's lovely here in the garden, don't you think? Why don't we just relax?

He raised his glass. – To a dull life!

Did he suspect that she was quizzing him? He was certainly changing the subject.

When did you meet my brother?

Your brother? 2004. Saved me from a spot of bother, I recall.

Really? What bother?

Let me see if I can draw a likeness of you. May I?

Placing a chair beneath the birch and guiding her onto it, he sat on the ground in front of her and began to draw.

The reason I asked you how you met Sebastian, she said, was because I've been out of touch. I too started out as an adventurer. In my teens I ached to be away from this beautiful place. Anywhere but here. So when I was eighteen, I left, and never came back. Not till now.

Yes, yes, how charming...

He wasn't listening. She felt he'd prefer it if she were silent. How could he draw her, if she kept moving?

That's why I want to know how you met Sebastian. To fill in the gaps. You see?

Hmm. Could you lift your head a little?

As she lifted her head, she caught sight of Michael tiptoeing out of the copse towards the chair behind Graham. He was after Graham's jacket. She glared at him.

Are you alright? asked Graham.

Michael was still hovering, unsure whether to chance it.

No! said Sarah, answering both men.

What is it? asked Graham.

Following her eye line, he turned but Michael was gone.

I just need to stop posing for a moment.

Of course. Would you like that glass of wine now?

Yes. Where did you say you met Sebastian?

I didn't say. He passed her the glass.

She didn't drink.

Glancing at the house, she saw movement behind the first-floor window of the annex. A woman's face appeared. Blond, fine-featured. Not the housekeeper. Sarah couldn't quite see. The face was obscured by sunshine bouncing off the window pane. But her first thought was that it was Yvonne. In shock she looked away, then looked straight back to check. Nothing there. A mirage, trick of the light.

You really want to know?

What?

Biarritz, he said. I was down at the harbour one evening, when Charlie and Sebastian rolled out of a bar. I'd seen them a couple of times before. As I watched them get into their tender and start the engine, gunshots rang out behind me.. Having reason to believe they might be aimed at me, I started to run. But at the water's edge, I was cut off. In a flash Sebastian swooped by and shouted jump. I jumped and we roared off across the bay.

Golly.

That's how we met.

Sarah thought Graham might have made it all up, especially as his hand was now around her waist.

You make my brother sound like a hero.

A hero, yes. Well he certainly has a very lovely sister...

Sarah squirmed out of his grasp.

Shall I pose for you again?

She sat coquettishly, with her wine glass raised.

That's lovely. Keep it like that.

Graham's talk and the face in the window, conjured up images of Yvonne alone in her white room, while the three men knocked about the world, hobnobbing with terrorists, gun runners, drug peddlers and engaging in lord knows what activities. Sat here, in this sun-blessed English garden, it all sounded far too dark and improbable.

Here! he said, passing her the sketchpad.

Sarah didn't know what to say. She saw nothing in the face he'd drawn to connect it with her own. She'd never looked like that, not even when she was eighteen. The draftsmanship was commendable but its vacant idealism was embarrassing.

The draftsmanship is amazing. It's perfect.

You think so?

He stepped too close and she didn't dare back away.

Yes, it's beautiful.

It's you who are beautiful, my dear.

She wanted to hit him. She wanted so much to be loved. It was an insult.

Anne's an artist too, she said, clutching at straws. Have you seen her work?

No, I'm afraid I...

Come on. I'll show you.

She grabbed his hand and led him into the house and up the stairs, talking all the while.

My parents hated all art. It serves no purpose, you see. They wouldn't have it in the house and yet now there are two of you working here. So gratifying. Of course Anne's work is very different. She really gets inside her subjects. I better knock.

Sarah knocked. There was no reply.

It is important to empathise with one's subject, he said, placing one hand on her cheek, to celebrate her face and her mind, and the other on her bum, to have a grope, while his handsome voice lulled her with more fine words. – When drawing a tree, one has to understand the treeness within. And when drawing a beautiful woman...

She knocked again, pounding on the door until it opened.

Oh thank goodness, said Sarah, barging in. I just want to show Graham your wonderful work. He's an artist too.

Anne was furious. It was a breach of confidence, a betrayal. But Sarah grabbed a sheaf of Anne's work and pushed it in front of Graham's face.

Very good, he said, viewing, with some alarm, the grotesquely fat man calling for more cakes. – You can always tell though, when an artist hasn't worked from real life. Subtle errors in the anatomy. Look here, my dear...

He sidled up to the scowling Anne and forced her to look at his sketch of Sarah.

What is it? she asked.

It's a sketch of your aunt.

Did you do it?

Yes, from life. Whereas, in your work... He pushed Anne's work under her face. ...You see this man lying on the couch. Now I know he's corpulent, but notice his left leg, there's something wrong in the angle and it's too big I think, almost cartoon-like.

Anne looked at him as if he was mad. But Sarah looked out of the window and saw Michael filching something from Graham's jacket. He's going to look in Graham's car, she thought.

Shit! she said.

You disagree? asked Graham.

No, said Sarah quickly. What you say is wonderful. It's very good advice, Anne. But look, Graham, these are stories. Sit beside me and I'll show you.

Graham was more than happy to sit on Anne's bed with Sarah and be shown. While Sarah diverted him with the wonders of Anne's fairytales, his arm searched out the wonders of Sarah.

Anne was disgusted. She was about to leave when she saw her aunt gesticulating: Don't go. Stay!

So she stayed. She sat on the floor, right in front of Graham and rolled a large spliff. Then she lit it, inhaled deeply and passed it to Graham.

What's this? he asked, sniffing it. Oh ganga. I'll pass. Last time I had ganga was in Morocco. They stole all my belongings. Wallet, everything.

Saying that, he patted his chest where the wallet had been, realised he didn't have his jacket and bounded over to the window. Sarah followed him.

The jacket was there, on the back of the chair, where he'd left it.

I'm just going to get my jacket, he said and left the room.

Sarah was about to follow. Anne stopped her.

That was horrible! she hissed. How dare you let that horrible reptile in here. And you letting him put his hands all over you. And why did you stop me from leaving? You some kind of fucking pervert?

Sarah pulled her over to the window. They watched Graham set out across the lawn. As he strode towards the oak, Michael appeared. He picked up the jacket and brought it over to Graham. They stood talking for a moment. When Michael walked on towards the house, Graham checked his jacket pockets and headed off, around the side of the annex.

Michael burst into the room. He was out of breath.

It was two streets away, he said. Almost didn't find it.

Are the keys back in his jacket?

He gave Sarah a wink and sprawled out on the bed.

I'll tell you. Anne, better shut the door.

Anne shut the door.

So what's going on? she asked, relighting her joint.

You still smoking that stuff?

Yeah. Want some?

Yeah, alright.

As Michael took a puff, Sarah noticed his hand was trembling.

You're shaking.

I am a bit frazzled actually. Couldn't find anything at first. No suitcase, nothing. Even looked in the engine. Then, under the spare wheel in the boot, there were all these packages wrapped in plastic. Documents, driving licenses, birth certificates, marriage certificates, passports. All in different names. And wherever there was a picture, it was a picture of Dad.

They sat in silence, taking it in. Anne found Graham's sketch of Sarah and sat peering at it.

To be honest, I didn't expect to find anything...

Michael's words hung in the air. Sarah didn't know what to think. To distract herself, she began gathering Anne's dirty washing.

Could be an architect, said Anne, softly. Or a forger.

Dad?

She means Graham, said Sarah.

Michael stood up. – Have either of you seen a leather briefcase? Graham arrived with one last night. I looked earlier, but... Hang on.

He ran out of the room. Anne held Graham's sketch at arm's length.

You want it?

Sarah shook her head. Anne tossed it across the room and resumed her drawing.

I've got your washing, said Sarah, on the way out.

Thanks.

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In the kitchen Sarah loaded the tumble drier with her and Michael's washed clothes. All her whites had a bluish tinge from his long ripped jeans. Kids! she thought affectionately. Who'd do the washing here normally? Mila?

The sparkling face in the annex window came to mind, just as Charlie entered with bags of groceries. He immediately splashed some oil into a large wok, flung it on the hob and began cracking eggs. Slices of bread went under the grill, groceries disappeared into appropriate cupboards. He pirouetted about the kitchen, as

he'd pirouetted about the yacht. Seeing the amazed look on her face, he pulled up short.

Seb is a bit upset, he explained. The authorities been giving him gyp. Fuming he is. Best get some food in him.

Flashing her a grin, he nipped back to turn toast and scramble eggs. Sarah loaded Anne's washing into the machine.

What are the authorities saying? she asked.

It's what they're not saying, I think. Like when they're going to release the Princess for one thing.

And the body?

He glanced at Sarah and nodded.

I suppose there are procedures, she said, trying to imagine. Do we know what the procedures are?

No idea. They probably don't know either. Little men with little power! he said, pouring fruit juice into little glasses and setting them on the table.

But what are they saying?

Charlie shrugged. I was doing the shopping.

Oh, so you weren't there.

He looked at her. Establish cause of death is what they say. But that doesn't explain why they're holding the Princess, does it?

He went back to buttering toast. – Lord knows what state she'll be in when we get her back!

Sebastian burst into the kitchen. Where the hell is Graham? he shouted, addressing no one in particular.

I think he popped out for a bit, said Sarah.

Sebastian stared at her, as if it were inconceivable.

With his blue nordic eyes popping out of his craggy nordic face, she could feel the rage coming off him. He was slightly scary. She thought she wouldn't like to be on the receiving end of his anger.

He was also wearing an immaculate black suit. She was about to compliment him on it, to soften his mood, when she realised it was a mourning suit and wondered if she should also be wearing black.

Popped out? What the hell's wrong with everyone?

Here, said Charlie, passing him a plate of scrambled eggs on toast. I was just telling Sarah about your tangle with the authorities.

Fucking bureaucrats, he snarled, spraying egg down his suit without the least inhibition. Little men with little power, shunting you from department to department like a fool.

Did they say anything about the Princess? Charlie asked, passing Sarah her scrambled eggs.

Sod the yacht, Charlie, I've got a funeral to arrange.

Yes of course Seb, sorry mate. Did they give you any idea?

I said half the property round here is owned by members of my family and unless they've got any evidence to support further investigation, they should despatch their responsibilities immediately or I'd be making a formal complaint. I mean, for decency's sake!

Sebastian flung his plate across the counter, just as Charlie sat down to eat.

Where did you say Graham was? he asked.

I don't know, Sebastian. We were in the garden earlier. He drew a sketch of me.

A sketch?

Yes, Graham's a fine artist, he...

Sebastian stormed out. Charlie pushed his untouched food aside.

Better check he's alright. You got everything you need?

Sarah nodded. Charlie left. She finished eating, cleared the dishes, checked the washing and walked into the garden.

The face in the annex window had probably been an illusion, but she hoped she might finally make contact with Mila. Someone nearer her own age, a woman and someone who'd know a hell of a lot about what went on in this house.

Sarah had never seen her brother so emotional. Not even as a child. Once he'd announced that he wouldn't return to boarding school. But when the time came and faced with their cold, unloving mother, he'd gone and without tears. It ran in the family: Never let others know what you're feeling. It's bad for business. Stiff upper lip. Until you don't do feelings anymore.

But he was feeling things now. And he was wearing a mourning suit. Was he in mourning? Or did he want it all over for other reasons? She couldn't bear to doubt her brother.

As she rounded the side of the annex, she saw Graham nipping up the front steps and into the Grange. A moment later she heard a ripping sound and looked up to see Michael clinging to a thick vine which was pulling away from the house. She stopped herself from crying out. There was nothing she could do if he fell. Somehow he swung himself across to the balcony and climbed over to safety.

The door of the annex opened. Two women stepped out, each carrying luggage. The housekeeper saw her, but ignored her. The second woman, who bore a striking resemblance to Yvonne, threw her a little self-effacing smile. Sarah walked over and picked up a large suitcase.

Let me help you.

No, ordered Mila in the low European voice Sarah remembered from Sunday. We can manage.

Sarah put the case down. Are you leaving?

Yes, I am leaving. I have no place for this family now.

She evidently felt badly treated.

That's such a pity, said Sarah. Especially at this time, when the children have lost their mother.

Why you not tell me? asked Mila accusingly.

Sarah looked at Mila's friend for clarification. The friend promptly smiled and held out a hand.

Hi. I'm Lucy.

Sarah introduced herself and shook Lucy's hand, before turning to the housekeeper.

What is it I haven't told you, Mila?

You come for your car. I ask you if all is well. Yes? You don't remember?

I remember.

So why you say nothing?

I'm sorry. I was too upset. I could hardly speak. Perhaps I thought it wasn't my place to tell you. But honestly I think I just had to get away. It is pretty awful isn't it.

Lucy seemed to respond to the feeling in Sarah's voice. Mila seemed immune, peering down at the soft little English woman.

Yes it is awful. And perhaps not so innocent.

I'm sorry?

Mila picked up her luggage and marched off towards a sleek Volvo in the drive. Sarah wanted to ask her what she meant, wanted to ask her a thousand questions. She turned to Lucy, who was struggling to lift a large valise.

Lucy? I need a contact number for Mila.

I don't think she's too keen...

I understand. But it's important. Would you help me?

I'll have a word.

Thanks.

Sarah picked up the valise and followed Lucy to the car. It was heavy and she had to keep putting it down. When she got to the drive, Mila wrenched it out of her hands and threw it in the boot.

You don't need my phone number, she said, slamming the boot.

I'm afraid I must insist, Sarah replied, deciding not to let it go.

You insist? Hah!

Mila got into the passenger seat. Sarah decided she'd stand in front of the car if need be.

So nice to have met you, said Lucy, grasping Sarah's hand and pushing a scrap of paper into it. That's my number, she whispered. I'll have a word with her. She's been very unhappy. ...Okay? You can call me...

Lucy got into the driver's seat and started the engine. As Sarah watched the plush Volvo disappear, Michael, having breezed out of the front door and come up behind her, spoke.

Hi.

Sarah jumped in the air with a shriek. Michael roared. He thought it was funny. Upset at not having found an ally in Mila and irked by her nephew acting his age, she walked back towards the garden. Michael followed at her heels.

Sorry, he said.

And no more of your swashbuckling Tarzan-style vine-leaping either.

You saw me! he said, delighted.

The lawn spread out before her. Smells of grass, lavender, honeysuckle. Birds fluttering, insects buzzing. A beautiful warm afternoon.

There's only one thing in Graham's leather case, Michael confided. A laptop. Same model as Dad's. Brand new. Nothing on it.

Sarah stopped and looked at him.

What do you think of Anne's idea, that Graham's a forger? she asked.

So what? The point is the documents all have pictures of Dad.

Yes. So you say.

Well what kind of person has loads of different identities?

Sarah said nothing. She had her eye on her mother's Japanese garden at the far end. Michael answered for her.

A criminal. Right?

But your father doesn't have the documents. Graham does.

He told Dad everything was safe in the car. And the only things in the car are the documents.

As they walked around the willow, the Japanese garden came into view.

Sarah gasped. It's still here.

The bamboo structures looked a bit mouldy, the pebble bed green with moss, the waterfall was blocked up leaving the pond slimy and stagnant. But it was still full of water lilies. She sat on the little bench and took in the secluded scene. Cloud tree, golden acer, bright mahonia and viburnum. No longer miniature, they'd all gone wild. No longer the elegant minimalism of Jane's frigid fantasy. Terrible thing to feel about your own mother, she thought. And it reminded her of Michael's vendetta against his father.

My parents were cold and uncaring, she told him. At least, Mum was.

I knew your mum, said Michael, jumping across the pond.

Course you did.

In fact that's the only other time I saw you. Last year at the funeral. I never even knew Dad had a sister.

Didn't you?

He came and sat beside her.

Why didn't we ever meet you? he asked.

I got out as soon as I could, Michael. My dad, whose name was Lionel...

I know.

...He sat in his study the whole time, dreaming up impossible schemes which were going to change our lives. Then he'd abandon them. Mum was always at her wit's end, in a perpetual rage that she'd married such a dreamer. Basically they had no time for us. Just sent us off to boarding school.

So did mine.

Your father wasn't even there.

No.

He looked at her, letting her see something of the unhappiness it caused him.

Michael, what was your mother like?

Beautiful.

Yes.

I was away most of the time. He looked across the lily pads. Bit like Gran really.

Like Jane? Sarah was very surprised.

They got on.

Yvonne and Jane got on?

She tried to imagine sour Jane who disapproved of drink, getting on with Yvonne who did little else.

Both women, he observed. Both lost their husbands.

Sarah nodded, reminded of Carl and her own loss. Would she have got on with her mother and sister-in-law? Would they have made a triumvirate of bitterness?

Was your mum kind?

Michael didn't answer for a while. A squirrel ran up the side of a tree.

Not really. But she was my Mum.

Noticing that Sarah was moved by this, he put his arm around her, to comfort. He's kind, she thought.

I've ordered a trojan, he said.

A what?

And a key logger. I'll have to modify them. Shouldn't take long.

He seemed weary.

What's a key logger? What's a trojan?

As in trojan horse. Software. It'll let me see what's going on. On Dad's laptop. And Graham's maybe.

Michael?

He shrugged. I can't ask him. And I need to know.

Sarah thought about it.

Are you good at things like that then, technical things?

He smiled at his aunt.

The world is full of fascinating problems waiting to be solved, he said.

Aunt Sarah thought it was wonderful.

Did you just make that up?

No, I read it. Great, isn't it.

She gazed at her mother's overgrown garden, thought about the world being full of fascinating problems waiting to be solved and came to a decision inside herself.

Would you like to hear a Zen poem? he asked.

Yes.

Okay. – To follow the path, look to the master. Follow the master, walk with the master, see through the master. Become the master.

Sarah studied her nephew. Strong chin. Clear eyes. A beautiful young man.

I better see if the software's arrived, he said, jumping up. Coming?

Yes. Our clothes should be ready. I'll have a shower.

In the hall, where light through stained glass projected little miracles of yellow and red upon the stale green carpet, they found the three men. Sebastian, sombre in his sleek black suit, with Graham, radiant in svelte blue linen and Charlie, rumped in cheap shiny brown.

We're off to the Barley Mow, Charlie explained.

Fancy a drink? Bite to eat? asked Graham, sidling up to Sarah and blatantly patting her bum.

It didn't help that her arms were piled high with washing, undies on top.

We did ask Anne, said Sebastian. She didn't fancy it. Michael?

I'll give it a miss Dad, if that's okay?

Of course. Sarah?

I'd love to Seb. But I really must have a shower. Honestly, I stink.

All three men seemed unsettled by this admission.

Rightee-ho then, said Sebastian, opening the front door.

Charlie and Graham hurried after him.

Did you notice that Dad and Graham were both carrying their cases? asked Michael.

She had noticed. They started up the stairs, each with their bundle of clean clothes.

Mila, the housekeeper, said Sarah, remembering.

What about her?

She's left.

Good riddance.

Really?

Michael opened the door to his room.

She didn't like us. We didn't like her.

But your mother must have employed her.

Oh she got on with Mum.

Oh, said Sarah. Oh well. I better go and have my shower.

Yes, you stink.

Do I?

No, but it was funny to see the looks on their faces when you said it.

They laughed together.

See ya, he said.

In the bathroom, she undressed, turned on the shower and stepped beneath. It felt glorious. She allowed the waterfall to wash over her. The décor might be beige, but it was still her bathroom.

Soaping herself down, she had the sudden sensation of becoming her younger self. It was the second time today. Sat in her window seat that morning, she'd recoiled, feeling shabby and unworthy. Young Sarah had been strong, flexible, perceptive, funny. Young Sarah wasn't a nervous, frightened person. Old Sarah didn't deserve to be young Sarah.

Noticing the fading light outside, the sensation came again. This time she accepted it and young Sarah immediately said don't be

frightened. Life doesn't make you a victim. You do that to yourself. Remember what Michael told you. The world is full of fascinating problems just waiting to be solved.

Pure optimism of course. But optimism creates boundless energy and commitment. And that's the key to everything.

Stepping from the shower, she caught sight of a plump middle-aged woman in the mirror. That's alright, she thought. It'll have to be.

Then she stopped and thought again. Until your forties, you're the adult your parents created. After that, it's up to you to become the adult you want to be.

She picked up a big beige towel and twirled it around her.

It's up to me, she said, winking at her reflection.

In the kitchen she collected Anne's washing from the drier and took it up to her. Anne was drawing as usual. Sarah began to put Anne's clothes away.

Don't do that Mum, I'll do it later.

Sarah froze. Anne didn't notice what she'd said and continued drawing. Sarah crept from the room and stood outside in a state of shock. Obviously Anne wasn't thinking. But no one had ever called Sarah mum. She needed a drink.

In the lounge she took a bottle of Shiraz, a glass and a bowl of peanuts from the bar and settled down to watch telly.

Flicking through the channels, she came upon her twenty-six-year-old self as a patient with one line in an ancient episode of Casualty. It was beyond coincidence. She was being told something.

The episode of Casualty ended. Sarah pressed the mute button and sat in the flickering dark, haunted by this visitation from her younger self. At first it was the physical contrast that spoke to her. Young Sarah was so slim, so sexy, so excited by everything and everyone. But it was a mask. She'd been desperate that day, bust-up with boyfriend, nowhere to live, borrowing the fare, running from station to studio, convinced that this was her big break and she was going to miss it. This angel of the past, this prototype which her parents had nurtured and spat out into the world didn't know diddly squat. She was just a mess of emotions. Liquid in search of a container. And that's how it had continued, all questions and no answers, until her eyes no longer sparkled and lines settled like cobwebs on her face. Nothing had been learned. Sarah sipped the Shiraz, which tasted sour. Sour grapes... She would either have to learn something or be content to just exist.

She switched off the TV and sat in the dark, in this tomb of her childhood, neutralised in pastel shades by her dead sister-in-law. All very well to say start afresh. You have to have a clue, an instinct. Is there purpose?

She'd been asked to look after two adolescents who'd just lost their mother. But where was their father? Down the Barley Mow, drinking with his chums. No wonder Michael wanted to nail him. No wonder Anne escaped into smoke and fantasy. Fight and flight respectively, and both so alone and vulnerable.

She decided to confront her brother. He had to take responsibility. Never mind his grief, if grief was what he felt.

Why hadn't he told her that he was separated from Yvonne? Why call it the last family holiday if he'd left when the children were tiny? It was a trick.

Why didn't he spend any time with his children? Why didn't he open his arms? Why were there documents in Graham's car, with Sebastian's photo under countless identities? Why did Yvonne own everything? Why was there nothing in his bank account? Why did Mila think it wasn't so innocent? It would be horrible to confront her brother in this way. But things had to change.

Hearing the front door open, and footsteps in the hall, she decided to have it out with him there and then. Rising from the armchair, she marched over and was about to fling the lounge door open, when she heard her brother's drunken voice.

...Just nick the boat and fuck off...

Putting her ear to the door, she heard Graham whispering.

Ssh. You'll wake up the whole house.

Then her brother again, blurting out: Well what do the fucking Swiss want now?

Iss all fine Seb...

Charlie was obviously also pissed. Graham, however, sounded sober.

Listen Seb... he began.

But Sebastian cut in, his voice hoarse and rasping.

No, you listen. Police and banks only have to cross wires and I'm fucked. That's right, isn't it?

And that's not going to happen. What the hell do you think I've been doing the past week, Seb?

Sarah heard a thud, followed by groans and grunts, and had the mental picture of Graham and Charlie trying to hoist her brother up.

Geddim in here...

She heard them bundle him into the dining room with lots of banging and whispering but no more words. For the first time,

Sarah felt threatened. There was no question that, whatever they were up to, it was illegal. Yvonne was dead and Sebastian was so scared that in his drunken stupor he wanted to steal the yacht from police custody.

Hearing Graham and Charlie in the hall again, she darted behind a sofa and waited until they'd both gone upstairs. She felt ridiculous. Had they entered, they'd have seen her anyway. She was frightened, upset. And very angry.

In the hall, her anger got the better of her. She strode into the dining room and closed the door. As her eyes adjusted, she saw Sebastian slumped on a camp bed beyond his desk, still in his suit and snoring. She'd wake him up. Slap him, anything.

A loud click stopped her. Someone was at the window. She slipped into a dark corner and watched Michael climb in. He crossed to his snoring father and peered at him. Having satisfied himself that his dad was asleep, he began to search. Under the bed, around it, around the desk, under it, in the drawers, behind chairs, on the shelves, in the fireplace. But he never saw Sarah. Eventually he climbed out of the window again and disappeared.

Somehow, having withstood these shocks to her system, Sarah felt very calm. She stood beside her brother and studied his sleeping face. The faces of sleeping creatures always looked so lovely. It was when they woke up that you had to worry. Was he as innocent and lost as he looked? Or had he murdered his wife? Perhaps the two weren't mutually exclusive. She stared but, for all the detail in his craggy face, she couldn't tell. He was her brother. All her questions evaporated. She kissed him on the cheek, padded out of the room and up the stairs.

Near the top, she heard voices and stopped.

Surprised to see you up so late, said Graham. Thought you'd have been asleep by now, young lad like you.

You came back a while ago, didn't you? Couldn't you sleep? asked Michael.

Just needed the loo, Graham replied. What about you, you off to bed now?

Me? No. Just going to see my sister actually.

Michael said the word sister very loudly and Sarah popped her head around the banister to see what was happening. They were standing just outside Charlie's room. One was off to the loo, the other to see his sister, yet neither made a move. Instead, the door at the end opened and Anne walked down towards them. She was dressed in just bra and knickers.

Hi Graham. Hi Michael. Graham I need your help. There's a form I need to fill in. Can I show you?

She took his hand and led him back down the corridor. Michael immediately slipped into Charlie's room. Sarah ran silently along the passage and into her room. Closing the door, she lay down on the bed and stared at the ceiling. She felt very quiet, almost detached.

Uncharacteristic behaviour, she thought, after days of furtive silence. Her brother, usually so circumspect, blurting out his private business. Something about the Swiss, about police and banks crossing wires. Alright he was pissed, but obviously at his wit's end. And Michael, climbing in windows, facing off Graham, calling for his sister. Anne was the biggest surprise, slinking along the corridor with almost nothing on and inveigling the middle-aged playboy into her room. Perhaps they too couldn't stand the silence, the stalemate. Just as she had felt the need to confront

her brother. Perhaps she wouldn't do that now. Perhaps she would just watch them all.

Her past had been a series of knee-jerk reactions, if not this, then that. All based on some nebulous childhood hypothesis that, somewhere out there, there was something... She had always suspected people who, like her brother, were not open, who held things back. She'd thought of her parents as repressed and she had determined to be open. But perhaps she'd been wrong and the only way to learn things was to store information inside oneself until it accrued understanding. Thus making herself the container she'd been searching for. Thus becoming the person who weighs things up and makes their own decisions.

Of the six people in the house, she was the outsider, the one who had least to gain or lose. She had no reason to be emotional or reactive. Just keep calm and watch.

When she heard scraping sounds on the outside wall, she guessed it was Michael. When he knocked on her window, she let him in.

I've planted it, he whispered.

What?

The trojan. I knew the laptop had to be in Charlie's room. Dad didn't have it. Graham nearly caught me. Said he was going to the loo.

Perhaps he was.

No. He's got an en suite. He's onto us.

Sarah refrained from smiling. At some level, Michael saw himself as a swashbuckling hero on a mission. And he was quite brave really. Brave at eighteen to take action. But if his suspicions about his father and his father's two accomplices were correct, there was possibly some danger.

What's this trojan for, again? she asked, dreading the answer.

It's actually a trojan with key logger.

Oh.

Dad's always on his laptop, right?

Yes.

Well from now on, I'll be able to see everything he sees and know every key he presses. Every website, every email, every document, password, encryption. Mind you, he's got some USB stick I haven't seen before. Made in Switzerland. Could be an encryption device. I'll have to check it out.

Sarah remembered Sebastian's drunken voice mentioning the Swiss, but said nothing.

A gentle knock on the door sent Michael diving behind the bed. Anne entered, now in a dressing gown, from which she drew a piece of A4 paper. Michael jumped up and grabbed it.

Wow, he said. It's perfect.

Yes, said Anne. I had to pretend I was stupid and couldn't follow his instructions...

She sat on the bed and giggled. Sarah watched, seeing another side to Anne, so self-possessed, so cool, as she told Michael what had happened.

...He was saying copy it slow, notice the angle of her pen, how she holds it. – Now, make a quick copy. ...Notice the rhythm. And I was fucking it up on purpose.

Anne and Michael giggled together. Not understanding a thing, Sarah took the A4 sheet from Michael. It was a printed form from a school, about a proposed study trip in the autumn term, which required the parent or guardian's signature. The signature was Yvonne's but, according to Anne, had been penned minutes ago by Graham. Anne and Michael were now convinced that he was a

professional forger, to the extent that Michael now considered planting his trojan-with-key-logger onto Graham's identical but, as yet, unused laptop.

Sarah allowed their conversation to wash over her. It was four in the morning. She lay back on the bed and closed her eyes.

When they reopened, her niece and nephew were gone and a faint glow of purple light hung about the window. The sense of anticipation in the air sent her sleepwalking down through the dark house and out across the spectral lawn, warm mist rising.

Reaching her grandfather's wrought iron pergola, she stretched out a hand to catch her breath and the whole structure almost gave way. A miracle of rust amid weeds and wild vine. She stared back at the Grange in silhouette rising from the earth, her sternest critic, proud, controlling and dead.

Hurrying on, across the stream, she entered the woodlands beyond. A narrow path led her almost in darkness through the leaves of summers passed, to a small clearing full of white cloud and seeping warmth. The only human artefact was an old rope that dangled from the arm of a birch high above. It was what she had come to see.

She sat on a rotting trunk amid moss, honey fungus and spider webs dripping with dew. Her body seemed to fill with the humid heat, dawn chorus ringing in her ears, blue tits and finches looping between branches. Sarah pressed her palms into the soft flesh of her belly and, eyes closing, began to rock slowly back and forth. Silent time, time without words. Minutes dripped by, then an hour or more. Slowly her body let go of the child. Gone the past and future too.

The day awoke. Creatures rustled busily through the undergrowth. Plants tilted their leaves to the sun. When at last Sarah looked up, she found herself staring into the beautiful, deep and equally amazed eyes of a young roe deer, before it leapt and vanished.

Sarah remained until the air was thick with heat. Basking in sunshine, something she'd hardly known since childhood returned. Her happiness. Simple happiness, the love of life itself.

It was a very different Sarah who rose, left the glade and made her way back to the house.

Pattering up the stairs from the kitchen, she heard voices in the hall. Charlie was shaking hands with a police officer. A police woman stood quietly by. All three were dappled with shards of light from the stained glass windows above.

Charlie turned, saw Sarah and immediately incorporated her into the situation. She became the hostess, ushered into the lounge with the police while Charlie, his face a crumpled mix of apprehension and hangover, hurried off to find Mr Merrick.

Sarah observed the officer, an older man with a shock of silver hair above a scrubbed and healthy face. The policewoman had a lovely dark complexion, Indian or Sri Lankan possibly. She made pleasantries about the heat, the hosepipe ban and how her own small garden was wilting in the sun. Sarah smiled appropriately but felt no need to speak.

They preferred to stand. The policewoman wandered about the room, regarding its aspects and features with obvious pleasure. Whatever they'd come to say or do was for Sebastian alone. This was formal and no amount of small talk could subdue the waiting feeling. Their manner was calm and reassuring but the calmness itself was implacable.

Sarah knew that their visit could have serious consequences. There may have been a development, new facts come to light. Who knows what they'd found on the yacht? Her brother might even be arrested. The anxiety on Charlie's face had not been a positive indicator. On the other hand, this gravitas may simply represent their respect for the family of the deceased. She asked if they would like a cup of tea. They said no and the waiting got louder.

She wondered if she should stay or go when Sebastian arrived. Leave him to privacy or remain in support. She'd be sensitive either way. The woodland birdsong still rang in her ears, her epiphany at dawn prevailed. Some lines from an old song came into her head. Che sera sera, whatever will be will be... Her mother would sing it in her wavering soprano voice, presumably because sera sounded like Sarah. Strange to think of her mother like that, when she usually thought of her as a mass of thorns and spikes. That tinkling voice was the sweet frightened nature, trapped by its own defences.

When the door handle turned, six eyes watched Sebastian enter. He looked just like their mother. Sarah had never considered this. His nordic face was Lionel's. But the expression was Jane's and bristling with fear. She wondered if the police officers could sense it. Possibly not, they didn't know him and seemed anyway to be composing themselves.

Sebastian almost stumbled across to greet them, all arms and legs and a complexion like grated cheese. In his creased black suit, he appeared to be holding himself up by sheer force of will. His eyes flicked nervously across at his sister, which may have been her cue to leave. But she remained in the bay window, immersed in sunlight, watching the introductions.

The officer's name was Peter Bradshaw. His partner introduced herself as Ashanta and her pretty smile seemed further to unnerve Sebastian. Sarah was aware that, for some reason, her brother was anxious should banks and authorities cross wires. She didn't know if he was fearful for other darker reasons.

The two officers and Sebastian sat equidistant in a triangle of armchairs facing each other. Sarah stood apart, a voyeur, although, whenever one of them moved or their expression changed, their feelings resonated through her. Peter Bradshaw seemed casual but his words were formal and his foot kept tapping.

Aware of Sebastian's concern as expressed at his visit the previous day, and sensitive to the Merrick family's standing in the community, he had chosen to make this visit personally. Presumably that meant that Peter Bradshaw was the senior officer in charge of this case.

He was conscious that what he had to say might be upsetting and would try to be as brief as possible. He smiled reassuringly. Ashanta also smiled. Sebastian didn't respond. He seemed transfixed by dread. A vacuum about to implode.

Officer Bradshaw had studied the reports made concerning the circumstances of the case as well as the post mortem examination which had arrived on his desk that morning. It had revealed a large quantity of alcohol in the bloodstream, the effects of which couldn't be understated.

The officer looked directly at Sebastian and the look did carry a question. Possibly, why was your wife so drunk or was she an alcoholic, something like that. But he lowered his eyelids, inferring that such questions would remain unasked and moved on.

The level of liquid in the lungs indicated that the deceased had been alive when entering the water.

Sebastian's head rolled imperceptibly back as if hit by a blow in slow motion. Ashanta averted her eyes in deference. Peter Bradshaw continued cautiously. It was a performance he'd given before. Steer clear of emotion. The yacht, as they knew, had, due to its size, been anchored further out than the rest, and this accounted for the fact that none of those questioned, either from the other boats or the beach, had seen or heard anything.

No one? asked Sebastian, sounding small, uncertain.

The officer's eyes narrowed. He peered at Sebastian, then shook his head.

Unfortunately not, Mr Merrick.

I see, said Sebastian, his voice rising, as if what he saw was a glimmer of hope.

Bradshaw noticed this. His lips pursed slightly but if he attached any significance, he gave no sign. Bruising had been consistent with events that followed. The current at the turn of the tide would have been extremely powerful.

Sarah felt, not for the first time, that she was under water, twisted and bashed as the current sucked her out. But glancing at Sebastian, his face seemed impassive, as if his mind had left the subject.

So, the verdict? he asked.

Verdict?

Your findings?

Officer Bradshaw shrugged. His mouth twitched. He was not entirely happy. Accidental death, he mumbled. The yacht would be released as soon as paperwork was complete. The body was available for burial.

Any further action to be taken? asked Sebastian, a little too casually. I mean, are we done with this?

The officer seemed slightly surprised, then apologetic. They had followed the statutory procedures. Such accidents were unfortunately not uncommon.

Suddenly everyone was rising, moving towards the door. Sarah felt dazed. She didn't know what to make of it. She was convinced that, whatever the truth, Sebastian had been through something immensely painful. A wave of exhaustion hit her. She'd hardly slept. Up before dawn.

She heard the ritual of courtesies and goodbyes, Sebastian almost imperious in his appreciation, lord of the manor once more. The front door closed, there was silence. The police car started up and rolled off, down the drive. A clamour of voices rose in the hall, like bells peeling out of sequence till they too faded.

An accidental death.

When Michael stormed in and started ranting at her, she was barely able to respond. Apparently Charlie was making breakfast and the atmosphere was jubilant as if a great victory had been won.

Stop, she asked, wearily.

Come and see, he insisted, grabbing her hand and dragging her down to the kitchen.

Charlie and Graham were being jolly. Sebastian was trying to be jolly too, but one look at his eyes revealed a mind spinning through chaos. Michael couldn't see the pain, only the obscene celebrations.

Sarah noticed the colour rise in his face, realised he was about to explode and hustled him up to her room.

Michael, if you had seen the grief on your father's face...

But Michael was having none of it.

Accidental death? It's a travesty. Dad must've bribed them.

Michael!

No. For Christ's sake listen to them down there, laughing and joking.

They're just trying to be cheerful, Michael. Trying to make your dad feel better. I know how it seems, but...

Are you kidding? It's like they've just won the lottery. They'll be popping open the bubbly next.

Sarah raised herself up, drew in her breath and used her last energy to explain: If your dad is relieved, it's because, had the verdict been suicide, your mother couldn't be buried in the family plot. Think of the pressure he's been under. All of us...

No. You believe what you want.

And why is it, you want to believe that your dad's guilty?

Michael stormed out of the room and she let him. She couldn't control any of them. The funeral date would be set. She'd have to look to herself. None of this was a substitute for a life of her own, whatever that might be.

It was almost midday and the room was hot. She had hardly slept and there was no reason to stay awake.

EIGHT Day 5 continued Wednesday 28th July 2010

Sarah awoke at twilight. She was starving and made her way down to the kitchen. Her brother was sitting alone sipping coffee while he worked on his laptop. He nodded as she entered. Only half awake, she switched the kettle on. She wanted to raid the fridge and eat anything she could lay her hands on. But she didn't

feel she could do that, with Sebastian there. She was the guest. Also she imagined Michael upstairs with his trojan, spying on his father and the knowledge made her feel guilty. She considered taking her coffee upstairs and coming down for food later. But she was hungry.

Where are Graham and Charlie? she asked, peering through the window, as if they might be in the garden. It was getting dark.

Out, he replied.

So he was alone. He was never alone.

As she passed behind him, cradling her coffee, he snapped his laptop shut. A little shot of pain exploded in her, of rejection. By the time she'd walked around the table to face him, she was angry. She put her drink down opposite her brother, which caused him to look up, aghast.

Yes, I'm going to talk to you, she said. Yes I'm going to interrupt your work and yes you're going to listen.

What is it? he asked, cautiously.

She thought. Well, it's about everything really. For instance, why don't you speak to your children?

I do, it's just...

You don't. How many times have you sat and just spent time with Anne? How many times have you put your arms around your boy?

Sebastian's face registered faint disgust, as though there were a sexual implication, which disgusted Sarah.

They're your kids, Sebastian. You didn't even pay them much attention when we were on the boat. Don't you care?

Of course I care.

Of course you don't. They've lost their mother. I can't think of anything more traumatic. And they are traumatised. She looked him in the eye: But you don't know it.

In what way are they traumatised? he asked.

Why don't you find out for yourself? she snapped, then softened her approach: Listen Seb, after it happened I accepted your isolation from us. We were all in shock, perhaps we still are. I understand your grief, but you've got to put the children first.

It isn't that, he proffered, hesitating, glancing down at his computer.

No I didn't think it was. Unless grief makes a person tap away on a laptop twenty-four-seven.

He looked up at her, all blue-eyed innocence, as if stung. Sarah herself had dark eyes and wasn't falling for it.

And what are those two men doing in the house?

You mean Charlie and Graham?

Of course I mean Charlie and Graham. What are they doing here?

Well Charlie is my skipper and Graham is my business...

What's wrong with you? Michael and Anne spend day after day in their rooms, in distress. And where are you? Off down the Barley Mow with your cronies! Talk to me Seb.

She sat down, sipped her coffee and waited.

Well?

It isn't so simple, he began. I have various financial difficulties at the moment. In a week's time there will be the funeral, which I've also to arrange. Once we've got through all that, I'm sure there will be time...

You mean in a week you might have time to comfort your children? Come on Sebastian, that's not it. There's a whole other level, isn't there?

What? he asked, as if he had no idea what she might mean.

So she stared at him until his defiance gave way to fear. Then she toyed with him, slowly nodding, as if she had information rather than suspicions. Shaking her head, as if what she knew, was bad. Whatever else Sebastian was, he was, or had been a very successful and aggressive businessman, a man who'd made a fortune in his twenties. He held his cards close to his chest, never gave anything away and she intended to draw him out.

Why didn't you tell me that you and Yvonne were separated?

We were trying to get back together.

Not from what I saw, you weren't. You were in the corner with Graham talking business or on deck with Charlie talking boats.

That's because she...

She? She's dead Sebastian. She sat alone drinking and now she's dead.

How dare you say that!

He looked horrified, a tortured soul, but she wasn't finished.

Let me put it this way, she said. You invited me on what you described as the last family holiday. In what way was it the last family holiday, since you'd left when the children were tiny?

He floundered. She let him and pressed on.

You don't spend time with your children because you don't know your children. Presumably now that the verdict is accidental death, you'll inherit. Your financial problems, as you describe them, will be sorted and you'll be free to do whatever you damn well please again.

She heard herself sounding like her mother Jane and, looking at Sebastian, saw her father Lionel, the henpecked husband, forever scolded for being a dreamer and not facing up to things. She drew in breath and held it. Here they were, in their parents' kitchen, reliving their parents' lives. Sarah had known by the time she was ten that Jane's whiplash tongue served no purpose. Lionel could only do what he could do. Her mother must have known it, but she kept on scolding him anyway, because Jane could only do what she could do. And here they were, a generation on, repeating the ritual. It made a nonsense of whatever they said.

Sebastian blinked, stood up and walked over to the fridge. She watched him unwrap a side of salmon and turn the grill on. His actions seemed trancelike, his thoughts elsewhere. Outside it was dark and the room was in shadow. Hardly enough light to see by, but Sebastian didn't seem to notice. She watched him prepare a salad, with watercress and tomatoes, watched his long pale hands effortlessly peel an avocado, his fair hair and chiselled face ghostlike, as if a Viking had suddenly materialised in the room. Ghosts in the machine, she thought, both of them, and sensed that, in the future, she'd be haunted by this moment. Why? Because she loved him and this was a moment together. If she loved him, why did she attack him? Did conflict clear the air, or poison it?

When she glanced up, her brother was staring at her.

Yvonne and I separated in 1997, he said. I left her everything, except a small stake, enough to set me up.

A kettle was boiling. Sebastian poured a little cous cous into a bowl, seasoned it and added hot water. So he was saying that it was his wealth anyway to start with, she thought. By inheriting his wife's estate, he was only retrieving what was his.

There were family holidays, he said, stirring the cous cous. Even after we'd separated. We'd spend a week or two together as a family. Sometimes Yvonne would come along.

Sarah was aware that her brother's voice was trembling, that he had turned away to stir, so she wouldn't see. Hard for a man like that to say what was in his heart, she thought.

Is there any provision for the children in Yvonne's will? she asked.

Oh, he said. It's all theirs.

For a moment she didn't get it.

Are you saying that all of Yvonne's estate will go to Michael and Anne? she asked.

Equally to both, he confirmed.

He brought the salad bowl over, lowered a silver lamp and switched it on. It cast an arc of warm light around the table.

And you? she asked.

He shrugged and went to check the grill. He was saying he got nothing from the will. If he had nothing to gain, he was innocent. The police had collected Yvonne's documents. Even if they'd suspected Sebastian, once they discovered that the children alone inherited their mother's estate, he'd have no motive. Michael was wrong. She must tell him.

Sebastian laid the table, a fork and knife for her, a fork and knife for him. Onto her plate he put salmon, cous cous and salad. Onto his plate he put the same. He poured wine into two glasses. She watched. He had made them a meal. She had done nothing to help. And what's more, he had made it because she was hungry. He had known. Of course he had known, they were brother and sister, they'd spent their childhood together. He sat down opposite.

I'd rather you didn't mention any of this to the children, he said. Yvonne's solicitor will do that directly after the funeral.

There was such darkness in his eyes that Sarah burst into tears. And once she'd started, she couldn't stop. When at last Sebastian took her hand in his, across the table, she began talking. And once she had started, she couldn't stop.

She told him all about her life. How she'd fled from their parents and the Grange, vowing never to return. How hard she'd tried to be an actress, to live on her wits, not weighed down by family and function, just to be free. How she'd got broody and, as time passed, how hard she'd tried to find a true partner and have babies.

I always thought I was the rebel, she said. Now I think it was you. You sailed away...

She could hardly speak for tears.

He shrugged, raised his glass and smiled.

Takes all types, he said, waiting for her to raise hers.

But she couldn't.

When we met at Mum's funeral in December, I was with a man, an actor called Carl. My own acting career was over, no work, no agent. But I was pregnant. Sebastian, he left me. And the day you called me, to invite me on holiday, I had just miscarried. Just then...

She looked at her brother, pleading for his help and saw the same desperation in his eyes.

Neither could speak, nor look away. Their hands clasped each others' across the table. The grill fan switched itself off.

Sarah had thought she had let go of the baby and Carl when she'd sat in the woods at dawn. But telling Sebastian brought it all back. How many times did one have to let go of the past before it

was gone? Sebastian's wife had just died. However unhappy their marriage had been, his face, as it faced her, was deep set in mourning and how on earth could she help?

I went to see the rope this morning.

What rope?

In the woods. Our rope, silly.

He frowned. Then his eyes lit up and his sister led him down memory lane. School holidays spent out in the woods, away from the sullen, bickering Grange. Jack Russells, Snapper and Snitch barking, as Sebastian and Sarah swung each other around on the rope or picnicked by the hollow tree. Large family gatherings at Uncle Harry's...

I've invited Uncle Harry to the funeral, he said.

Sarah gasped. He must be ancient. Are you inviting the whole family then?

Yes. He blushed. I haven't been in contact with the family for years, apart from Mum's funeral, he admitted.

So I gathered.

But I think it would be right.

Yes, said Sarah, warmly, realising that her brother needed to feel his family around him, glad that he wanted to heal wounds.

What about Yvonne's family? she asked.

He shook his head regretfully. She never talked about her family and I never pressed her. I gathered her parents had died. None of her lot at the wedding.

Really?

She saw that his eyes were dark again and reproached herself for allowing her curiosity to prod the pain.

Will you stay for longer? he asked.

The question took her by surprise.

I have to get myself a life, she said. You must face your children, Sebastian. You're the parent.

Of course, he said softly. But this could be a base for you, to prepare yourself. – For whatever you decide to do.

He smiled at his sister.

Would you promise to spend time with your children from now on? she asked.

He raised the palm of his hand. I promise, he said. And thank you.

Michael does need you. He's so distressed. Don't be surprised if he's angry, Sebastian.

No.

You'll have to take it on the chin. I think it may take some time, but...

I understand.

And Anne. She's a wonderful artist, you know. But that's all she does. You could encourage her.

And you'll move in for a while?

...Okay... She felt breathless.

He stood up and put his hand out. She rose. They shook hands. It was formal, a pledge.

Sarah couldn't help herself. She walked around the table and hugged her brother. She felt the full weight of his frame collapse on her. His head dropped to her shoulder. He began shaking. She held him close. Slowly the tremors faded away. He breathed in deeply and sank into his chair. Sarah returned to her chair and they sat sipping wine until Charlie and Graham returned.

Sebastian excused himself and Sarah did the washing up. Later she went up to her room with a glass of wine to think things over.

Sitting in the dingy spare room made her regret her promise. She didn't want to move in here. Wasn't there a room that hadn't been redecorated within an inch of its life? She thought of the attic and was up the stairs in no time, glass in hand, fumbling for the switch.

A lamp came on. It was perched just inside, on a small ornate side table which she recognised as her mother's. Beside it was a large old armchair, part of the suite which used to be in the lounge. These had not been here before, but the rest of the attic was just as she'd remembered it: Crates and boxes piled high gathering dust and, beyond them, the small gothic window in the eaves, through which a crescent moon was shining. Her grandmother's sewing machine in the corner.

Sarah sank back in the armchair and gazed around her, full of sweet painful memory. This room would do. Smaller than she'd remembered but so poetic up in the roof, with its ceiling that rose to a point above, with its nooks and crannies. A wardrobe would go in that little alcove. A single bed would fit in along that wall.

Sipping her wine she made plans. She'd have to sort through all the crates and boxes, turf out all but a few cherished things. That might be difficult. Better to be brusque, practical.

Beneath the window frame, she spied the small cavity in which she used to hide her secret things, well away from Jan's prying eyes. She wondered if she'd left anything in it. All sorts of superstitious thoughts crept around her mind, as if some old piece of memorabilia might remind her of her purpose, provide a clue as to what she should do with the rest of her life.

Curiosity got the better of her. Climbing over the dusty stacks, she knelt beneath the window and put her hand into the cavity,

feeling her way along. Her fingers felt something lodged right at the end and, bit by bit, eased it out.

She pulled out a mottled grey box file which she did not recognise. Inside were papers. She couldn't see clearly enough. Climbing back towards the light, something dropped. Her hand, fumbling between two boxes, picked it up. It was long, cold, a stone possibly, with sharp symmetrical edges. Gripping the stone in one hand and the file in the other, she eased herself around the last obstacles to the chair beneath the lamp.

First she studied the stone. It was a long crystal, pointed at one end, with a silver fitting at the other for a string or a chain. The different faces of the crystal refracted light into rainbow colours as she turned it around in her hands.

Placing it on the floor beside her, she opened the box file, lifted the clasp which held the papers in place and began leafing through. There was a hospital report naming some ailment in Latin. The patient's surname was Noble, forename Yvonne. Sarah drew in her breath, looked up, gripping the sides of the box, as it dawned upon her whose box this was.

She searched through the other sheets. Several were newspaper cuttings. One described a drugs raid on a housing estate in Lewes. Another contained classified advertisements. The next sheet was an official form in red with black typing. Turning it sideways, she read Yvonne Alice Noble, born 8th May 1967, Lewes, Sussex. Father, Alfred, a book seller, mother Eleanor...

Sarah scanned the document for some minutes, emotional at the realisation that she was holding her sister-in-law's birth certificate. Slowly then, she leafed through the remaining papers and came upon a black and white photograph. Three people stood together outside an old fashioned shop façade. She felt intuitively

that the adults were Yvonne's parents. She could see that the shop sold books. Only the lower halves of the letters above the shop front were visible, but her mind immediately filled in the upper halves. Noble Books. The girl in the photo, however, was not Yvonne, but a small dark-haired child. Did Yvonne have a sister? Had Yvonne taken the photo? Slightly overwhelmed by these glimpses of a life gone by and feeling strange to be holding them, when the last person to have held them had undoubtedly been Yvonne, she put the box on the floor, picked up her wine glass and sat thinking.

Sebastian had said that his wife never talked about her past, that he believed her parents were dead. But what if they weren't? Or what if her sister had taken over the shop? She could look in the phone book or try directory of enquiries. If she did find a number, would she call? What would she say? It would be too late to call now...

She peered down at the box file. Would she tell the others what she had found? Possibly not. Not now anyway, too upsetting. It occurred to her that someone, Michael, or even Anne, might see the light from the attic, reflected on the stairs below, and come to investigate.

Swigging back the remains of her wine, she put the crystal back in the box and replaced the file in what had once been Sarah's secret place, but had become Yvonne's. Having checked to see that she'd left things as she'd found them, Sarah picked up her glass, switched off the lamp and tiptoed down to her room.

In her bag, she found her mobile phone. It had no credit. She put it on to charge anyway. She saw the envelope containing the wad of notes Sebastian had given her to pay her debts and packed

it safely in a zip-up pocket on the side of her holdall. In the same pocket, she noticed her little address book and pulled it out.

Padding along the passageway, she felt furtive. There must be a house phone, possibly in the dining room but, treading carefully down the stairs, she saw a light beneath the door and heard voices within. Entering the lounge, she switched on the light and immediately saw a phone on the edge of the bar at the far end.

She dialled Directory and, getting through, asked the number for Noble Books in Lewes, East Sussex. She waited, fumbling to get the little pen out of the ring of fabric which attached it to the address book, whilst holding the receiver to her ear.

There was a click and an automatic voice rapped out a number. She was so surprised, she was hardly able to get it down. The number was repeated, confirming what she'd written. Replacing the receiver in its cradle, she stood, leaning on the bar, lost in thought, tired and yet full of adrenalin. Too late to call now and no idea what to say.

There was a bottle of wine on the counter. It had a screw top. She twisted it off and slugged back half the contents. Grabbing her address book and pen, she rushed out of the room and up the stairs. With the door closed, she flung herself on the bed and lay there breathing deeply as the cheap wine went to her head.

NINE Day 6 Thursday 29th July 2010

Sarah awoke in the early morning already knowing her plans. She washed, brushed her long auburn hair, slipped on her white summer dress, her bright red sandals and, for the first time since Yvonne's death, applied makeup. Just a little mascara around her

dark eyes and lipstick the colour of her sandals, which was also the colour of her car. She was happy to inhabit her old identity again, her Brighton image, if only for a while. Leaving a message for Sebastian, she ran out to her Smart Car, started the engine and set off.

As soon as she was clear of the Grange, she rolled down the windows. The day had not yet warmed up but she was glad of the cool air on her face and felt life buzzing in her chest, freedom itself the fuel.

Turning east onto the A27, she joined other drivers off to work. What day was it? A weekday certainly. Traffic slowed down around Chichester and, realising that the car needed petrol, she pulled into a service station just short of Arundel. There, she bought fruit juice and a sandwich, put credit on her phone and sat in the forecourt eating her breakfast. Was it too early to call? Eight thirty-two. What would she say? She punched in the number and waited.

An elderly voice answered. Noble Books, can I help you?

Alfred, she thought, Yvonne's father.

Is that Alfred Noble? she asked tentatively.

Yes. Who is this please?

My name is Sarah, Sarah Merrick. You don't know me, but this is about your daughter, Yvonne.

There was a pause. Alfred's voice, when it answered, seemed faint, distant.

I see.

Look, could I visit you? I'm just west of Arundel. I could be with you in about an hour. Would that be okay?

I suppose...

Sarah heard another voice beyond, asking who is it? The name Eleanor came to mind. They were both alive.

Thank you, said Sarah quickly. I'll be there in an hour or so and rang off.

They're both alive, she thought. How will I tell them?

Traffic was slow around Arundel and slower still through Worthing. Sarah was grateful, not because it gave her time to think, she couldn't think, but because she was too nervous to drive quickly. Only beyond Brighton did the traffic ease up and by then she was almost at Lewes.

Parking at the first car park she came to, she paid, displayed and walked off to find the shop.

The town of Lewes, at least the part that Sarah walked through, seemed very staid, preserved, as if, despite its sea breezes, the air had not moved for centuries. Each sign hand painted in archaic lettering, each blade of grass manicured, each plant pruned to perfection, nothing unsightly, nothing to catch the eye. Each building repointed, woodwork glossed. Even the few humans she saw strolling or standing seemed to have been thoughtfully placed. The whole town seemed like a memorial to wealth and good citizenship.

It reminded her of the way Yvonne had redecorated the Grange, nothing to trouble the mind or stir the heart. A strange aspiration. On the other hand, Yvonne never spoke of her family, gave the impression that her parents were dead and had no contact with them. So something must have happened, troubled her mind or stirred her heart, that she left and never returned.

Sarah had no idea how she might face Yvonne's parents. Whatever had happened in the family, telling them that their daughter was dead would be traumatic. Perhaps she might be able

to gauge their reaction to Yvonne first, which might inform her as to how to proceed. Nonetheless, when she saw Noble Books, she stopped to steady herself. Its façade and shining black woodwork matched perfectly the photo in Yvonne's box file. Small windows revealed rows of antiquarian books peering out on a world as old and as dormant as they.

A bell tinkled as she entered. The air inside was acrid with the smell of old paper and print. She could hardly move for book-lined shelves which reached from floor to ceiling.

A bald stooped man in his late sixties slid out from between the book cases and looked at her, saying nothing. Had she been after a book, she'd have left immediately.

How do you do, she said, proffering her hand. I'm Sarah Merrick.

Still the man said nothing. He was so stooped that his head appeared to protrude from his chest.

I called you earlier, she added.

You better come this way, he said, turning and vanishing immediately.

His voice sounded like dust, his manner grudging, as if he was doing her a favour. She followed, finding her way through a dark maze of shelves to a tiny parlour at the back.

A large elderly woman sat in a wheel chair beside a small ornate fireplace. She was draped in a thick grey woollen shawl, despite the heat, and her big square face was something moulded out of cement. The bald man with skin like parchment stood by an old desk positioned in front of a little window, the only light source. Its curtains were closed. Neither of them spoke

How do you do, said Sarah, not proffering her hand this time. I'm Sarah Merrick. I phoned earlier.

She looked from the woman to the man. Not a muscle moved. She was forced to continue.

It's about your daughter. I am right, aren't I, you do have a daughter called Yvonne...?

At this, the stooping man turned slightly, as if to observe his wife's response. The woman stared at Sarah, almost accusingly. Unnerved, Sarah wanted to check further. She remembered the parents' names on the certificate.

Are your names Eleanor and Alfred? she asked, nervously, looking from one to the other.

Yes, said the woman firmly, in a deep plummy British voice, and waited for Sarah to continue.

I'm not sure if you know, she began, but your daughter married my brother, Sebastian. They have two children...

How could she say it, without saying it? She looked for a chair but the only chair was tucked under the desk. Okay...

There was an accident last week. The family was on a boating holiday. Unfortunately your daughter fell in... ..she drowned...

The couple did not react. There was only silence and heat.

I'm sorry to bring you this news, she said.

Slowly, the woman turned her large head towards the mantelpiece. There, Sarah saw a framed photograph of a girl in her teens. It was the girl in the centre of the picture Sarah had seen in the box file. The girl she had thought might be Yvonne's sister.

Our daughter, said the woman in a strained and haughty voice, died twenty-one years ago.

Sarah didn't understand. Your daughter Yvonne?

Indeed. ...So I don't know who this woman who drowned could have been. But she was certainly not our daughter.

Oh, I'm sorry... Sarah already felt herself backing out, making her apologies and leaving. She had the wrong Yvonne. It was a coincidence. ...But it couldn't be.

She glanced at the photo on the mantelpiece. There had to be some connection, because of the photo. Rummaging in her bag for the camera, she clicked through, until she found an image of Yvonne sitting alone, drink in hand, aboard the Princess. It occurred to her that this Yvonne, petite and blond, looked nothing like Alfred and Eleanor.

Do you recognise this person? she asked, passing the camera to Eleanor.

Eleanor peered at the image. After a while she nodded.

Yes. I do. It's Vaz Crow. Have a look Alfred. She's older, but it's definitely her.

Who's Vaz Crow?

She, said Eleanor with distain, was a girl who befriended our daughter. Not that she was the sort of girl you'd want your daughter to befriend. ...But things being what they were...

Eleanor's face turned suddenly to stone.

Our daughter was unwell, Alfred explained. She had a brain tumour.

More than one, said Eleanor, quietly correcting her husband.

Yes, he acknowledged. From the age of thirteen, she began to miss school, complaining of headaches. It took some time for the condition to be diagnosed.

Eleanor made a small sound. Grief. Sarah's eyes sprang with tears. She felt awful to have caused this elderly couple to reveal their grief.

So that's Vaz Crow, is it?

Alfred nodded, passing her back the camera.

So she was your daughter's friend.

She used to visit, he said. At first it was to tell her the homework. Then we invited her for supper and she used to stay right into the evening.

I never trusted her, said Eleanor.

Oh come on, said her husband, appealing to his wife's better nature. She was a good companion to Yvonne.

She'd have moved in, had we let her! snapped Eleanor.

Well I suppose, given her background...

What was her background? asked Sarah.

Her family lived on the Lipton Estate, I believe. It's a housing estate just...

A plague of Crows, the papers said! Eleanor growled, her voice full of vitriol and loathing. Don't you remember, Alfred, she came round here begging us to take her in, but we'd already read about it in the Sussex Express by then.

Read about what? Sarah asked. She remembered the newspaper clipping, but needed to know more.

Drugs! Eleanor announced.

There are always drugs on those estates, Alfred reasoned. You can't blame an innocent girl...

It was her family. All of them. They were the drug dealers. Her mother, her mother's sister. And they never did find out what happened to the sister's husband.

So what happened to Vaz Crow? Sarah asked.

Well she couldn't stay here. Not with our daughter in her condition.

Not that we were ungenerous, said Alfred. But you wouldn't want a girl like that staying with you.

So you never saw her again?

Yes, once, Eleanor began. After Yvonne...

Our daughter passed away in 1989, Alfred explained.

Eleanor stared at Sarah, eyes full of rage and malice. Vaz Crow turned up at our door just a few days after the funeral, she said, as if it were an outrage. We hadn't seen her for five years. She said she wanted to pay her respects.

Actually I was quite touched, said Alfred. She asked to see Yvonne's room. She was well dressed, respectable, so we let her. We were serving customers.

In a moment of realisation, Sarah imagined Vaz Crow upstairs searching for documents.

Has she been using our daughter's name? asked Eleanor, obviously reaching the same conclusion.

No, said Sarah, thinking quickly. I've got it mixed up, that's all. We never knew her background. There were no documents. I saw your daughter's name and address on a piece of paper and thought Vaz may be short for Yvonne. You don't know where Vaz Crow used to live, do you?

The Lipton Estate, that's all we know, said Alfred.

Sarah wanted to ask for directions but then thought she couldn't just leave this couple in distress.

I'm very sorry to have caused you such distress, she said, kneeling down and taking Eleanor's hand in hers. The hand flinched, but Sarah held on. A tragedy never completely goes away, does it? My brother's family have their own tragedy and I must serve it.

Eleanor nodded.

You've both been so helpful, Sarah said, rising. Thank you. I'll find my own way out.

She smiled, taking in the woman in the wheelchair and her stooped husband. Then she turned, found her way along the narrow passage between book cases and fled the shop.

The door tinkled behind her. She crossed the road and followed a footpath, just to be out of sight. It led to a church and a graveyard.

The sun was high, approaching noon on another hot summer's day. Sarah sat on a bench to think. Sebastian's wife was not Yvonne. Her name was Vaz Crow. She had grown up on a poor housing estate. She must have been the same age as the real Yvonne, because she used to come round with homework. She must have been in the same class, in the same year. The real Yvonne was born in May 1967. According to her parents, Yvonne had befriended Vaz aged thirteen. Or was that just when Yvonne had begun missing lessons? They had disapproved of Vaz, possibly because of her poor background. Alfred and Eleanor were certainly snobs. But at some point, Vaz had turned up and begged to be allowed to stay. That was just after a drugs raid on the Lipton Estate and an article in the Sussex Express branding her family A Plague Of Crows. What year might that have been?

Sarah's mind went round and round, trying to make sense of what she'd been told. What difference did it make if Yvonne were Vaz? She heard herself telling her brother and saw him shrug. It was only a point of information, it made no difference now. Unless... For the first time, Sarah entertained the possibility that her sister-in-law might have committed suicide. She had a secret, she had changed her identity and hidden her past.

If Sarah told her nephew, Michael, about his mother's past, would it stop him accusing his father? Was it acceptable to vilify his mother to redeem his father? The likelihood was that Sarah

would never tell her brother or his children or anyone else any of this. But Sarah herself needed to know.

She had already decided to visit the Lipton Estate, wherever it was. Surely someone there would remember. But first she needed to understand the chronology. Looking out across the graveyard, sizzling in the heat, she remembered that 1989 was when Vaz returned to pay her respects and to steal the documents. That was just after the real Yvonne died and her parents hadn't seen Vaz for five years. So the drugs raid would have been in 1984 or thereabouts.

Sarah stood up and began to walk back up the footpath towards the high street. Her dress was wet and sticky under the arms. It was too hot to move quickly. Vaz Crow, born about 1967, place unknown. But in her teens she'd lived on the Lipton Estate with her mother, her mother's sister and the sister's husband. Sarah remembered Eleanor saying that they never did find out what happened to the sister's husband. They were drug dealers on the estate in the early 1980s. In 1984 there had been a police raid. Was that when the sister's husband had disappeared? Had Vaz Crow remained on the estate after that? When she reappeared at Noble Books five years later, she'd been respectably dressed. What was the estate like?

She found out an hour later, when she climbed a steep hill and found herself facing an enclave of grey housing blocks, each about five storeys high, connected by concrete paths, small strips of brown grass and a car park. Few people were about. Loud music emanated from one of the open windows.

In the car park a small sporty car with twin exhausts and flashy chrome wheels slid into a space beside a dark blue saloon. She saw the window of the saloon roll down and a hand reach out. As

soon as she realised an exchange was being made, she turned and walked the other way. She recalled coming out of the Ritzy Cinema in Brixton and seeing such an exchange and in the back streets of Kemptown in Brighton

On the few occasions she'd bought drugs, and then only grass, it had been from a friend of a friend. Despite the drugs connection, she wasn't about to ask them about the Crows.

She had to find somebody older, someone who'd lived here for thirty years or more. The afternoon sun bore down on the concrete as Sarah trudged up one path and down another, looking for someone who might help. Her white sun dress was drenched, her red shoes cut into her feet and with matching red lipstick, she felt inappropriately dressed, too middle-class, too flamboyant.

A teenage girl pushing a buggy was walking towards her. The little boy in the buggy made Sarah smile. Looking up, she saw that the girl was smiling at her, the proud indulgent smile of a young mother.

I wonder if you could help me, said Sarah.

The girl stopped.

I'm trying to find out about someone who used to live here thirty years ago. Would your mother, or...

She don't live here. The girl shook her head. Sorry, she said, then thought. There's an old lady who lives on the ground floor there, at the end. She pointed.

Thanks, said Sarah.

The little boy dropped something. His mother went to pick it up. Sarah walked over to the flat on the end and rang its bell.

No one answered. She might be deaf, Sarah thought and rang again and again. Finally she rapped on the window. Still no one came. She was about to give up, when the front door of the next

flat opened and a woman with a thin, deeply lined face and dyed red hair poked her head out.

She won't answer you, said the woman. She's down the shops.

Just a minute! said Sarah, to stop the woman shutting her door. Perhaps you could help me.

The woman looked her up and down.

I'm trying to find out about someone who used to live here thirty years ago. Have you been here that long?

Who you after? she asked.

Her name was Vaz Crow.

The Crows? They never lived here. They lived up there, she said, pointing to the next block. Anyway, what do you want to know about them for?

Apparently there was a drugs raid in 1984. I want to know what happened to Vaz Crow after that.

No idea, said the woman, shaking her head and about to close the door.

But you know about the raid? asked Sarah, quickly.

Listen, I know all there is to know about them bastards but that don't mean I'm going to tell you.

I just want to know about Vaz.

Why?

Sarah was suddenly overcome by emotion.

Because she just died.

The woman's face registered surprise and then feeling.

Come in, she said.

Inside was beautifully decorated, a painting here, a plant there and, most surprisingly, simple furniture that looked hand-made. Very feminine, a woman's domain.

How did you find me? asked the woman, switching on an electric kettle. Then she thought again. Why were you banging on Mrs Pike's? She's only been here three years, since her husband died.

Someone, a young girl with her baby, said there was an old lady living there.

The woman stared at Sarah, as if she found it hard to believe.

Vaz Crow just died you said?

Yes, said Sarah.

The kettle boiled.

Tea?

Yes please.

You better sit down.

Sarah sat down. The woman, whose name was Rose, passed her a mug of tea, sat opposite and told her the entire story of the Crows from start to finish.

Terry Crow was a gyppo, she said, who conned his way into a council flat cos he had a baby girl.

Vaz? asked Sarah.

Yes, only Terry wasn't with Vaz's mum Sharon. He was with her sister Denise. Mind you, he could've been Vaz's dad, knowing him. Anyway he set himself up as the dealer round here and not just the dealer either.

What?

He was violent. Alright, if you want to know, he beat up every bloke that got in his way and had his way with every girl on the estate.

Sarah caught Rose's eye and realised what Rose was admitting.

Yeah, me too, she said. But that was nothing compared to what he did to his wife Denise and her sister Sharon.

Vaz's mum?

Rose nodded. Black and blue. You'd hear it. You'd see them the next day.

So, is that how the police caught up with him and raided the flat?

Rose shook her head. No, they never caught up with Terry. Denise and Sharon did that.

Sarah stared at Rose and Rose stared back. Birds sang outside, traffic rumbled far away. Sun shone in through a large window and lit Rose's thin, lined face.

What did they do with him? asked Sarah.

Officially? Nothing. Terry Crow died of a drug overdose, summer of 1980. Best day of my life. All our lives.

I see, said Sarah.

No you don't. Terry Crow never took drugs. That was his strength. He got everyone else hooked but he wouldn't touch the stuff himself, not even gange.

So how come he died of an overdose? asked Sarah.

Rose shrugged, sipped her tea and looked back at Sarah, as if waiting for the penny to drop.

You said it was the sisters who caught up with him. Do you mean they plied him with drugs?

Rose nodded.

But how, if he didn't take drugs?

He didn't take drugs but he got drunk all the time.

Oh, so...

So they got all the stuff he was dealing and injected it into him.

How do you know?

Rose's eyes narrowed. Vaz told me, she said.

Sarah was shocked. You mean Vaz saw it?

Rose nodded. So after that, the sisters took over Terry's business.

They became dealers?

Yes. Only without the rape and the violence, thank god.

Oh, so it was the sisters who got caught in the police raid.

No, they'd done a runner. Vaz came home from school and the police were there. They questioned her and told her that social services were on their way but Vaz didn't wait. She came over to me. I said I'd hide her. But she said she knew some posh people and was going to ask them to put her up. Never saw her again.

For the next hour Sarah chatted with Rose, asking her more questions, telling her everything she knew about Vaz who'd become Yvonne, who'd married Sebastian, had two children and whose life had ended at East Head six days ago.

Rose was a carpenter with a workshop in her spare room. She'd married once but had no children. She was fifty-four years old, eleven years older than Vaz and ten years older than Sarah. She seemed happy, independent and although alone, content with her lot. Sarah admired her and immediately began to think of herself as a single independent woman and to take strength from it.

When she left, Sarah walked quickly off the estate. She needed to feel alone and think. Vaz's uncle, who might have been her father, had beaten and raped those about him. Did he beat her? Did he rape her? What age had she been when her mother Sharon and Sharon's sister Denise had plied drunken Terry with his own drugs and killed him? Summer of 1980, Rose had said. And Vaz had witnessed it. Sarah couldn't imagine the effect it would have

on a thirteen-year-old. And then four years later, coming back to find that your mum's gone and the police are there. Vaz probably didn't have any money. She went to the Nobles. They wouldn't take her in. Not that noble then.

Mind you, being brought up like that, didn't necessarily make you into a nice person. Sarah realised she had no idea who Vaz-who-became-Yvonne was. She'd gone away and reappeared five years later, looking respectable. Did she find her mum? How had she made her way? Maybe she didn't just choose to change her name, maybe she had to change her name.

Sarah was relieved to find her car and felt an irresistible urge to get away from Lewes and go home. And, perhaps for the last time, home was Brighton.

Driving out of Lewes, past the prison and onto the A27, a thought popped into her mind. It caused her to swerve and pull over, onto the hard shoulder. She stopped the engine and turned on the warning lights.

She was thinking about her niece, Anne, her gothic pen-and-ink drawings and the stories they told. One story in particular pushed itself to the fore. The one about the greedy man who would not share his food. The two women - were they sisters? - had stuffed him full of cakes, till he died. Then they'd eaten their fill.

Replace food with drugs and it was what Vaz had witnessed. Was Anne psychic? Sarah played the parallel stories over in her mind.

A huge truck passed within inches of the car, shaking it. And shaking the already shaken Sarah. She switched the engine back on, warning lights off, indicated and pulled out.

It was a beautiful sultry afternoon. She took the Falmer exit across the fields, along the Downs. Blue sky, blue sea, rolling hills

and, coming over the rise, the little city of Brighton beyond, with its funfair and pier stretching out across the glittering water. Sarah felt emotional, for herself this time.

The bijou apartment was as she'd left it. Not as messy as she'd feared. She'd been in such a state. But a thin layer of dust had settled, so the place already seemed as if it were in the past.

She so wanted to stay. Having fallen out of the acting profession, sweet bohemian Brighton seemed like the apex of her aspirations. And the thought that she was now going to lose that as well, frightened her. If she had an income... If she had a way forward...

As she gazed around the little living room, her eyes stopped on a tiny baby-grow she'd bought as a symbol of motherhood, of her partnership with Carl and their family life ahead. She scooped it up, flung it in the bin, grabbed a roll of bin liners from under the sink and began stuffing all her belongings into them. Bedding, clothes, towels and toiletries. Never mind the order, she'd sort it out the other end.

Someone squealed behind her. – Oh it's you!

She swung round as if caught in a guilty act and saw Mark beaming. He flung his arms around her and kissed her. When they separated, she found that she was grinning.

I thought I heard someone, he said. I told Laurie, but he wouldn't believe me, would he? How are you? Laurie! Laurie! It's Sarah! So how was your holiday?

Sarah didn't know what to say. Mark had apparently been a wild boy right through his twenties until, a year or two before Sarah moved in, he'd been diagnosed as bi-polar. His partner, a dapper little man called Laurie, looked after him. But Mark was a very emotional soul and Sarah didn't want to trouble him.

It was obvious she was packing, so she just said I'm going to have to move out Mark.

But you can't, he said.

Laurie appeared in the doorway, smiling his sweet smile. He always seemed to wear blazers and slacks, his idea of casual. An airline pilot, commuting to Gatwick, he was the bread-winner. And despite the fact that he looked like a tiny penguin, he had an astute mind and was deeply kind.

Sarah and Laurie embraced. But not for too long, in case Mark became jealous. Laurie had been married to a good woman, who was still a friend. He'd only realised he was gay in his late thirties. While Laurie flew his passengers to exotic destinations, Mark imagined him having all sorts of affairs. But Mark was Laurie's first and only love.

Laurie was looking at Sarah, his eyes piercing and compassionate. What gives? he asked.

Sarah sank down into a chair. There was an accident, she said. My brother's wife drowned.

She looked at Laurie and Mark. Neither knew what to say.

I've got to be there. For the children.

Laurie nodded. How old? he asked.

They're adolescents. But you can imagine...

But this is awful! said Mark. Who's going to be my friend when Laurie's away?

I don't think that's the priority at the moment Mark, said Laurie, gently. I think we have to help Sarah to pack, don't you?

Mark just stood there in his huge floral shirt with his mouth open. But...

He rushed from the room. They heard him running up the stairs. Laurie shrugged.

Are you alright? he asked.

Sarah shrugged, stood up and started to pack. Laurie helped.

How are you going to get all this in your little car? he asked.

Sarah couldn't think. She was on automatic.

A while later Mark reappeared and announced that he was cooking them a candle-lit dinner. They would have it on the roof, like they used to. Sarah was touched. Mark was obviously coming to terms with the change and wanted to contribute. But she'd intended to leave tonight. There was no bedding on her bed.

Laurie saw her looking. We've got bedding, he said. And don't worry about clearing up. Anything you don't want, just leave it. Mark and I will sort it out.

So Sarah accepted that she would stay the night and, in a way, it calmed her.

On a clear warm night, Laurie, Mark and Sarah sat on the roof, beneath the stars eating roast lamb, sipping wine and chatting. Laurie kept guiding the conversation away from the drowning. But Mark wanted to know and eventually Sarah told them. Once she'd started, one thing led to another and everything that had happened spilled out. They were shocked that son Michael suspected his father of murder, that Yvonne was not Yvonne, that daughter Anne made up stories that paralleled her mother's secret past. But for Sarah herself it was this candle-lit meal, with the sights and sounds of Brighton's nightlife all around, that filled her heart to bursting.

Suddenly they both became aware that Mark was drunk. Very drunk. He was trying repeatedly to tell Sarah that he loved her. She thanked and cuddled him, but each time he began again. They didn't suggest that he went to bed, as he might imagine

some ulterior motive. They waited until his words all joined together into one long vowel sound and he fell off his chair.

Together they hauled him downstairs into the bedroom and onto his bed. Sarah left Laurie to see to Mark and, glass in hand, wandered about the roof, looking out across Brighton. By the time Laurie returned, she was feeling a bit low. She asked him about his work and which places he'd been to lately. He'd just returned from Barbados, before that, Goa. He was off to San Francisco on Monday. She asked him about Mark. Yes he was drinking again. Finally he asked her the question she'd wanted to avoid.

So what about you? he asked.

There's a little village just north-east of Chichester, called Wymple, she said, her voice soft and measured. All my family live around there. Hundreds of them. The Merricks. Builders of the empire.

She smiled. That's where I'm off to. Do you think I should tell my brother what I've found out about his wife?

No, Laurie said, a little alarmed. Why upset him? He may already know.

This hadn't occurred to her.

I can't make Sebastian out at all, she said. One minute I think he's in deep mourning, the next he's out to wine and dine with his slimy business partner Graham, and Charlie his skipper. He's tight-lipped and suspicious. He hardly speaks to the kids and yet last night he was full of genuine feeling, made me a meal. I don't know. Yvonne was such a strange person. Vaz I should say, Vaz Crow, who watched her mother and aunt ply Terry Crow with drugs, who stole her friend's identity. If I told Michael about his mum's past, he might stop suspecting his dad. Michael's planted spyware on Sebastian's computer, you know.

You told me.

Yes. Mind you, if I told him that he and Anne inherit, that Sebastian doesn't get a thing...

Don't tell anyone anything Sarah.

Really?

Just let them be. You're the curious type Sarah, you always want to understand people. It's what makes you such a great actress.

She beamed at him for his kindness.

Curb your curiosity, he advised. Or, if you can't do that, at least keep it to yourself. Don't make a show of it.

Is that what you think of me? she asked.

I think the world of you dear. Look, the summer will end. The children will return to their boarding schools. Your brother will get back on his boat. What will you do?

Michael won't go back to school, she said. He's eighteen. I don't think he's planning on university.

Laurie was shaking his head and smiling.

What? she asked.

I'm not asking you what other people are going to do. I'm asking you what you're going to do.

I've no idea, she admitted. I've always rushed at life. Now I'm going to wait.

Okay. But if you find yourself at a loss, just come home for a visit and we'll sort you out.

They chatted a while longer, then brought everything downstairs. Sarah preferred to sleep on the couch in Laurie's lounge but, after he'd gone to bed, she lay awake, unable to think and unable to let go.

Sarah awoke at first light and began lugging her belongings down to the front door. Having squeezed the cases in and stuffed the binbags above them, she was left with three bags that wouldn't go in. One by one, she opened them and pushed the contents into any cranny she could find. She had to heave at the doors to shut them. When she stood back, hot and flustered, she saw Mark and Laurie in the doorway. They were half dressed and half asleep. She went to embrace them. Mark was polite, unemotional, as if he'd already let her go. Laurie however seemed devastated.

Oh, your keys, she said. And the rent I owe you.

No, he said.

But she made him take the cash and his eyes collapsed into tears.

I'll be back, she promised.

She knew, as she pulled out, that she could only see through one mirror and that she'd have to drive very carefully. It was still early when she got onto the dual carriageway. Not many cars about yet. Passing through Worthing, she realised she had a headache. She'd buy some water, or even aspirin, but nothing was open yet. Later she passed a service station, but thought she'd make it back to the Grange.

By the time she entered the little village of Wymple, her head was banging, her vision blurred. A big black four-wheel-drive pulled out in front of her and she almost slammed into it.

Coming out of the chemist, having gulped back a glass of water and two paracetamol, she opened the side door without thinking and half her belongings fell out onto the pavement.

ELEVEN Day 7 continued Friday 30th July 2010

Each time Sarah thrust a pile of undies and CDs into the car, another pile fell off the top. Unable to formulate a strategy, hot, bothered and embarrassed, she was scrabbling about in the dust, trying to reclaim a scattering of paperbacks, when a pair of masculine hands appeared beside hers. She turned and saw, through her haze of headache and exertion, two green eyes flecked with gold.

It's alright, she said. I can manage.

Not to worry, said a soft Irish drawl. Many hands make light work, as they say. Allow me...

His voice was so clear and resonant that Sarah stopped and looked at the man. He had dark hair, slightly curly, a boyish face and pale skin.

Goodness me, he said, staring at her. I believe I recognise you. Then he frowned and shook his head. It'll come to me.

Sarah had only been recognised twice before. Once by a mother who'd seen her on a toddlers' TV show in the nineties, called Jump Up! and whose little boy invariably jumped up whenever Sarah called out the programme's catch phrase. The other time, a woman had rushed across the grass at Larkhall Park and accused her of murdering her own baby. Sarah had thought the woman insane, until she remembered having filmed a crime reconstruction, in which she'd played a mother who'd killed her child. But it was years since she'd done anything on TV and she thought the man must be mistaken.

He stood up, brushed the dust off his knees and smiled. He was tall and dressed in smart casual wear of the blandest pastel shades, which made him look like three flavours of ice cream.

Allow me, he said.

She stood back while he forced the last books in and slammed the car door shut. Then he fixed her with his golden green eyes and announced:

Sarah Jane Merrick, born third of February, 1968, daughter to Lionel and Jane, sister to Sebastian. Am I right?

Yes, but...

Tom Leland, he said, proffering his hand. It's amazing to meet you. You must come and say hi to the family. They'll be thrilled.

He was pumping her hand and beaming.

I'll tell you what, he said. You jump into your little motor and I'll lead you. Mine's over there.

He pointed to the big black four-wheel-drive she'd almost slammed into, which was now parked across the street. The thought of going to meet her extended family filled her with alarm. She wasn't dressed properly, she had a headache.

I can't, she said.

Why ever not?

My car for one thing. Look at it. And I'm not dressed. I look a mess.

You do not.

And I've got a raging headache.

Nothing that a nice cup of tea wouldn't sort. I'll tell you what, park your little motor behind the post office and I'll give you a lift. It's alright, I'll drive you back whenever you want.

Sarah couldn't put the words together to argue and found herself manoeuvring her car behind the post office and climbing into his big black Toyota.

You don't need to stay for long if you don't want, he reassured her as they moved off. Just give me a nod and I'll drive you back.

But everyone will be there and they'll be over the moon to see you. Did I introduce myself? – Tom Leland.

He reached his right hand across to shake hers and almost swerved into someone's garden. A worse driver than me, Sarah thought. Altogether too relaxed.

You're not a Merrick then, she said, by way of conversation.

I was married to Kate, he explained. Katherine Merrick. She passed away in March, the twenty-sixth of March. You may have heard.

I didn't. I'm sorry. It must be tough.

It is that.

They drove on in silence for a while, down country lanes with high hedgerows wilting in the heat.

How come you recognised me? she asked, her head clearing a little.

I spent a year, while Kate was ill, writing a history of the Merricks. It's what I do anyway and Kate enjoyed looking at the photographs and learning about her people.

The tenderness in his resonant voice calmed Sarah. Do you have children? she asked.

No. I wanted them, mind you, being adopted.

Oh...

Don't worry, I'm over all that now, though I suppose it accounts for my interest in family histories. I did investigate my past. And I did meet my mother once. So that's all done with. What about you? How's your life Sarah?

Sarah found Tom's openness unsettling. Usually it was a quality she admired but there was so much about Sebastian and Yvonne which she mustn't repeat and about her own miserable life which

she couldn't bear to reveal. So she said: Fine, thank you very much.

Tom nodded and kept his eyes on the road, which Sarah was grateful for. It occurred to her that he might well know about Yvonne's death. Others she was about to meet would certainly know. She'd have to be careful what she said. It had been a terrible accident. Just leave it at that.

They turned onto the private road, passing the sign carved in pseudo-gothic script which announced that they were entering Merricke. Tom told her the story, which she remembered, of one of her forebears who'd believed that a Welshman called Merrick had given his name to the continent of America and so had named his estate Merricka. Sometime later the A had been changed to an E, which was considered posher, as in ye olde Merricke.

They passed between pasture and gardens beyond, pulling up in front of the sprawling Merricke Manor, which made the Grange seem like a labourer's cottage. Each generation had added some superbly built monstrosity until the manor stuck out at all angles in all styles. Sarah followed Tom down the long hall into a vast modern kitchen where nine or more women were working and chattering.

Ladies! boomed Tom.

The chattering stopped. The ladies turned.

Allow me to reacquaint you with a relative of yours. Miss Sarah Merrick.

The Merrick women immediately clustered around Sarah, introducing themselves and welcoming her.

Hi, I'm Nancy. Roger's other half.

Pleased to meet you Sarah. I'm Pat and this is my daughter Gemma.

Sarah! – It's Helen. Ralph's daughter. We used to play behind the cowsheds. Do you remember when we got caught stealing from the orchard?

Sarah didn't remember. She thought it must have been someone else's life, so thoroughly had she wiped the slate clean. And yet the happy chatter, laughter and the faces bobbing like rosy apples in an orchard did stir something deep inside her. The warmth and support of a loving family. When you're on your own, you have to hold yourself up, move yourself forward.

A small blond woman stepped forward and introduced herself as Lucy. We met briefly a few days ago, she said.

Sarah remembered the woman she'd mistaken for Yvonne, when she'd glimpsed her at the annex window, whilst Graham was sketching her. That had been a shock. It was Lucy who'd helped the housekeeper when she'd left. On an impulse, Sarah turned and saw a tall woman in a shapeless dress, peeling potatoes in the corner. So this was where Mila had come.

Tom pressed a warm mug of tea into Sarah's hand.

Come, he said. Let's leave them to it. We'll retire to the sun lounge. Uncle Harry will be delighted to see you again.

The idea that Uncle Harry was alive still shocked Sarah. He'd been old when she was a child. How could he still be alive?

He must be in his hundreds!

He's ninety-two and proud of it.

Uncle Harry had been an all-pervading presence in her youth. He was the one you went to if you had a problem or if you wanted to know how to do something. His warmth and humour disguised a quick perceptive mind. He'd held the family together forever. Sebastian had adored him. It made her nervous to think how the years might have reduced him.

They passed along the corridor with its plush Victorian wallpaper, glowing wall lamps and the rich smell of polish. Tom led her through the Edwardian drawing room, which hadn't changed at all, into a sitting room which she vaguely remembered and, beyond that, into a vast modern lounge with huge white leather sofas and a cinema screen, which may have been a new extension. Beyond that, they entered the sun lounge, a hexagonal glass structure with blinds, vines and exotic plants, which sat right out on the south lawn.

When she saw Uncle Harry, the sun was full on his face and he looked twenty-five, if that. He was sitting back in a fine art deco armchair with his feet up on an Egyptian poof.

Tom knelt beside him. I have a surprise for you Harry, he said. I've brought Sarah Merrick to see you.

Sarah Merrick? Lionel and Jane's daughter. Rebellious little imp. Went into theatre. Did very well for herself I believe. Don't know what became of her.

She's here, Harry. In front of you. Look up!!

Uncle Harry looked up. Sarah stepped closer, then closer still.

Sit there! ordered Harry, pointing to the poof, from which he removed his legs. Ah, there you are. Now I can see you. Well Sarah, what have you been up to? Last I heard, you were attending the Central School of Speech and Drama in London.

Suddenly Sarah felt like a little girl on her grandfather's knee. Dutifully, she began to tell her story.

He interrupted her. Can't hear you! I'm deaf as a post! Mind you, I'd rather be deaf as a post than thick as a post!

Sarah gave a girlish laugh. Tom said he had to pop out to collect the golfers and Sarah continued with full theatrical voice projection. Intuitively she steered clear of sexual liaisons and

professional disappointments. The story she told was the story she'd have wanted to tell, though she did it to spare him the grief.

Nonetheless, when she'd finished, he said: I'd have helped you Sarah.

And she burst into tears. Luckily he didn't seem to notice. She dried her eyes quickly and drank her tea. The warm liquid cleared her head. The headache was gone and she listened as Uncle Harry told her how he'd helped her brother Sebastian.

Sebastian had always been good at numbers and betting games. He was also highly motivated. Uncle Harry had noticed that. – Well the boy wasn't going to be a builder, that was for sure. Harry sent him to London, to a brokers in the city. Idea was for Sebastian to become the family's financial adviser and investment broker.

...Not that that worked out quite the way we'd imagined, Harry reflected.

He did make millions, Sarah said, defending her brother. And he did come back. I thought he was the Merrick's money man for a while.

Uncle Harry brushed all that aside with a wave of his arm. – Terrible though, about Yvonne, he said. How is the lad?

He meant Sebastian. Sarah was about to answer when there was a hiatus in the entrance and umpteen golfers streamed in.

Barry got a birdie at the sixteenth, Uncle!

You should've seen Toby, Granddad. Straight into the lake. Both times.

As they crowded in, they noticed Sarah and stopped in their tracks. All except a few who were making business calls on their mobiles. She heard Uncle Harry introduce her as Sebastian's sister and was overwhelmed by handshakes, smiled and endless

interruptions. There was Barry, Phillip's brother. The brothers beamed. There was Richard, Cyril's boy, and Stephen, Allan, Mark, William... They made a fuss of Sarah. They paid her compliments and seemed delighted that she had returned to the fold.

Looking around, she noticed that they all had drinks in their hands and stood in groups, discussing building projects, loans and possible deals. This was the Merrick network in action. More business was probably done here on a Friday than Monday through Thursday in the office. Outside their children were playing with the croquet set on the south lawn. A couple of the men noticed and stepped out to stop them. The children ran off. Sarah couldn't see Tom and asked after him.

Oh we couldn't wait for him, said Barry, raising his drink. So, I gather you're an actress Sarah. Have you met my wife?

Sarah turned and saw Lucy.

We've met, said Lucy, smiling brightly. Now! she said, raising her voice. If all you marvellous men would put down your drinks for a moment, we need a hand getting the tables onto the lawn.

A Queen could not have had a quicker response. Men downed their drinks. Two helped Harry up and, in moments, Sarah was standing in the sun lounge with just Lucy.

I wanted to apologise, she said, for not having introduced myself as family when I came over to collect Mila the other day. I was so shocked by the things she said. I just wanted to get her out of there, after everything she'd been through.

Sarah listened, while Lucy regaled her with the insults Mila had suffered. How the children had ignored her or simply been downright rude. How Sebastian had returned after all those years and immediately lorded it over her. And those dreadful men, by which she meant Charlie and Graham. But the worst thing that

Mila had told her, was that, on several occasions, Yvonne had made sexual advances to her.

Sarah showed her surprise and wondered if it was true.

Awful what happens behind closed doors, said Lucy. Oh, by the way, you shouldn't have been in the sun lounge when the men returned. You weren't to know of course, but it's where they gather after golf and talk shop. Don't worry, you'll catch on.

With a quick radiant smile, Lucy swished out onto the lawn and began directing table settings. Sarah stood in the doorway watching and trying to work out who was who.

Who are all these people? she asked Tom when he joined her.

Well, that pretty girl there in the blue is Tamsin. She's Carol's daughter, the lady with the red rinse laying plates at the far end. She's married to, now let me see, you see the man chatting with Barry?

Hang on a tick, said Sarah, laying her hand on Tom's arm and smiling. I don't think I can take all this in. I'll tell you what, you sit beside me at the meal and whenever someone talks to me, whisper their name.

It's a deal, he said with a grin and led her onto the grass, where three long tables had been set, end to end, covered with crisp white tablecloths and best silver service.

It proved harder to sit together than they'd imagined as Lucy had other plans. She was adamant that Sarah would be seated next to Uncle Harry, who was already in place at the head of the table. Tom was to sit at the other end, nearest the children, who had a separate table, which Mila was presently setting.

While Tom negotiated, a large avuncular man approached Sarah. How do you do, he said. I'm Walter, Dora and Edmund's son.

Wasn't Dora, Ethel's daughter? Sarah asked, shaking his hand.

Yes, he said, gratified.

Ethel was remarkable within family history for being the only woman to go into business. She'd been a landscape gardener, acceptable for a woman, who in the 1920s had designed the grounds of many country estates, particularly in Buckinghamshire and latterly at Kew Gardens in West London.

Just a word of warning, said Walter. About Tom.

Oh? she said.

Well of course he's part of the family, if only by marriage and it's dreadful what happened to Kate. You know, I suppose?

Sarah nodded and waited.

Walter gave an awkward little shrug. Let's just say Tom's out of favour.

Can you say why? she asked.

Oh he's been trying to publish some hatchet job on the family. It really doesn't bear thinking about. He's been wandering around like a lost sheep ever since Kate died but we're buying his house so he shouldn't be around for much longer. Probably find his way back to the Emerald Isle, birds of a feather, you know. And you? I imagine you've had a bit of a bumpy ride Sarah.

Sarah had no opportunity to reply, as they were all called to table. Sarah sat down beside Uncle Harry, who smiled at her. Tom pulled up his chair on the other side, having done a private swap with Wendy's husband James. Soup was served.

It was a glorious day, air full of birdsong and butterflies and, despite the jarring notes of Lucy's barbed comments and Walter's warning, Sarah was happy to be in the bosom of her family and in particular between the two men she intuitively liked.

Conversation up and down the table centred around extensions and refurbishments to the various family dwellings and the morning's golf, with Barry's birdie and Toby's shots into the lake featuring prominently. Tom not only whispered people's names, he also whispered little instructions, helping Sarah to conform to family etiquette.

As the soup was being cleared away, Lucy's husband Barry mentioned Yvonne's fatal accident and asked Sarah to convey his sympathies to her brother.

There was a murmur of approval. Then Ralph, Barry's brother said: Mind you, shouldn't be sympathetic after what he did to his own dad.

Lionel? said Giles, across the table from Sarah, stabbing a piece of beef with his fork. Lionel was a fool. And you know what they say about a fool and his money. Giles rammed the meat into his mouth and chewed heartily.

Sebastian gave his father due warning, said a voice further down the table. Lionel insisted that Sebastian lent him capital for his hair-brained scheme.

That's George, whispered Tom.

Sarah nodded, but was too immersed in what was being said, to care who'd said it. They were referring to events surrounding the financial crisis of the late 1980s which, despite her absence, Sarah knew a little about. Sebastian, having made a fortune in the boom, had been pressed by his father Lionel into lending him a vast sum to finance an ill-advised housing refurbishment project. When repayment became due, the project remained incomplete and the markets had turned. The rights and wrongs of what had happened were a matter of opinion.

Couldn't refuse his dad though.

Didn't have to insist on repayment.

He did. Markets collapsing and all that.

But father and son. I mean, we're family. Merricks should help each other. For a son to bankrupt his own father...

Yes, it was a bad show.

We all lost our investments due to Sebastian, if you remember.

And then he goes and marries that awful woman.

Sarah almost gasped at Lucy's insensitivity. She was referring to Yvonne who had just died. A frisson went round the table. No one spoke.

Turning her head, Sarah noticed that Uncle Harry was surveying her, as if sizing her up. Someone asked for the parsnips to be passed, but it only served to extend the discomfort.

Oh I don't know, said Barry to his wife. Yvonne was no worse than Jane.

Ralph chuckled. Yes, he said, looking at Sarah. She had a lip on her, your mother, may she rest in peace.

Suddenly Sarah felt very awkward. Each statement seemed sweet, yet was barbed, as if the tasty food were poisoned. She lay down her cutlery and her plate was whisked away by Mila, who threw her a nasty smirk.

Sarah wanted to stand up, tell them what she thought of them and leave. But she wasn't willing to give them the satisfaction. This was the family she'd been born into and escaped from. She sensed that the nastiness would continue, but if they smelt blood it would be worse. So she smiled and when a bowl of apple crumble was placed before her, she said thank you.

Your sister-in-law's death was all an accident. That right, Sarah?

Yes Ralph. Accidental death.

Cream?

Yes thanks, Mila.

You've been staying at the Grange I believe, said Barry. What's your take on it?

Yes, what's your opinion, Sarah?

Were you actually at East Head? I mean, did you actually witness the, er, event?

No. No I didn't. I have no opinion. Except to try to help my brother and his children.

Ah yes the children.

How is Sebastian? Taking it pretty hard, is he?

Someone further up the table said something, which she didn't catch, though she could guess, as she heard the muffled laughter.

Sarah moved the crumble about the bowl but couldn't eat. She answered questions about Michael and Anne, until the children, having finished their food, crowded around and it was croquet time. She didn't feel like playing croquet, though Tom evidently did.

As the tables were cleared, she found herself alone with Uncle Harry, who placed his hand over hers and leaned in confidentially.

Are you going to get to the bottom of this? he asked.

For a moment she didn't know what he meant.

Of what? she asked.

Such a convenient death, he said, staring into her eyes.

Sarah opened her mouth to speak, but no sound came out. Uncle Harry leaned back, closed his eyes and said nothing more.

Tom rejoined them, pulling up the chair beside her and sitting down.

Aren't you going to play? she asked.

Not today. They've enough players, they say.

Two of the younger men helped Uncle Harry indoors for his afternoon nap. Sarah watched the players, half listening to Tom's commentary, putting names and relationships to faces.

Is your Merrick history to be published? she asked.

That was the idea, he said. Had a publisher lined up. Merricks put a stop to it. They wanted all the negative stuff out. Not that I'd included anything that would have compromised anyone living. But I couldn't take out all the darker stuff. Book would've ended up like a catalogue. Publishers wouldn't publish. Would've been different if Kate were still with us. Never mind.

What darker stuff? she asked.

Well, he said, looking about to check that there was no one within hearing. The building industry is always susceptible to dirty deals, greasing the palms of officials, using substandard materials. You know it was the Merricks who built the original Piccadilly Circus in London? Yes, well they couldn't skimp on the circus side, the side that came to be associated with Piccadilly, with all the electric advertising, Coca Cola sign and all. But when it was demolished in the 1980s, the backs of the buildings just crumbled into dust. It wasn't just the walls, but the foundations themselves. Not that anyone cared by then, it was long past. And not that you'd point the finger at Merricks in particular. It was common practice. It's just that the Merricks were better at it than most.

As Sarah sat back in the rich afternoon sunlight, watching the increasingly aggressive game of croquet, she followed Tom's

resonant, musical voice, almost purring as he wove his tales of the Merricks from Victorian edifices to Edwardian opulence.

In the 1920s the family had branched out into housing for the common man. After world war two, they'd been responsible for vast rehousing projects, new towns, industrial and commercial sites. One side of the family had branched out into roads and were responsible for the final section of Britain's first motorway, the M1.

Branching out was the significant feature here. A father might have many sons. Each son might set up his own enterprise within the family umbrella. Each might develop his own sector of the family network. And each son might, in turn, have many sons who would each do the same. Competitors felt that Merricks was effectively a cartel.

It was this which had led to the family's first real crisis. Following the Poulson Affair in the 1960s, Merricks were implicated in a series of investigations which alleged bribery of council officials, using materials of lower specifications and, in one case, receiving payment for an entire housing estate in Portsmouth which didn't exist.

Tom chuckled. Merricks survived, he said. Nothing came to court. Of course, there's all the personal stuff, battles within the family, affairs and the like. But I tried to keep most of that out of the book.

Sarah felt she was being asked to enquire about the scandals. Instead she asked: What really went on between my father and my brother?

Oh. Nothing. It's been blown up out of proportion. Your father saw a way of making a killing. He'd never made a penny. Not suited to the business. But he saw that everyone else was buying up old houses, doing them up and selling them on to upwardly

mobile professionals. Thought he'd do the same, only on a grand scale. Bought a series of old London wharfs at inflated prices and set about transforming them into luxury riverside apartments. And that's what you see there now. Worth a fortune. But Lionel didn't make that fortune, couldn't even complete the project. He was too late. The boom was over. Young Sebastian had warned his dad, but dad wouldn't be told. This was Lionel's project, his chance to prove that his wife and the family were wrong about him. Sebastian, who'd made a mint on the rising stock markets, couldn't refuse his father, but included tough stipulations on repayment and interest. When everything started to slide, Sebastian, who was no fool, insisted that his father honoured the terms of the loan, which ruined him. What made it seem worse, was Lionel's death the following year.

Listen Sarah, Tom said, coming closer and speaking softer. The Merricks don't really care about that. That's just business and their history is littered with family battles far more deadly. By comparison, Sebastian's actions were entirely above board, if tough. No, what the Merricks care about are the millions that they lost.

To Sebastian?

No. Not necessarily. But he was their broker. He guided them. You have to understand that, with the family, it's all bricks and mortar, An Englishman's home is his castle, that sort of thing. They're traditionally suspicious of shares and futures, they've no idea of hedge funds or short-selling, it's all too capricious, too abstract for the Merrick mind. But people are making millions and here's young Sebastian, who's invested his entire trust fund and come back a millionaire in just three years. It was too much for them. They threw their money at him.

Did he mismanage it?

Now there, you see, is where we have the problem.

There was a roar of anger from Ralph as his niece, Tamsin, knocked his croquet ball right off the lawn and down the west slope. Others cheered. Ralph must have been in the lead.

Most of the money that the Merricks invested came from, shall we say, dubious sources, tucked away in offshore accounts, that sort of thing. So, when the money was lost, they couldn't go to the authorities. There was no way for them to investigate. They had to take Sebastian's word.

But what do you think?

I've no idea. I'm no good at that sort of thing. It's quite possible that your brother was honourable. He had been, with your father.

He ruined him.

Oh well, as Giles said earlier, a fool and his money...

So you blame father?

I don't feel the need to judge people.

Don't you?

Sarah watched the melee on the croquet lawn. The game had paused due to the outbreak of several rows between competing players.

I think I'd like to go now, she said.

Right-you-are. Tom strode onto the lawn to explain that he was giving Sarah a lift, not that anyone was interested.

Sarah followed, to say her goodbyes. She was quick, not wanting to interrupt the conflict they so obviously relished. Even so, she overheard Barry and others mumbling - Come on! - Are we playing a game here, or what? - Yes, nice to see you again Sarah. - I think it's your turn...

The ball that ran into Sarah's foot was probably not aimed at her, though the look in Delia's eye left room for doubt. Sarah just smiled and hurried back toward the house, followed by Tom.

Passing through the kitchen, she spied Mila washing up and told Tom she'd meet him at the car. As soon as he'd gone, she marched up to Mila.

Why did you bad-mouth my brother and his family? she asked.

Mila swung round and Sarah noticed a brooch which she thought had belonged to her mother.

I don't have to answer your questions!

You do if you make accusations. What are your suspicions concerning my brother? You mentioned that you thought it wasn't an accident. Tell me! Did Yvonne come back to the Grange during the holiday?

Mila pursed her lips tight and said nothing.

Why did you tell Lucy that Yvonne had made sexual advances to you?

The look on Mila's face, staring down on Sarah, was imperious. Sarah had had enough.

I think it far more likely that you and Yvonne were having an affair and Sebastian, returning, spoiled it.

She saw Mila redden.

Don't worry, said Sarah. I've no problem with different sexual orientations and, quite frankly, I'm not going to mention it to anyone. On the other hand, if you ever repeat or mention anything to do with my family, I'll make it my business to find out everything about your past.

Sarah fingered Jane's brooch and walked out.

When she saw Tom's benign smile, as he waited by the car, she realised she was fizzing with rage. Not wishing to dump her rage

on him, she smiled, took her place in the passenger seat and sat quietly until they were off the Merrick's land.

Then she breathed deeply, watched the passing hedgerows and thought about the gentle man beside her, who'd said he didn't judge others.

I can understand the family not wanting you to publish your book, she said.

Yes, I'll not pursue it.

What will you publish next?

Oh I don't know about that. I'm thinking of setting up as a family detective, helping people to find their lost relatives. You see, I like the research part, but not the politics of publishing. I can't be doing with it.

So what are your plans?

Oh I don't know about plans. Difficult since Kate's passing you know. One step at a time.

You loved her.

Indeed. Though it made her angry.

Your love made her angry?

There was a war going on inside Kate. One side wanted to reach out to warmth and tenderness. The other side belonged to the family. You know what they say about the Catholic church, if they get you before you're five, you're theirs for life. That's how it is with the Merricks. What they don't realise is that, the way you behave to others, is the way you'll behave to yourself. If you're aggressive, suspicious, grasping, well it's like planting a minefield in your own head. So anyway, that was Kate's trouble. I wanted to save her soul but I couldn't even save her life. Here now...

He pulled up beside Sarah's little red car.

You take care now, he said.

You're selling your house, aren't you?

Yes, Ralph's buying me out.

Where will you go?

There's a little place called Allihies on the west coast of Cork. Very other-worldly but beautiful. I might spend some time there.

But how can you set up your business? You won't find many missing relatives there.

He chuckled. No. But you see it doesn't matter where I am for that. All those records, they're on the internet now.

On impulse she clasped his hand. Don't run away Tom.

His response was in his eyes, a timid helpless look as if he dared not accept kindness.

Having stepped out of the car, she remembered something.

I might need to find out about someone's past, she said.

I'd be glad to help.

They exchanged phone numbers. Sarah got into her car and, feeling self-conscious about her driving, carefully manoeuvred onto the road and turned left towards the Grange.

The moment she was out of sight, Sarah took a deep breath to release her and sped away from the whole experience as fast as she could. The Merricks' family values, their jollity, with its undertow of sheer nastiness felt like her particular kryptonite. It sapped her energy, her belief in the essential goodness of people, like nothing else. She'd been running away from it all her life.

A lowering sun cast deep purple shadows and the heat of the day hung in the country lanes. It was hot, even with the windows down. Her headache threatened to return. She shouldn't have drunk wine, an involuntary response when the nastiness began. All those poisonous smiles, she'd never had the stomach for it. No

wonder the Merricks drank. Tom was right, whatever harm you did to others, harmed you. Tom was harmless, a beautiful timid man. He was an orphan. Perhaps that explained why he rushed to do their bidding even as they rejected him.

She was also a fly in their web, she realised, moving back home to the Grange and the atmosphere there so secretive, isolated. It might have changed. Seb had promised to spend time with his children. On the other hand, Sarah felt unfocussed and unprepared.

Turning into Palmers Lane, she pulled off the road and came to a halt by a gate to a field. She was to say nothing about the Nobles or the Crows. Take Laurie's advice. Nothing either about the Merricks or Mila. She'd planned to move into the attic today but it was too late now. One more night in that ghastly guest room.

The way not to tell anyone anything, was not to think about it. But sitting alone as the sun set, thoughts arose uninvited. Where had Vaz been in the four years between leaving Lipton Estate and returning to the Nobles to steal their daughter's identity? She could have caught up with her mother and aunt. What if someone from her past had discovered that Vaz Crow was now a rich woman? What if Sharon and Denise were still around? Could Mila be connected? No, she was from east Europe somewhere. But the Crows were supposedly gypsies... Had Mila and Yvonne had an affair? Revisiting Mila's reaction, she thought probably yes. If Yvonne, during her three-day absence, had returned to Mila... If Sebastian knew, or found out... - Stop it.

She restarted the car, switched on the headlamps and drove on, her head throbbing. She didn't want any fuss. Just get her luggage up to the room and sleep. Coming up the drive, she cut

the engine as soon as she could and parked in shadow just short of the house. She managed to get two bin bags out and lugged them quietly, keeping to the grass, up to the entrance.

The moment she got into the hall, the dining room door clicked open and Graham's head appeared.

What are you doing? he asked, staring at her luggage as if it might contain a bomb.

Nothing, she said defensively.

Well where are you taking them?

Upstairs.

What is it?

My belongings.

Oh.

Who is it? called Sebastian from within the room.

Only your sister, said Graham and, looking from the bin bags to Sarah, asked: Want some help, or can you manage?

I can manage.

Righty-ho.

The door closed and Sarah stood in the hall, fuming. For one thing, Sebastian was obviously not spending the evening with his children. She hauled the bin liners up to the guest room and, tipping out the contents, took the empty bags down. She decided to use the back stairs and, on the last trip, having locked the car, she stopped in the kitchen for some water and a stale slice of bread. Almost immediately her head stopped throbbing. Get some sleep, she thought.

Sarah couldn't sleep. Having lain on the guest room bed for a couple of minutes to get her breath back, she decided to go and see Michael to ask his help clearing the attic in the morning.

When she knocked, there was no reply, although she thought she heard movement in the room. She knocked again. Finally the door opened a fraction and Michael's piercing blue eyes peered suspiciously out.

Oh it's you, he whispered. Come in.

He was furtive, quiet and quick to close the door behind her. The almost empty room was littered with unwashed plates and soft drink cans. Unlocking the bureau, he booted up his PC.

Have to keep it locked now, he murmured. Graham's been snooping.

Michael's fair hair was matted and his pale young face grey as if he hadn't slept for nights.

Look at this, he said, as a series of pages popped up on the screen. These are all Dad's accounts. Each under a different name or business. He flashed her a smile. I reckon they correspond to the documents I saw in Graham's car.

A rectangle at the base of the screen flashed red. Michael clicked on it and a page, headed Liberty Reserve, appeared. As they watched, an unseen hand typed in an account name and number.

What's happening? she asked.

That's Dad, downstairs.

Now?

He nodded. Under Password, a row of stars appeared.

Just consult the key logger and ...voila! he said, as a small box revealed the actual password.

What's he doing? she asked.

He's paying out seventeen thousand five hundred dollars to a company called Main Concern. The point is, it's an outpayment.

Well, if he's paying out, it means he has money.

Whose money?

But your original gambit, Michael, was that your father was broke and that's why he might have conspired to harm his wife.

Exactly! he said, giving her a nasty triumphant glare. I think he's got hold of Mum's capital and he's using it to pay his debts.

That's impossible, she said, then clammed up. Sebastian had asked her not to tell the children that they would inherit. On the other hand, he had also promised to spend time with them. So she asked.

Did your dad spent any time with you while I was away?

No! he said, as if the idea were ridiculous. Then he reconsidered. He came up once. Asked me if I'd like to have a chat! Spooked me right out. I was online, spying on him and suddenly he was spying on me. I just said I was busy. The point is, if he's got control of Mum's money...

Sarah interrupted him. He can't do that Michael, she said, calmly. It's not how things work. You may be a brilliant hacker, or cracker, or whatever, but you don't understand inheritance. The family solicitors hold your mother's estate until the reading of the will which, I'm told, is to be directly after the funeral.

At the word funeral, Michael turned to face his aunt. She saw in his eyes what he was going through, and how hard he was trying to avoid it.

Are you sure? he asked.

She nodded.

Okay, he said. But why all the secrecy, the suspicion and snooping? I mean, if he can control all these accounts, then surely...

Your dad is an investor. He was a millionaire in his twenties, Michael.

Michael's head jerked sideways, as if hit by a blow. He was tired of hearing of his dad's early success. It must rankle. Sarah noticed but continued.

Of course he keeps his transactions to himself. Of course he doesn't want anyone to know what he's investing. He's simply going about his business. Just because you don't understand...

I know all about his business.

Do you Michael?

She felt weary.

Want to know?

I suppose.

Okay, first there are the clients. They could be anyone, investors with money they can't declare, executives with insider information, hedge fund managers, the mob.

The mob?

My guess is that Dad would meet them at ports of call. All these guys have yachts. Anyway, he'd receive cash and instructions. Then he'd feed the cash through offshore or virtual accounts, make the investments...

How a young person could sit all day and night at a computer screen and conjure up mafia, yachts and god knows what else, completely baffled Sarah. Was all human life to become virtual? She heard his voice rabbitting on about numbers and procedures. It was hard to listen.

...which would be at least twenty-five percent. Anyway, when the investments yielded, he'd launder the proceeds. Know how to launder money?

No.

Simple. Spread it around loads of accounts in different territories, again and again, as payment for this or that, until even financial forensics can't trace it. Then you just collect it in some pristine numbered account and pay the client's nominated account, less your cut of course.

Sarah was exhausted. Really?

Really.

And that's what your dad does?

Yes.

How do you know?

Easy. History of his accounts, his laptop history, research into how things are done, mainly Adam.

What's Adam?

He's this guy in London who's been helping me. He works for the banks, so he should know.

The news that somebody else was involved, someone who worked for the banks, sent a chill through Sarah. How could Michael trust a stranger with sensitive information about his father?

But that isn't what he's doing now, Aunt Sarah.

Adam?

Dad. Listen, soon after the markets crashed, end of 2008, he stopped trading. You'd have thought he'd make a fortune out of a crash. He did at the end of the eighties.

Did he?

Sarah thought of the conversation at the Merricks. Had Sebastian taken the family's money, told them it was lost in the crash and made a fortune himself?

I think he fucked it. Maybe he was over extended.

Maybe he didn't see it coming.

Took his eye off the ball? Shouldn't think so. Everybody knew. Even the bank of England.

Did they?

Can you imagine what'd happen if he lost millions of his clients' dosh? I mean, those people aren't law abiding idiots and some of them, the Chinese, the Russians, they'd come after him.

You're saying he stopped doing business?

Stopped investing. He kept moving money around.

Then that's what he's doing now. Just moving his money around.

No. I know Dad's accounts. This is different.

He pointed to the screen.

He's paying out to accounts I can't trace. My guess is that he's hugely in debt, to the mob or one of those black market groups, and he's trying to find a way out of it. I think he's desperate. If you're right about Mum's estate, he may be playing for time till he inherits.

Sarah's instinct was that, if Sebastian were in trouble, they should help him. She contemplated telling Michael that he and Anne would inherit, according to their father. But he would just scoff and she had no proof that it was true. Meanwhile he was telling her about some encrypted emails he couldn't decipher.

He's got some Swiss dongle device which I can't hack. They could be the ones putting the squeeze on him.

Sarah tried to work out if telling him about Vaz Crow might stop him spying on his dad. She couldn't even remember why she shouldn't. Laurie had advised her not to say anything, so she headed for the door before she blurted out things she might regret.

Where are you going? he asked.

I'm tired Michael.

You're not going to tell Dad?

She turned on him.

How come I'm not allowed to tell my brother that his own son is spying on him, but it's okay for you to reveal your dad's personal business to some bank employee? Eh? - Some unknown person you've never met, who, for all you know, may be in the pay of this mob you're on about. Or, more likely, assigned by the bank to investigate.

Adam? You're kidding.

Have you met him?

Adam's alright. He used to be a hacker like me.

Have you met him?

No.

You arrogant little shit. When you first came to me with this stuff about your dad, I decided to humour you. He's young, I thought, he doesn't even know his own feelings. He disguises his grief as moral outrage and looks for someone to blame. It's classic. So what do I do? I decide to go along with it, in the hope that, as your rage abates, you'll come round. But however you psychoanalyse it, involving a bank official is something else entirely. Do you understand?

Michael's mouth tightened into a mean little line. He wasn't going to answer. She gave up.

Well understand this: Deal's off!

She wrenched the door open.

Why did you come to see me just now? asked Michael, in a little, swallowed voice.

She hovered in the doorway, trying to remember.

Oh, something else. Doesn't matter.

What?

I was going to ask you to help me tomorrow. I want to make the west attic my room and it'll need clearing. As I say, it doesn't matter.

You moving in?

Sarah didn't know what she was doing. She shuddered, threw an arm in the air and left the room. Just as the door closed, she heard Michael call out.

I'll help.

In the corridor she stopped and leant against the wall. She was in a mess. Ever since Yvonne had drowned, she had been mesmerised by the notion that it might not have been an accident. This had been prompted by Michael, who was obsessed with proving that his father had a motive. Sarah had discovered that Yvonne had a past. But nothing had come to light which connected Sebastian or anyone else to the events at East Head. All these theories and unanswered questions simply hovered like spectres in the air. It was grief and it played itself out as a kind of haunting. A way to keep thinking about the person who had died, a way to come to terms with it. An unhappy drunk woman had fallen overboard. It was terribly sad but that was all.

It was odd that Yvonne had been absent for three nights before the accident. It was true that Sebastian had financial problems. He'd admitted as much, the night he'd made her a meal. There

were four years between Vaz Crow leaving the estate and her taking on her dead friend's identity. A question popped into her mind. Why had Vaz become Yvonne? There had to be a reason. As soon as she'd thought of it, she couldn't let it go.

A thin strip of light glowed beneath Anne's door. Sarah knocked. She heard frantic movement within. Why was everyone so secretive? That's what Sarah couldn't handle, the divisions between people, whether it was the Merricks' spitefulness or Michael's spying. She thought, bleakly, that everything she did was an attempt to kiss the world better. But why shouldn't there be tension, individuality, dissonance?

The door opened an inch but Anne, unlike Michael, did not invite her in.

What do you want?

Sarah flustered. Actually I wanted to come in and read your stories.

No! said Anne, very abruptly. Not now. I need to be alone. I could bring them to you. Which ones do you want?

All. I wanted to read them all. No, don't bother. Some other time.

Sarah backed away. She felt like a fool. She was making mistakes. Everything was a mistake. She went to her room and lay down on her bed. In the dark, she fought against the desire to go to the attic and study Yvonne's box file. She tried to sleep but events churned around in her mind until only chaos made sense.

She heard the door open and saw a silhouette of Anne in a nightgown, piled high with her artwork.

Oh, said Anne, thinking Sarah was asleep.

Sarah jumped up to help her niece. Cases and bin bags lined the room. The only free space was the bed. Sarah laid Anne's artwork down on the duvet and thanked her.

Don't bother to return them tonight.

No.

Anne looked around the room. This your stuff?

Yes.

Anne opened her mouth to say something, then thought the better of it.

...Anyway, she said, turning to go. Oh...

She fumbled in the pocket of her nightie.

I rolled you one.

She handed Sarah a spliff and a lighter.

Thanks, said Sarah.

See ya.

The door closed, leaving Sarah in moonlight. As she sat on the bed, the sheaves of art paper slid into her lap and threatened to spill onto the floor. Gripping them with one hand, she groped for the bedside lamp and switched it on. Carefully she gathered Anne's stories and stood up. She had to make some space. She piled all the bin bags up the opposite wall, in front of the fireplace. The room was hot with stale air, so she opened the window. The air outside was just as warm, but fragrant. She took a small glass from the wash basin and put it on the bedside table to use as an ashtray. Plumping the pillows, she sat up in bed and began to separate each story from the pile, placing them around her.

There was no sound in the house, no sound from outside, except a faraway hum of traffic. If anything, the little family at the Grange seemed even more isolated. Anne had definitely not wanted her to enter her room and had made a point of telling

Sarah not to return the stories tonight. Glancing at the table beside her, she thought, ungenerously, that the spliff might be Anne's insurance policy. Sarah would get stoned and fall asleep. It seemed like a good idea and for a moment she couldn't remember why she'd wanted to study these stories. She'd wanted to find out more about Vaz Crow. But interpreting these fairytales wouldn't help, unless Anne was somehow psychic, which was ridiculous.

Sarah decided to give them a quick look through, then clear them away, smoke the jay and relax. First she chose the tale of the sisters who fed the greedy man to death. The images of the tyrannical glutton and the skeletal sisters made Sarah giggle. There was a dark humour in Anne's work. Each pen and ink drawing was full of violence, the women being starved, the mountainous man on the couch stuffing his sweaty face with cakes. The characters were so extreme, the horror distilled into comedy. But if there was any connection between this story and Vaz having witnessed Terry Crow being plied with drugs, it was a coincidence.

Sarah picked up another story she'd previously read. This depicted a battle for a young girl's soul, between a handsome wizard who loved her and an old crone who wanted to destroy her. The girl might have been Anne, fair-haired and innocent. The old witch was twisted, with buboes and warts and a pointy hat. The wizard shone like a saint. They lived in a cottage on the edge of the forest, weaving their magic, casting their spells, good and bad, each more powerful than the last, until the cottage itself crackled with forked lightning.

When the girl tried to escape, the door handle gave her such a shock that she fell back, unconscious. The old crone checked the girl's pulse. No pulse. She was dead. The witch stood on the roof

of the cottage and cackled. And the cackles set light to the trees of the forest.

Inside, the girl awoke. Next to her she found the witches book of spells and cast a fire spell on the witch cackling on the roof above her. As the witch caught light, the young girl ran from the cottage into the fiery forest. Looking back, she saw the thatched roof ablaze and the old crone falling into the house, just as the wizard returned.

The girl wanted to warn him. She cried out but he could not hear her and, as he entered, the cottage exploded and the final page was a frightening image of the young girl, now a witch herself, running away through the burning trees.

There was no humour in this story. It was upsetting. It shed no light on Vaz Crow. No reason why it should. Just a fairytale. Sarah reached over, lit the joint and picked up another story.

An ancient sailing vessel was caught in a tempest. The captain was awoken by a sailor. He left his beautiful young wife to sleep while he called his men on deck. They turned the clipper, mast bending, sails ripping, out of the storm. For a moment, the captain saw land ahead. Then a great wave, like a vast mouth, rose up and swallowed the vessel whole. All lives were lost. The storm fled with the night.

At daybreak a woman crawled out of the sea and fell upon the rocks which lined the shore. It was the beautiful young wife of the captain. The warm sunlight and gentle lapping of the waves roused her. She had no idea if she was still alive.

Later that day, she entered a small fishing village where a handsome boat was about to set sail. She mingled with the crowd until she saw a kindly old couple and asked them if she might

have some water to quench her thirst. The old couple ignored her, didn't even seem to have heard her.

After that, the girl asked everyone, until she realised that none of them could see her. She was dead then. But if she was dead, why did she feel alive? Perhaps she was a spirit. She looked about for a body to inhabit. Just then, the captain of the boat about to sail, stood on deck with his wife, waving at the villagers who'd come to see them off on their voyage. She stared at the wife on deck.

In the next image, the wife had a strange look in her eye and the girl was nowhere to be seen. After a hearty meal, the captain and his wife went to bed. In the night, the wife awoke. She sat bolt upright in the bed, her face shining, and called for a tempest to swallow the boat.

Sarah hated the story and put it down rather quickly. There was something horrible in it which gripped her. It was circular and went round in her head, until there was no escape, until she felt she might become the captain's wife, lost, alone and doomed to cause endless shipwrecks.

She felt sure there must be a point to it, something she was missing. Glancing up, she beheld a vision of souls trapped in dark floating bubbles, before realising they were her binbags. The spliff had gone out. She relit it and picked up another fairytale, hoping it was a funny one.

Beneath a vast overhanging rock in the middle of nowhere, sat the little village of Ugly. Here every thought and every deed was ugly and in the centre of this village dwelt the Ugly Girl. She had been found in a ditch by some ugly teenagers who had brought her back and paraded her as the ugliest thing they'd ever seen.

She was pelted with cow dung and made to work day and night in the tavern.

Only in her sleep was she free. Then she would dream marvellous dreams and awake with one word upon her lips: Beauty. But that was a word which could never be uttered in the little village of Ugly. So she spent her every waking moment slaving and serving and life passed her by.

One day, while she was being spat upon by some local farmers, a golden chariot flashed out of the sky. As it passed, a gorgeous young prince alighted and ordered a jug of ale and a pie. The townsfolk were suspicious. He's not from these parts, murmured one. Instinctively they grabbed rocks. As the Ugly Girl brought the Prince his hearty snack, she leant down and whispered timidly in his ear. Beware sire, for they will attack you. The Prince stared at the Ugly Girl and gasped.

Instead of bewaring, he drew her close and told her the story of a boy and girl who'd grown up together in a state of grace. But when the boy's evil brother became king, he demanded the girl as his bride. And when she refused, he cast her out of the kingdom of joy forever.

The Ugly Girl was frightened. Why was he telling her this garbage. They would both be attacked. But the Prince persisted. You remember, don't you, he said. You even remember the sacred word. She thought he must be mad. Tell me the sacred word! he demanded. Suddenly a shape formed on her lips and before she could stop herself a word came flying out. Beauty, she said.

The crowd shrank back in terror. Then they rushed forward in rage, hurling their rocks. But the Prince, her childhood friend, swooped her up into his golden chariot and carried her back to the

kingdom of joy where they dwelt together in realms of golden splendour.

Sarah smiled and, laying down the pages, relit her spliff and inhaled. The Ugly Girl had been the most poetic story so far and had a happy ending. Sarah had forgotten that she was reading these stories for any reason other than pleasure, and the drawings, which were stunning. She picked up another sheaf and read its title: The Encyclopaedia of Eve.

It featured a small dark-haired girl with big drooping eyes, whose austere parents had decided that she was to be the cleverest, most knowledgeable girl in the land. Each day they crammed her with facts and surrounded her with books, until the books obscured all light and Eve was left in darkness.

As Eve lay softly weeping in the endless night, a little fairy appeared, hovering like a dragonfly before her eyes.

What's wrong my dear? asked the fairy, in a voice like tinkling glass.

My parents say I must learn everything, whispered Eve.

No one can know everything, said the fairy.

But if I don't learn everything, they won't love me. I keep trying but it's hurting my head. The trouble is I'm not clever.

What's that noise? asked Eve's father, entering.

Who are you talking to? demanded her mother.

I'm talking to this fairy, said Eve.

Nonsense. There are no such things as fairies. Only facts, thundered her father.

But look! said Eve.

The tiny fairy hovered in front of Eve's parents. Her mother brought out a broom and tried to swat it, but the little gossamer

creature zipped out of the way and, landing on Eve's shoulder, addressed the parents.

If you love your daughter, she said, you will give her love and kindness.

Love and kindness won't pay the bills! insisted the mother.

But can't you see the harm you're doing? Just look at your daughter.

There was a close-up of the daughter's face, all lopsided with a lump on her forehead.

Sarah froze. The real Yvonne Noble had died of a brain tumour. The books she was surrounded by, represented the bookshop. And her name was Eve. Sarah forced herself to read on.

The father's hand appeared either side of the fairy. The hands clapped and Eve's little angel disappeared in fairy dust.

Name all the pharaohs of Egypt in order! screamed Eve's mother.

Eve's head seemed to get bigger and to glow.

Give me the value of pie to the nearest zillionth! yelled her father.

There was just one image on the last page. It depicted Eve's head exploding, releasing all her knowledge back into the universe. In the bottom right hand corner, Anne had written: And that was the end of the noble Eve.

Sarah let the pages fall. The noble Eve. Yvonne Noble. Surely that was not coincidence. She didn't believe in psychics and yet, between mother and daughter, there might be some level of umbilical connection, some kind of telepathy. Was it possible?

It was late at night. The stories had spooked her even before she had made the connection. Now her mind floated in a sleepy

stupor, searching for patterns and finding no focus. Some time later, she picked up the last story.

Three witches danced about a cauldron. Villagers drank their witchy brews and fell about laughing. The Lord of the Manor rode in with his knights. They caught the youngest witch and burned her to death.

Sarah could take no more. Perhaps it was the police raid on the Lipton Estate. Perhaps she was loosing her marbles. She was stoned. She rolled over and fell asleep.

FOURTEEN Day 8 Saturday 31st July 2010

Birdsong filled the room and bright sunlight shone blood red through her eyelids. Her body was a ball of heat under the duvet. Kicking off the covers, she heard a gentle splashing of papers as they slid from bed to floor.

Seconds later Sarah was scrabbling about, gathering Anne's artwork and trying to put the stories back in order. Her head, still in clouds of sleep, merged fairytales with real events. Picking out the cover of *The Greedy Man*, she saw the murder of Terry Crow, as if she'd been dreaming it all night. Eve's lopsided face became the real Yvonne, dying of a brain tumour. The Lord and his Knights rode up to the Lipton Estate, but the witches and their drugs were gone, leaving only adolescent Vaz. And Vaz was also the Ugly Girl. The Prince may have been a boyfriend on the estate, or Sebastian, or wish fulfilment...

As her mind began to sort dream from reality, Sarah tried to interpret the other stories. The Wizard and Crone who battled for the girl's soul, might have been Vaz's own parents, or the Nobles,

Eleanor and Alfred. Or even Sarah's parents, Vaz's in-laws, Jane and Lionel. There were many possibilities, but the girl was always Vaz.

Unaware of time passing, Sarah sat on the floor, leafing through fairytales as the sun rose in the sky. She drifted through the last story, in which a captain's wife survived a shipwreck as a spirit, entering the body of the next captain's wife and causing another shipwreck. It was certainly about changing identities, about Vaz becoming Yvonne. But also about a wife, a captain's wife, who wrecked people's lives. She thought about Sebastian on his yacht, the Princess, named after her perhaps, and her terrible death overboard.

Sarah's heart flooded with feeling. For the first time she felt sympathy for her sister-in-law, for someone who thought of herself as a bad spirit and for the loneliness of a person who has shed their true identity.

Sarah suddenly understood that she needed to find out about Vaz for her own reasons. She didn't know what it would mean for her life, she would have to find out.

So she phoned Tom. A sleepy voice answered. She told him she needed to find out about someone called Vaz Crow. He asked her to hang on while he found a pen. He quizzed her on the christian name. She didn't know. The Crows had been gypsies. Vasilla? All she knew was that Vaz had been born in the late sixties and grew up in Lewes on the Lipton Estate. Sarah wanted to assure Tom that she would pay him for his work, but he rang off, saying he'd get onto it.

It was late morning but no one was up. Sarah decided to start clearing the attic on her own. First she piled everything into the centre of the room and began to wash walls and sloping roof. With

sunlight streaming through the open window and her arms dripping with suds, the rhythm of work took over. Dreams and fairytales were washed away with the cobwebs. Sarah re-entered her own life: Get the attic done. Move in. Move forward.

There were layers of filth everywhere. Each patch took at least three washes. Every so often she had to traipse down to the kitchen for fresh soapy water. Finally one wall was sparkling and, as she wrung out the cloth, Anne's sleepy head came bobbing up the stairs, followed by her nightie.

Oh, said Anne. You moving up here?

I'm sorry if my noise woke you.

I'll get some clothes on, she said and bobbed back down.

Some moments later, she reappeared, in T-shirt and shorts and without being asked, began cleaning the ceiling above the window. When the water splashed down on her, Sarah heard her giggle. A little later, Sarah went to rinse her cloth and found the bowl and Anne missing.

Sarah glanced around the attic. Surprisingly big. Even with Anne's help, it would take all day. But beautiful, and the view to the hills beyond would be lovely to gaze out upon.

Michael's on his way, Anne announced, returning with fresh soapy water. What are you going to do with this lot?

Sarah stared at the vast mounds of boxes, crates, sewing machine, radiogram, stacks of records, sideboard, broken or discarded chairs, table, books and magazines. She had no idea. She couldn't dump them.

Michael joined them, clumping up the stairs and appearing, haggard and pale-faced in the light. Anne handed him a cloth and Sarah watched them get down to work, before she realised that

she should be working too. There was a lovely feeling in the warm room as the three of them scrubbed away at the walls.

Stop it Michael! Anne said, giggling. Make him stop it.

Sarah turned and watched Michael flicking water at his sister with his rag. Sarah was about to say something, when Anne dunked her cloth in the bowl and threw it at her brother. It hit him in the face and he lunged at her, holding her tight with one arm, while reaching for the bowl with the other.

Make him stop. Make him stop.

Well you started it, didn't you? Didn't you? he chanted, holding the bowl above his sister and threatening to pour.

Anne twisted free and, jumping, head butted the bowl so that the water tipped back over Michael. Sarah roared with laughter. Perhaps she should act like a parent, but they were so playful, it was a joy to see. Michael, giggling, grabbed a dirty mop and pursued Anne around the pile of old furniture and boxes. Lurching forward to mop her face, he skidded and fell back on the wet floor. Anne rounded on him with a spray bottle of cleaning fluid. He tangled his feet in hers, to topple his sister. Sarah, clutching her ribs from laughter, noticed Grandma's sewing machine perched precariously.

Stop! she called.

Surprisingly they stopped and looked at their aunt with sheepish grins like naughty children.

I should have stopped you earlier, she said, securing the sewing machine, but I was thinking how lovely you are together and what a pleasure it is to know you.

Their faces shone with the compliment. Anne flashed Sarah such a grateful smile that Sarah felt emotional. Better late than never,

she thought, watching her niece thrust out a hand and haul her brother up.

What are we going to do with all this shit? asked Michael.

Main attic, I thought, said Anne.

Let's do it, he said, hoisting a large crate onto one shoulder and starting off down the stairs.

Anne followed with the sewing machine. Sarah sat on a box of books, ribs aching from the fun and wishing she'd known them while they were growing up.

Below, there was a loud thud, followed by angry shouting. Sarah thought it might be Sebastian telling his children off for the noise or for moving stuff out of the attic. She rushed down to defend them and take responsibility.

She saw Anne standing beside the crate and beyond, Graham, in his blue linen suit, strolling off down the corridor. Anne beckoned to her aunt.

Graham was in Michael's room, she whispered.

Michael was inside, unlocking his bureau.

Shut the door, he hissed.

Sarah stood by the window, watching him, as he booted up his PC. Anne remained by the closed door.

What do you think Graham was up to? asked Sarah.

Remember a few nights ago, when he stopped me outside Charlie's room?

Yes, Sarah said.

I think he got suspicious. Probably doesn't know why. Only thing in this room is the PC and it was locked away, so I don't... Hang on. Dad's online.

Michael tapped instructions in and a succession of bank account pages flashed up on the screen.

What are these accounts? I don't know these accounts. There's no history. Look.

Sarah and Anne looked, but the screen changed faster than their eyes could focus. They glanced at each other.

Michael was mumbling names of banks under his breath as he worked, reciting and checking account numbers.

Incomprehensible, said Sarah.

Don't even try, said Anne. He built his own computer when he was fourteen. He's mad about all that.

Ssh, said Michael. These are the accounts he's been pouring money into. I didn't think they were his. Look, there's almost a million in this one alone.

Sarah had switched off. She was gazing out of the window at a car that was rolling up the drive. It was a police car.

A police car, she said.

Anne joined her at the window. There's a police car in the drive, Michael.

Probably come to arrest Dad, said Michael. Look what he's doing. He's closing all his other accounts.

I'll go and check, said Anne, and raced out of the room.

All of them. Look, Aunt Sarah. As fast as his fingers can move. Let's look at the new accounts. Oh, he's switched off. Never mind. I've got them logged. Let's have a look... There are, let me see - one, two, three, four...

Michael?

Yes?

Didn't you tell me that your dad has stopped doing business?

So?

So is it possible that he's simply securing his fortune? That he hasn't lost it, as you'd thought, or fallen foul of some gang?

Why has he got eight new accounts then? Why is he closing all the others.

I don't know, but..

Anne burst into the room.

It's alright, she said. They just came to give Dad his stuff back. He just had to sign for the documents and boat keys. They're off now.

Sarah and Anne went to the window and watched the police leave.

He's planning something, mumbled Michael, still in a world of his own. I bet it's to do with the Swiss. He'll be back online in a bit.

Can you hear shouting? asked Anne.

Sarah couldn't.

It's Dad! said Anne and ran to the door.

Sarah followed her. In the corridor they heard Sebastian's angry voice echoing up the stairwell.

He's coming up, said Anne, fear flashing across her face. Would you deal with Dad, Aunt Sarah? There's something I've got to do.

Anne fled along the passage and ducked into her room as Sebastian arrived, fuming, eyes bulging, at the top of the stairs.

Who's stolen my laptop? he roared, sweeping past Sarah into the doorway of his son's room. Michael? What have you done with it, eh?

Michael stood in front of his closed bureau. What, Dad? he asked, innocently.

Sebastian pointed at the bureau. What's in there?

My school work, my PC.

He doesn't have your laptop, Sebastian, said Sarah, calmly.

Sebastian swung round and saw his daughter emerging from her room.

I haven't got it, Dad, said Anne, quickly.

Sebastian suddenly became aware of the crate and sewing machine beside him. What the bloody hell is all this? he barked.

Sarah explained that she was moving into the west attic and that the children had been helping her.

Where?

The attic. You remember. I used to like spending time up there when we were kids, Seb.

There are perfectly good rooms in the house. It's not even decorated. And where's all this going?

Sarah was about to humbly ask if she might use the central loft, since that already contained storage, when Charlie called up.

Panic over! Graham's got it.

What the bloody hell is Graham doing with my laptop? roared Sebastian and galloped off down the stairs.

I've got an idea, said Michael. You two stand guard at the top of the stairs.

He pulled a USB stick from the pocket of his damp jeans and ran off, past the stairwell, to the far end of the corridor and disappeared into Graham's room.

Sarah heard Sebastian below, demanding to know why Graham had his computer.

I hid it when the police turned up, that's all, replied Graham.

Why? The police weren't going to touch my laptop!

Not the police, Seb, said Charlie.

Your boy, said Graham. He's been taking an interest.

Sarah felt nauseous. How dare Graham accuse Michael. Graham was the one who'd been in Michael's room. And so what, if Michael

was interested. He's your son, she thought, her blood boiling, of course he's interested. How could Sebastian allow himself to be influenced by these other men? Sarah felt she'd been apologising for her brother's behaviour throughout. She'd wanted to bring the family together. But it was Sebastian who divided it, despite his promises.

Leaving Anne at the top of the stairs, Sarah walked back towards the attic, intending to finish washing the walls and cool down. Passing Anne's room, she heard someone moving inside. Flinging open the door, she came face to face with a dark-skinned, curly-haired adolescent, who smiled sweetly.

Hello, he said. I'm Toby.

Anne appeared behind Sarah and bundled her into the room.

Please don't say anything to Dad, she pleaded. He'll go ballistic.

Sarah didn't doubt it. She didn't know what to think. She couldn't allow this pretty young man to stay in Anne's room without informing her father.

Please Aunt Sarah. Toby is my artist friend. He was concerned for me, after what happened. He's travelled miles to get here. His parents know, it's just...

I don't know, said Sarah.

Please, begged Anne.

On the floor, behind Toby, Sarah noticed a large drawing of a witch on a broomstick. It was all done in black ink, except that the witch had blond hair and bright blue eyes like Anne, or her mother.

Where do you get your stories from, Anne? she asked.

What?

Your fairy stories. Do you make them up?

Anne flashed Toby an embarrassed little grin, then turned to her aunt and blushed. They just sort of come to me, she said.

Sarah sensed that it wasn't true. You want me to keep your confidence, she said. How about being straight with me? Where do you get your ideas?

Well, they're based on bedtime stories when I was young, if you must know. But I don't see what that's got to do with Toby staying.

Whose bedtime stories?

Mum's.

Sarah was struck dumb. Her jaw dropped and her hand went to her chest. They were Vaz Crow's own stories.

I thought you invented those stories yourself, said Toby. Don't you write any of them?

Before Anne could answer, Michael ducked into the room. I've planted the trojan on Graham's laptop, he said, panting. Oh, hi Toby.

Michael, said Anne, please tell Aunt Sarah that it's alright for Toby to stay. And not to tell Dad.

Oh, said Michael and turned to Sarah. Can I have a word with you in private, Sarah?

He opened the door to lead her out. But in the doorway, she stopped him and hissed.

I can't allow her to keep a sixteen-year-old boy in her room. I just can't.

Michael whispered in her ear. You don't have to worry about Toby, he's not that way inclined.

She glanced back at Toby and realised that Michael was telling her that Toby was gay. As of course he was. She smiled.

Michael nodded. Can I borrow your car? he asked.

Certainly not, Michael.

I've got my licence.

But no insurance.

I'm a good driver.

I don't care how good a driver you are, Michael. Why do you want it?

Dad and his cronies are off to the Princess to check damage and restock, they say. I want to follow them.

I've kept your confidence about spying on your father, she hissed. I'm willing to turn a blind eye with regard to Toby, but I'm damned if I'm going to ...oh.

Charlie was ambling up the corridor, proffering a phone.

Phone for Sarah Merrick, he called, cheerily.

Toby dived under the bed. Anne slammed the door shut. Michael ran past Charlie and Sarah took the phone.

Who is it? she asked.

Tom, replied a mellifluous voice.

Charlie remained standing, smiling at Sarah. She thanked him and went into her room.

Tom, she said, once she'd closed the door. Why did you call the house phone?

Sarah felt that everything in the house was probably bugged. Gazing out of the window, she saw Michael cycling off, as Tom explained that he'd tried her mobile.

I've found something out about that woman you're interested in, he said.

I'll phone you back on my mobile, she said.

No, just come over. Drive to Wymples and call me. I'll guide you in.

Sarah noticed the three men walk out of the Grange below her, get into Graham's car and drive away.

Tom? she said. He'd rung off.

Grabbing her bag and phone, Sarah crossed the corridor and barged in on Anne and Toby, who were drawing a picture together and giggling.

Your dad and his friends have gone to the boat, she said. I think that's where Michael's going too. I've got to go out as well, so you will be alone in the house for a while. Will you be alright, you two?

It was a silly question. They were jubilant.

You won't say anything to Dad?

Sarah shook her head, blew a kiss and left.

She was troubled and drove carefully. All she could think about was Anne's admission that her mother had told her the stories. They are Vaz Crow's stories, they are Vaz Crow's stories, she repeated to herself, until her mind began to assimilate the information. For one thing there was the imaginative leap: Someone who transformed their life into stories, however macabre. She recalled the story of Eve, who wasn't clever. But Vaz was clever and found a way to tell her daughter about her life. Sarah didn't think that Anne knew the meanings of the stories. Best to keep it that way. Anne and Michael had enough to contend with, having a father like Sebastian.

Sarah had believed him when he'd promised to spend time with his children. But he just barked at them and accused them. The only relationships he seemed able to make were with yes-men. For him, relationship was a means of manipulation. He had bankrupted his own father, who had then died. Why not go the whole hog and do away with his wife? ...If he needed to. Sarah

only had his say-so that the children inherited. For all she knew, Michael was right. His father had already embezzled his wife's assets, laundered the money and secreted it in a series of untraceable accounts under false identities. He'd had opportunity.

On that afternoon at East Head, it was a week ago today, Sebastian had wandered off to meet Graham in the car park. Charlie had remained with the children, preparing the barbecue. Although Charlie had then gone off to collect driftwood. Sarah had gone for a walk. As she'd climbed the sandbank, she'd looked out at her brother's yacht and seen a blue motorboat scudding away. Sebastian or Graham could have hired a boat. Any one of the three men might have swum out. When Yvonne went overboard, she was still alive, since her lungs filled with water, the police had said. Bruising had been consistent with drowning. Was Yvonne so drunk that someone could have just thrown her in?

It was too traumatic to think about. She was nearing the village of Wymple. Tom said he had news, but he may have the wrong person, or the news might not be news to her. Surely he could not have discovered that Vaz became Yvonne. If he had, she'd ask him to keep the secret. If not, don't tell him. Don't involve him. He's too close to the Merricks, he's written a history of them. He knows all our deeds and misdeeds.

She phoned him and he guided her down a series of country lanes to a handsome old redbrick house. It was twilight when she pulled up and he walked across to greet her. He embraced her, kissing her on both cheeks. She felt anxious, prickly.

What have you found? she asked, following him inside.

There were crates and boxes in the hall and dust covers on furniture in the lounge. Tom led her over to a table in one corner where a PC was set up.

A marriage, he said, pointing at the screen.

A marriage?

Yes, look.

Her eyes wouldn't focus. It must be Sebastian and Yvonne, she thought and tried to work out how she would respond.

Here. Can you see it?

No, she said.

A Vanessa Crow was married in 1986. Her parents are listed as Terrence and Sharon. Might this be the person you're looking for, Sarah?

Terry was listed as the father. She'd watched her father murdered. The shock brought Sarah's eyes into focus and she stared at the name of the bridegroom: Cardew, Morris Edward. The name Morris Cardew. She'd heard a name like that. She heard Tom giving her further details. The marriage had taken place at Forest Row in East Sussex on June the third...

A memory began to materialise. The day she'd visited Haven Farm. That had been the day after Yvonne's death. Sarah had been in a panic. She'd asked the owner, Dagmar, and their guide Jacob if they'd seen Yvonne after the pony trek. Something...

Is everything alright? asked Tom, perturbed.

Yes.

Do you think this is the person you are looking for?

I don't know.

She did know. What was it?

If you think we have the right person, said Tom, we could visit Forest Row. It's only a village. We could ask about.

A small wizened man with pale blue eyes came into her mind's eye. After visiting the farm. A guest house. He'd shown her the register. The names in the register. Dr M & V Cardew.

What's wrong? asked Tom.

Does it give the husband's profession? she asked, feeling suddenly weak.

I think so. Yes. He peered at the screen. Doctor and medical herbalist.

Sarah nodded, as if it were just a detail, but her heart was thumping. Doctor M and V Cardew had stayed at the guest house for the three nights that Yvonne had been absent from the yacht.

I think I will visit that village, she said. What's the time?

It's too late now. Go tomorrow. It's Sunday. People will be at home.

Okay.

Would you like company? You could stay over and we could set out first thing...

What was he suggesting?

There's a guest room, he said gently.

His eyes were green with gold fleck and their expression suggested kindness.

Are you hungry? he asked.

She was hungry. She didn't want to sleep at the Grange. The attic wasn't ready.

What is your interest in this Vanessa Crow? he asked.

I think she's an old friend of Yvonne. I'd like to contact her.

I see.

He accepted it. He took her out to eat at a local carvery. He asked about her life and, when she wasn't forthcoming, talked about himself and his plans. Throughout the meal and afterwards, lying on a camp bed in the dark lounge, her mind played and replayed a single thought: Vanessa Crow married Doctor Morris

Cardew in 1986. In 2010 they spent three nights together at a guest house.

FIFTEEN Day 9 Sunday 1st August 2010

Sarah lay naked, half awake in the dark, every pore of her plump body shedding water. Tom was standing over her. She knew he was standing over her, but couldn't move. She fell in and out of consciousness. When finally she rolled over, he wasn't there. Heavy velvet curtains covered the windows but sunlight seeped in around the edges, pumping heat into the room. She felt like a boiler about to explode.

The door opened and Tom strode in.

I'm terribly sorry about the heat in this room, he said. I should have opened a window. Here's some water.

What time is it? she asked, taking the glass.

Nearly eleven, he said. I thought I'd let you sleep.

Some water spilt. She could hear it fizzing as it touched her skin. There was a moment, when they were both looking at each other, when she thought something was about to happen between them. And if she hadn't been in grief for the loss of her baby. And if he wasn't mourning his beloved Kate. And if he hadn't been such a well mannered Irishman. And if she wasn't a boiler about to explode. And so the moment passed.

I've made us some breakfast, he said. Then we should leave.

Sarah only ate the eggs and bacon and sausages and fried bread to please Tom and then only after downing a pint and a half of water. By the time they were in his big black Toyota, she was

glad for the noise of the engine. Her stomach was gurgling and she felt as if steam were shooting out of her ears.

Tom believed they were looking for Vanessa Crow. Sarah knew they wouldn't find her. But she might find Morris Cardew. Tom had an address.

What would she do if she found him? Ask him straight out if he'd been at the guest house? Ask him if he was present when Vanessa Cardew drowned? She might be looking at a murderer.

Or, he may have been with her at the guest house but nothing to do with events which followed. He might be entirely unaware. Yvonne may have just used the names. In which case she would be telling him that Vaz had died.

But whatever may have happened, she would be meeting Vaz Crow's first husband. According to the marriage certificate, he was a doctor and medical herbalist. Perhaps she'd changed her name when she left him. Or when she met Sebastian, whichever came first. There was no record of a divorce. Perhaps he wasn't alive.

Forest Row was hardly a village. Placards at the roadside heralded a Mansion Market and affluent hippy folk thronged the streets. It took Tom twenty minutes to get down the hill and into the centre, whereupon they became trapped between cars and crowds, with nowhere to park. Sarah was desperate for a piss and hopped out.

Make sure your phone is on, Tom called after her.

Every other shop offered antiques or colonic irrigation as Sarah hurried towards a traditional olde English tavern and pushed her way through to a sweltering loo in the back.

Fighting her way out of sweltering heat into blistering sunlight, she found Tom holding up the town's traffic, his big black box on wheels facing the other way.

I've got directions, he yelled, as she got in.

They edged their way back up hill and, just as traffic eased up, turned left, onto an unmade road. Even here, beautiful young people and jolly families, all in colourful garb, flocked down the paths, on their way to market. A medieval scene with mobile phones. Tom found a space and parked up where the road forked in two.

It should be up here, he said, jumping out and taking the right fork up a steep incline. Sarah followed, soon becoming breathless as lanky Tom strode ahead. The rocky track led between secluded homesteads, screened by trees and bushes. The air was hot and a rich forest smell rose from the shade. Tom kept peering from side to side, checking house names.

Here it is. The Old School House, he called, reading a battered sign by an entrance to the left.

Sarah struggled up the last few steps to join him, and looked up at the Old School House. Grey slate turreted roof, grey brick walls in serious need of repointing, it perched on the side of the hill in a sea of overgrown brambles and wild herbs. Building materials were stacked on one side, wood under canvas, bricks, tiles, sand and cement. Halfway down the path, Tom picked a sprig of wild thyme and smelt it.

I don't think Doctor Cardew would be too happy about the state of his herb garden, he observed.

Sarah couldn't take it in. She felt uneasy. When Tom rang the doorbell and they heard the sound echoing through the house, her heart fluttered in her chest.

I'll nip round the back, said Tom. See if there's anyone there.

No. ...we shouldn't...

He vanished. She looked up at the grey walls. This is where Morris and Vanessa Cardew lived together. This was their address. She looked in through a window. No furniture, empty. What were their lives like? Did they love each other? He was a doctor. Vaz Crow, off the Lipton Estate, had married a doctor. They weren't here now though.

Convincing herself that no one was in, and there was nothing to see, she walked quickly back up the path towards the winding track. She was just approaching the broken gate, when an odd feeling flushed through her. She turned and stared at the house.

It wasn't the quaint twisty cottage depicted in Anne's story, but something about its shape, the way it perched on the side of the hill, at the edge of the forest... Was Morris Cardew the wizard? He was a doctor. What would that mean? Had there been a fire? Feeling light-headed, she found her way back to the track and stood panting in the humid shade. Some Germans strode past, laughing gaily.

When Tom emerged, shaking his head, Sarah was so relieved, she beamed at him. She was just taking in his dark wavy hair, his boyish face with its lopsided grin, when a shrill voice rang out behind her.

What are you doing in there?

Sarah swung round and saw a tiny lady with mottled skin and angry eyes.

I've been watching you from the window, she screeched. This is a private road you know.

Tom swept into the fray, oozing Irish charm.

We're trying to find out about someone who used to live here, he purred.

Well don't ask them, she scolded. They've just moved in.

Perhaps you can help us, he suggested.

Her expression softened, clearly pleased to be consulted.

We're looking for Morris and Vanessa Cardew, said Sarah.

The tiny lady shot her a look of hate.

In prison, she spat. At least I hope so.

You hope so? drawled Tom.

A monster! she said. Killed his own mother.

Tom looked at Sarah, who looked helplessly back at him.

He was a doctor, wasn't he? asked Tom, trying to regain his composure.

He was a poisoner.

Seeing their aghast faces, she added: Don't take my word for it, ask Henry up at Honeysuckle. He was their solicitor.

Their solicitor, Tom repeated.

Yes, up by the golf course, she pointed. And don't start talking about it in the village. It's taken people round here twenty years to live it down.

She was obviously keen to see them off her patch and stood watching as Tom took Sarah's hand. When they'd rounded a corner, Tom stopped to take stock.

That's more than we bargained for, he said lightly, whilst searching in Sarah's dark eyes in case she knew more than he.

When the tiny woman had said that Cardew had killed his mother, Sarah had seen Anne's drawing of the Wizard and the Old Crone, with the house ablaze and the girl, now a witch herself, disappearing into the burning forest. Under Tom's searching gaze, she tried to pull herself together.

Do you want to go on? he asked.

She nodded.

At the top of the hill, the track met another larger track, which was lined with cars and beyond, through trees, they saw the golf course. A row of cottages flanked this edge of the course and the last was called Honeysuckle.

We'd like to see Henry, if that's possible, Tom told the young woman who answered the door.

Is it about his memoirs? she asked.

It's about a case he once defended.

Oh, his work. He does like talking about his work. He'll be pleased to see you. And she flitted away like a pretty butterfly into the dark warm folds of the dwelling, calling Granddad! Some people here to see you about your work.

Tom and Sarah were shown through to a little cottage room, its walls lined with dusty books and yellowed papers. The man, who took up most of the room, looked like an old walrus. His granddaughter hurried in with two chairs for the guests.

I've just given Granddad his tea, she said. Would you like some? It's no trouble.

Sarah had not yet assimilated what the tiny screeching lady had said. If Morris Cardew was a murderer, there were implications she couldn't fathom. She certainly wasn't ready for more information.

With a look to her and perhaps sensing her distress, Tom took the lead.

Henry remembered the case and cast his mind back. Morris Cardew had indeed been accused and convicted of poisoning his mother. The doctor and his wife had returned one night and found the mother dead. The post mortem revealed a common poison in great quantities. The prosecution then discovered that the mother had been in the process of cutting her son out of her will,

apparently because she disapproved of his marriage. As a doctor and medical herbalist...

What exactly does that mean? asked Tom.

Trained as a doctor. Threw it up and became a herbalist. Hundreds of them round here, alternative healers and other mumbo jumbo. Its pertinence here is that Doctor Cardew had the expertise, as well as the means to administer the poison. His motive, inheritance. Convicted.

You were the solicitor. What did you advise? asked Tom.

Oh, he pleaded guilty. Yes, and he accepted the verdict. There was no appeal.

Silence as the teas were brought. Having taken two spoonfuls of sugar and stirred them into his tea, Tom asked further questions. Sarah kept her head down and sipped, wanting to get out as soon as possible, into the open air. Henry had no idea what became of Doctor Cardew or his wife. Even so, it seemed an age before they were able to thank him for his help and his granddaughter for her hospitality and, politely, leave.

As they were sauntering down the sunny track, Sarah stopped.

Just a minute, she said and ran back up.

When the young woman answered, Sarah said There's something I forgot to ask your granddad. May I? and smiled her way in.

Ah! said Henry, looking up from his book. Forgotten something?

Yes. You said it was a common poison.

Digitalis. What you and I would call foxglove.

And in great quantity, you said. Do you mean more than was necessary to...

To kill the old lady. Yes. About sixty times the lethal dose, forensics said.

Sarah froze, frightened to put voice to the question in her head.

Why would a doctor use a poison that was easily traceable? she asked, slowly forming the words. And why...

Why the overdose?

Yes.

Ah. There you have it.

What? Didn't you ask?

Sometimes, said Henry, it's better to leave a few stones unturned.

But, you think...

I have no information.

She nodded, accepting his reticence, whilst feeling that he had, nonetheless, given her the information.

On the way down the track, Tom couldn't get a word out of her. In the car, having rolled down the windows, he sat beside her, waiting. When she said nothing, he asked.

Where to?

Home.

It was twilight when they pulled up beside her car in his drive.

Come in for a drink, he said.

She shook her head.

You know, if there was a murder trial, there'll be information, maybe even pictures on the internet.

She looked up at Tom. He shrugged. She followed him in.

Once Tom had started googling, there seemed no end to the articles and reports about the case. Sarah felt sick. She knew what was coming before it came.

Oh my god! said Tom suddenly and Sarah knew he'd found it.

Oh my god! he said again.

He was staring at an image of Doctor Morris Cardew on his way to court. Beside him was a young woman with light hair and a pretty but closed face.

Tom turned to Sarah.

It's Yvonne, isn't it?

She nodded.

Talk to me, he said.

She told him about Vanessa Crow's past. Though she intended to miss the more upsetting events, they all came tumbling out. There was Terry Crow's murder which, according to Rose on the Lipton Estate, Vanessa had witnessed. The marriage certificate named him as her father. He'd been the local drug dealer and rapist. The overdose of his own drugs which killed him, was administered by his wife and her sister Sharon, Vanessa's mother. The sisters took over as Lipton's dealers until a drugs raid in 1984. They escaped, but left Vanessa homeless.

Tom listened quietly. When the light faded, he switched on a side lamp. Other than that, he didn't move. Sarah described stooping Alfred and his wheelchair-bound wife Eleanor, whose daughter had developed a brain tumour. She'd been Vanessa's friend. Her name was Yvonne Noble. When Vanessa became homeless, she asked the Nobles if she could stay with them. They refused. They didn't see her again for five years. When, in 1989, their daughter died, Vanessa appeared in their shop. She paid her condolences and asked if she might visit Yvonne's room. Alfred and Eleanor were serving customers and let her. She walked away with her dead friend's identity.

Do the Nobles know? Did you tell them?

No. Eleanor asked, but I backtracked. Said it was a mistake.

But it wasn't.

No. Among Yvonne Merrick's private papers is Yvonne Noble's birth certificate.

Are your family aware of this?

No. Well Michael and Anne don't know. I'm sure Sebastian doesn't know. I haven't told him. I'm not telling anyone.

So what is your purpose? Does this have any bearing, in your mind, on the cause of your sister-in-law's death?

I don't know.

But you think it might. Especially what we discovered today.

Tom sat back in his chair, rubbed his stubble and thought for a moment.

Did you suspect that she'd been married before?

No.

So when I showed you the marriage certificate last night...

It was a shock, said Sarah. I only knew there was a five-year gap.

Sarah was thinking about Vanessa and Doctor Morris Cardew. She wondered how they'd met. She was the daughter of a drug dealer and grew up on a rough housing estate. He was a qualified doctor whose mother owned The Old School House in affluent, leafy Forest Row. The mother had disapproved. The mother had died. There had been a court case.

1989, did you say?

What?

When Vanessa became Yvonne, when the Noble girl died?

1989, yes, Sarah confirmed.

Tom scratched the back of his head. The court case was in March of that year. So when her husband went to prison, Vanessa became Yvonne. Is that it?

I think so.

When did she meet your brother Sebastian.

I don't know. Some time later, I imagine.

She was feeling drained. In 1989 Sarah had been far away in London. It was the year she had become an actress. She had an idea that Sebastian had already returned to Merrick land with his fortune by then.

Do you suspect your brother?

No. Sarah was shocked by the question.

I'm sorry, said Tom. I was only thinking that, if he found out about his wife's past... But with your brother being innocent and Doctor Cardew languishing in prison, it seems more likely that your sister-in-law died accidentally, or by her own hand, perhaps?

Sarah stared at Tom, her eyes blazing. That was where he was wrong. That was what had been plaguing her since the screeching lady had said Cardew had poisoned his mother.

What is it? Tom asked.

I'm not sure that Doctor Cardew is languishing in prison, she said.

We can check, he said, swinging round to his computer.

No, not now. It's late. I should go.

Oh. Tom turned to face her. You don't have to go. You could stay over and go back in the morning.

She shook her head and stood up.

Okay, he said, rising. But even if Cardew had been released, it seems unlikely... Again he noticed a look of panic on her face. What is it? he asked.

Yvonne was absent on three nights before she died, Tom. In a hotel register for those dates, I found the names Doctor M and V Cardew.

Just saying it frightened Sarah. She needed to get away. She looked wildly around for the way out and noticed the crates and boxes in the shadowy hall.

When are you leaving? she asked sweetly.

He seemed nonplussed at the quick change of subject. Oh, a couple of days. When the house sale goes through on Tuesday, there'll be nothing to hold me here.

Maybe we could meet up for a drink before you go, she offered, as he followed her to the front door.

That would be nice. You're not frightened, are you?

She shook her head, reached up and planted a kiss on his cheek.

Thanks for today Tom.

Sarah was frightened. She felt that Doctor Morris Cardew was somewhere about. Driving back to the Grange, her mind played all sorts of tricks. Sebastian was in league with Morris. Or the former housekeeper, Mila, had been sheltering him. He could have changed his identity and become Graham, or even Charlie. Nothing made sense but she sensed that he was somewhere about.

Arriving back in the middle of the night, she tiptoed up to the guest room and found it empty. All her belongings were gone. There was no one to ask. Perhaps Michael or Anne had dumped them up in the attic. She went to check. Flicking on the switch at the top of the stairs, she gasped. The room was beautiful.

Curtains adorned the garret window, there were rugs on the floor, an old wardrobe housed her clothes, dresses and coats all neatly hung up within. Books on a shelf, several sidelights, one on a desk, another beside an armchair, a third on a little table beside the bed, which was made, the cover turned back to welcome her.

She sat down on the bed, gazed around at the magical attic room and blessed Anne and Michael for their work, for this gift.

On an impulse, initially just to make sure that Yvonne's private papers were still in their hiding place, she drew out the box file and sat in the armchair studying its contents.

She told herself that she was reading and rereading these documents and cuttings in order to glean further information. In fact she was winding herself up. There was only one thing she didn't know. In the bottom of the file, she found the crystal which had dropped out the first time she'd opened the box. She turned it over in her hands, watching the refracted light bouncing off. The more she stared at it, the more convinced she became that it related to the marriage of Vanessa and Morris. Crystals were said, by mystical folk, therapists and the like, to have healing properties. It would be the kind of thing you'd buy in Forest Row. Vanessa's husband was a medical herbalist in Forest Row.

Each time she decided to put it back in the box, she hesitated. She decided she'd have to drive to the guest house in the morning, to get a description of the couple who'd stayed there. But even if the man hadn't been Morris, the woman must have been Yvonne. The names in the register could not have been a coincidence.

She had no idea what Morris Cardew would look like now. In the pictures on the internet, he'd been slim, fine-featured, with dark hair, somewhat taller than Vanessa. But he could have changed. He could be Charlie, or Graham. Similar height, similar age. He could be in this house now.

Graham had told her that Sebastian saved him from a spot of bother in 2004. Charlie had been Seb's friend since London in the

eighties, he'd said. But there was nothing to suggest that any of the men, Sebastian included, told the truth.

She replaced the box file but kept the crystal out, setting it beside her bed. She undressed, turned out the lights and crawled under the duvet.

Who is Morris Cardew? she asked herself. Who gave Yvonne that? she thought, staring at the crystal which glowed in the moonlight.

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Prisms of light flickered between her eyelashes, while dreams still curled like smoke, conjuring up faces and places in lives that may or may not have been hers. A clock was ticking, hands reading ten past three, presumably unset. Could be any hour of any day. Just mechanical time ticking aimlessly in an attic somewhere.

Rousing herself, Sarah sat on the side of her warm bed and gazed around at the room in the gabled roof, her head still thick with sleep. Neat little points of focus, towel and wash bag on a chair by the door, clothes hanging like shadows in the open wardrobe, fresh flowers in a vase by the window, all chosen and placed by Anne. An artist's garret, high above the world.

There were three objects on her bedside table, her clock, her mobile phone and Yvonne's crystal. Sarah picked up the crystal and cradled it in her hands. It was long, bevelled to a point at one end, like a thick pencil, with a silver clasp at the other end, with holes for a chain. It was heavy and impenetrably cold.

If she could believe in mysterious forces, perhaps it would reveal its past. Morris Cardew had given this crystal to Vanessa Crow.

Sarah felt certain. She could almost sense the moment, in the Old School House at Forest Row. A gift, an act of love in an unhappy household. Perhaps he had given it to her to ward off evil spirits, Vanessa's own past. He must have known. Or his mother. She'd been against the marriage. Yes, to protect her. It hadn't worked. Yet she kept it. What did it mean to her? Perhaps it just meant him. Had she sat in this attic, cradling it in her hands as Sarah was now doing? What were her thoughts?

Opening her mind to revelation only drew Sarah back towards sleep. In frustration she formed a fist around the icy crystal, squeezed it and tried to concentrate her thoughts.

When Morris Cardew was convicted of murdering his mother, Vanessa Cardew had taken her dead friend's identity and entered another unhappy household. Twenty-one years later she fell overboard and drowned. A dark tale, which included at least two murders, Vanessa's father Terry drugged to death, Morris Cardew's mother poisoned. But that was all it was, a series of events now over. Except for Sebastian's secret manoeuvrings and the names in the guest house register. Sarah could visualise the spidery scrawl in the book: Dr. M & V Cardew. Yvonne's handwriting. Was she with him? Uncanny that she should die directly after this.

Sarah tried to imagine the two of them together for two days and three nights after twenty-one years separation. He might have held her captive. He knew her secret, which gave him power over her. Or it might have been love. Sarah knew the way remeeting someone could rekindle a flame, as if no time had elapsed. She stared at the crystal in her hands.

Another thought forced its way through, the type and amount of poison administered to Cardew's mother. His solicitor, Henry, had

said that some stones were better left unturned. The implication was that Vanessa might have administered the fatal dose. If so, Morris had protected his wife and gone to prison without a word. And she had disappeared from his life. That might have been planned or it might have been a betrayal. If she had killed his mother and he had protected her, it could only have been for love. If, after two decades, Morris Cardew had seen Yvonne and recognised her, he may have watched, waited, made plans...

If, if, if! she said out loud, her voice echoing through the attic and, picking up her phone, called Tom.

I need to know more about Morris Cardew, she said.

And good afternoon to you, Tom replied in his laconic drawl.

What time is it? she asked.

Three thirty.

Oh. She stared at the clock. Three thirty. She must have slept ten hours or more. I'm sorry Tom. Good afternoon. It's just that I have this feeling...

He interrupted her. I'm ahead of you. I've spent most of the morning on Doctor Morris Cardew. Which is crazy, as I'm supposed to be leaving tomorrow.

Tomorrow?

Yes. I wondered if you'd care to come over for that goodbye drink this evening?

I'd love to.

There's a doctor, a friend and former colleague of Cardew, whose number I have. He's not answering at the moment, but if you keep your phone with you Sarah, I'll call as soon as I have information. Also, a retired prison warder, who may be able to fill us in.

Is Cardew still in prison?

No. He was released, hang on. Morris Edward Cardew, released from Lewes prison on March seventeenth, Saint Patrick's Day, in 2004.

Adrenalin shot through Sarah's body. She didn't even notice the end of the call. Cardew had been released. He was somewhere around. More than that, he was in the house. She felt it. 2004 was the year Graham said he'd met Sebastian. Released, he'd located her, watched, waited, conspired to befriend her new husband. Sarah's mind plunged into wild new tangles of thought. First and second husbands in it together. What might Sebastian know? Who was Graham? Who was Charlie? She couldn't trust a word any of them had told her.

Quickly she found her sewing kit, threaded the crystal and slipped it over her head as a necklace to use as bait. Then she dressed and went downstairs, feeling shaky but determined.

She realised she had no plan. The sense that a convicted murderer was in the house, someone who could disguise his identity, who could kill, put her on the verge of panic. There was no precedent in her life for this. She was the sort of person who would get distressed if she mislaid her car keys. When Michael opened his bedroom door and invited her in, she jumped.

Not now Michael, she said, trying to recover.

Now, he hissed.

She stared at him. He seemed older. He was haggard, unshaven. She realised he looked just like his father. And just like Sebastian, there was that sudden change from civility to menace.

Michael's room was hot and the air thick with rotting pizza and testosterone. He apologised for having borrowed her PC.

But you can't... she said, stopping herself. It contained all her personal stuff, about Carl, her pregnancy, her miscarriage...

Michael explained that he was using it to simultaneously monitor Graham's activities. At the mention of Graham, Sarah told herself to calm down and focus.

What are his activities? she asked.

Well, he too has alias accounts.

In what names?

Michael flicked through a series of accounts. The name Morris Cardew was not among them.

Are there any other names on his laptop, in his documents or emails or...

Stop, Aunt Sarah. It's not the point.

How do you know what the point is? she barked.

He gave her a long withering look. Do you want to know what I've found out or not?

Yes.

Okay. Setting up accounts in false names is a doddle. This, however, is not.

He showed her an image on his own PC.

It looks like a USB stick, she said.

It's a Swiss encryption device. Dad has one. They're issued to clients with privileged numbered accounts. It means that Dad has opened such an account.

So?

So these Swiss accounts are very hard to get. Especially with the new regulations since the markets collapsed. They investigate. Look: They require proof of identity, origin of funds, nature of professional business, financial situation, history of transactions. That's what Graham's been doing, forging all that lot. Dad must've been shitting himself. I mean, would they buy it?

And have they?

Michael shrugged. Don't know. But they must have, because... Hang on, I'll show you. There.

What am I looking at, Michael?

You remember I showed you those new accounts, the ones I thought weren't Dad's?

Yes.

Well since yesterday he's been funnelling all his capital from them into this one account.

Okay.

Look at the name!

He highlighted it.

Sebastian Merrick, she read.

It's in his own name!

Sarah felt bewildered. What does it mean?

It means he's surfaced. He wouldn't do that unless he was about to make the transfer into the Swiss account. And look at Graham's machine. He's also got the details and codes for this new account. That's in case I manage to steal Dad's laptop.

Michael turned to face her.

We're the enemy Aunt Sarah. He did away with Mum, either for her money or because she threatened to blow the whistle, and now his plan's almost...

A thought burst into Sarah's mind. Morris and Vanessa had never divorced. If Morris had told Sebastian, he'd know his marriage wasn't legal. He had settled a fortune on her, but his shady business meant he had no redress to law. But the two of them, two men betrayed by a murderess... She had an intimation that her imagination had let loose and was flying off at all angles, but she couldn't work any of it out with Michael gabbling on. She heard him say that the Princess was ready to sail.

Is it?

I'll bet you the moment the funeral's over they'll be off. He just has to keep us sweet for a couple more days. Dad doesn't care about us, any more than he cared about Mum. By the time we find out what he's done, he'll be gone. He must be feeling pleased with himself.

Sarah heard the fury and pain in Michael's voice and saw a look of cruel satisfaction light up his face.

What they don't realise, he said, is that they're too old. Dad and Graham use the internet but they don't know about trojans and stuff. They couldn't hack into a side of beef. They've got no idea what I can do.

What do you know about Graham Fletcher?

He's a forger.

And Charlie?

He's the get-away man.

Yes, but their past.

Michael shrugged.

Find out!

The force with which she said it, took her nephew by surprise.

Find out everything you can, real names, life stories, everything, as soon as you can.

Okay...

Got it?

Yes.

As she was about to leave, she turned.

Thanks for setting up the attic.

Oh, that was Anne mainly.

In the corridor, Sarah leant against a wall but, unable to think, took a deep breath and set off to find the men.

Barging into the dining room, she found Sebastian alone, multi-tasking at his desk. He was on the phone to the funeral director, checking times and arrangements. When she entered, he threw a quick nod her way, before squinting back at his laptop. Occasionally he tapped something in on the keyboard or interjected with: I see, yes. Shouldn't that be earlier? He did seem pleased with himself, as Michael had predicted. A man now free to move forward, a general organising a military manoeuvre. Long strands of white-blond hair flopped forward over his brow, which he occasionally flipped back with a flick of his hand. Other than that, his face seemed impassive. That was how she had always thought of her brother, somehow incapable of being blown off course.

After a while, Sarah felt uncomfortable standing, hovering, so she pulled up a chair and sat down. Inadvertently her hand went to the crystal around her neck and she remembered that she needed to draw his attention to it, to gauge his reaction. She needed to be observant.

Fittings here tomorrow at 11am, he said and she realised he was speaking to her. Funeral the following afternoon, he added. Whole Merrick clan to be there.

His face broke into a boyish smile and his blue eyes lit up as he said it. She understood that the prospect of his family's attendance made him happy. A second later his focus was back on the phone call.

He was in his element when doing business, organising, anything professional. And desperate when it came to anything personal. Too soft inside. This made his life a performance, a firework display, a diversion. So you wouldn't notice his feeling side. Yet it was his feeling side that Sarah needed to contact.

Where are Charlie and Graham? she asked as his phone call ended. She lifted the crystal from her chest and twirled it slowly around, so that baubles of reflected light shot about the room.

Graham's driven Charlie to the Princess. There's a damn blue gash along the starboard side.

Sarah tried to disguise her reaction. What shade? she asked.

Light blue. Do you know anything about it?

No, she said, remembering the blue motorboat she'd seen scudding away as she'd climbed the dune at East Head. Is Charlie fixing it?

Yes. Graham's ferrying supplies.

Do you intend to sail?

Just getting her up and running.

How long have you known Graham?

Graham? I don't know, several years. Why do you ask?

I just wondered whether you were friends or just colleagues. What do you know about him, his past?

His past? You'll have to ask him.

He told me you'd saved him from a spot of bother in Biarritz. Gunshots, you swung the boat by and he jumped in.

Sebastian screwed up his face as if trying to remember, then raised his eyebrows as if he might have a faint recollection.

I think he said it was in 2004, she added, in case it might help.

Well, if that's what he says. Anyway he'll be back soon. Is there anything else?

Yes Sebastian.

She sensed his unease and waited.

Well? he asked.

I need to know everything. Charlie said he met you in London in the early days. He said you got him off heroin and bought him a yacht. Was that the Princess?

No. First yacht was an X36, forget her name. You seem to be very interested in my partners. You writing a play or something?

Sarah understood that this was an allusion to her having been an actress, knew it was a put-down but ignored it.

Did you name the Princess for Yvonne?

He blinked slowly, as if this was below the belt.

Yes, he said finally, as if that put a lid on it.

When did you first meet her? she asked, fingering the crystal.

He shook his head. His blue eyes flicked between laptop and phone, begging for an interruption.

At a summer fete in Wymple, he murmured.

Did you speak to her first? Did you have friends in common?

As a matter of fact she introduced herself to me. Said she'd read some article about me.

What do you know about her past, Sebastian?

His eyes glazed over. His whole face closed. Not a lot, I shouldn't think. She had her interests, I had mine.

What were her interests?

I don't know, interior design, gardening, always out the back in the herb garden, weeding, pruning. She liked to get dolled up and attend events. Not my cup of tea, but there you go.

So you're saying you had different interests from the start?

Oh I don't know, sis. Things change. Listen, I have tried with the kids Sarah. I just can't seem to get through to them. Never was any good at that sort of thing. None of us choose who we are...

She reached out a hand and squeezed his. Did he really not know anything about Charlie or Graham or even his wife?

Why did you marry her?

Sebastian's pale goat-like face took on a haunted look.

She was beautiful, he said.

The phone rang. He pounced on it eagerly. Sarah stood up and left the room. In the hall she waited, trying to remember two things, the light blue gash along the side of the Princess and something else. The herb garden. Yvonne had kept a herb garden.

Pattering down the stairs to the kitchen, she found Anne, who looked relieved to see her. Anne was making sandwiches. Too many for one person.

How is Toby? Sarah asked.

He's sweet, she replied.

Thank you for my room, Anne.

Oh, that's alright. Looks okay, doesn't it?

It's lovely. And so peaceful up there. I must have slept ten hours or more.

Anne giggled. Do you want one?

Sarah looked at the sandwiches. No, it's alright, you go ahead. I'll sort myself out. Anne, have you ever seen a crystal like this before?

No. Where did you get it?

In Forest Row, yesterday, she lied.

It's lovely.

How long have you known Charlie and Graham?

I don't know them. They're Dad's friends.

Sebastian once told me that you and Michael sometimes went for holidays on his yacht.

Only twice and only when we were very young.

Was Charlie there?

I don't know. I would've been three or four. I don't think so.

Why?

And you've never seen Graham before?

Not before this holiday.

And your mother, she liked gardening?

Yes.

And telling you fairytales.

Yes.

And what else? What else would she do?

Drinking mostly. She'd spend hours over at Mila's.

In the annex?

I was away at school most of the time. I don't know what Mum did.

There was an edge of feeling in Anne's voice which Sarah had not heard before.

Was she a happy person, your mother?

Anne shook her head.

Was it because your dad left?

Could have been. I better get these up. Is the coast clear?

Seb's in the dining room. Graham and Charlie are out.

Thanks. Take one.

Sarah took a sandwich and smiled at Anne.

I think Mum was happy with Mila.

Oh.

Anne smiled and floated off up the stairs with her sandwiches. Sarah took a bite from the thick wedge of cheese and tomato and went out the back door.

It was blazing hot in the garden. Sarah hardly knew one herb from another but stood there chomping on the sandwich and

trying to imagine what this garden might have meant to her sister-in-law.

Vanessa Cardew's husband was a medical herbalist. When he went to prison, she put it all behind her and started a new life. Yet she created a herb garden here and must have spent time in it, enough for Sebastian to have noticed. It must have connected her to Morris. Whether from guilt or love, it must have driven a wedge between her and her new husband Sebastian. He said they'd had their own separate interests. Anne said her mum had been happy with Mila. What if Sebastian had introduced her to Graham or Charlie and she had recognised her first husband? Three nights at a guest house. She couldn't have been kept there against her will. Graham had left the boat that night...

Her mobile phone rang. It was Tom. He'd contacted a former colleague of Cardew, a Doctor Adriana Margolis.

They were at medical school together, Tom explained. Then, when Cardew started The Association of Holistic Healers, he invited Doctor Margolis onto the board, as a consultant, presumably to add credibility.

When he started what?

The Association of Holistic Healers, Tom repeated, a smile in his voice. Cardew formed it in 1985, convinced that alternative medicines had to show a unified front. All those different eastern or pagan traditions which had become fashionable in the sixties and seventies. Shiatsu, acupuncture, aromatherapy, hypnosis, hundreds of them, including medical herbalism, which Cardew himself had embraced and which were under threat from the establishment at the time. Drug companies were attempting to patent herbs used for medicinal purposes, for instance. Anyhow, Doctor Adriana Margolis became an adviser to the AHH, which was

brave, considering the climate of the times. Doesn't seem to have done her much harm. She's now a senior Harley Street consultant. Lives in Tunbridge Wells but doesn't return from London till sometime after seven. Anyhow, she's agreed to meet you. I'll text you the address and directions, but you'd better get going soon, on account of the traffic. The point is, Sarah... Sarah? Are you still there?

Sarah hadn't heard a sound but something made her turn. Graham Fletcher was standing a few meters away, staring at her. She almost dropped the phone.

Graham? she asked.

I'll wait, he said.

Tom, yes I'm here. You said you'd text me the details.

Yes, but the point is, this Doctor Adriana Margolis may have seen Cardew since his release. I didn't ask, but they were very close.

As Tom spoke, Sarah watched Graham wander into the herb garden. He seemed to be studying the plants. Sarah needed to end the call.

Okay Tom. I've got to go now.

Don't forget our date, he said.

No. Bye...

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Sarah stared at Graham in his linen suit, stooping to smell a cluster of pretty lilac flowers. He was about the right age, she thought. His eyes were brown, his hair dyed auburn. He probably

did have dark hair originally. But it was seeing him in the herb garden which raised her pulse.

Slipping the phone into her pocket, she walked over. Now was her chance to check him out. She dreaded it.

To what do I owe the pleasure? she asked.

Seb mentioned that you wanted to see me.

Did he?

Yes, and I must say it's a real treat to see you.

He surveyed her, up and down, with obvious relish, as if she were a prize marrow.

So what can I do for you? he asked, stepping a little too close. Apparently you were interested in my past.

No, she said, a little too quickly. I was only asking Sebastian how you guys met.

Biarritz 2004, remember? I told you.

Yes, but before.

Ah, before. Now why would you want to know that?

He caressed her cheek with the soft pad of his right index finger.

Any means to an end, she thought, and plunged into what she hoped was the appropriate role.

Because. Oh well. You may as well know it. Because you're an attractive man.

His mouth opened momentarily in surprise, then transformed from svelte man-of-the-world into overt lust. Sarah felt a shot of reflux rise in her throat.

I wanted to know what your life had been like. All sorts of things. Whether you were married. ...Were you?

His eyes flickered. My life has been difficult, Sarah. I find it upsetting to talk about.

Try, she said, peering up at him with what she hoped was a look of love.

That book is closed, I'm afraid, Sarah.

Really? she asked, adoringly.

He cleared his throat. Perhaps when we're more acquainted.

You were married, weren't you?

Put it like this: I'm available.

He lunged forward, arms ready to embrace, but she'd seen it coming and side-stepped him.

He almost fell. Recovering his poise, he stood in a flower bed, breathing heavily.

I thought you were attracted to me Sarah.

I am, Graham. But I have to know you first. You understand?

Coyly, she turned and wandered over to the small lilac flowers he'd been sniffing before.

Beautiful, aren't they? I saw you admiring them. What are they called?

Comfrey, he said, coming to kneel beside her and stroking the plant's long veined leaves.

I've heard of comfrey, she said.

Yes, he replied. It's used to soothe.

He seemed about to soothe her, so she stood up.

Do you know about plants then? she asked.

I try to know about most things, he admitted, suavely.

He rose and gazed around the little patch wilting in the heat wave. This is a herb garden, he announced, as if she were completely stupid.

She headed over to the long purple spires of foxgloves. Digitalis, which had killed Cardew's mother.

Are these herbs?

Not exactly. They're foxgloves, Sarah. They heal the heart, so we're told.

Aren't they also poisonous?

Many plants are poisonous, he said, stopping in front of her and smiling. Like people, they can do you harm, or they can do you good.

Was he taunting her? Did he know?

Even apple pips contain cyanide, he added, as if it were an amusing fact.

Sarah was petrified. Furthermore he was staring at her bosom. She cursed herself for wearing a top with a low neckline. Instinctively she put her hand over her cleavage and felt the cool crystal beneath her palm. Hesitantly, she opened her hand and revealed the glittering stone.

Were you looking at this? she asked.

He stepped forward and took it gently in his hands.

This? It's a crystal, isn't it? A crystal wand.

A wand, she repeated.

She could feel the thread press into the back of her neck as he drew her close.

Yes, he purred. Used for transmitting powerful energies, I believe. Is that what you want, Sarah?

She had no opportunity to disabuse him. He was all over her like a rash, plastering his sticky wet lips over her face, his hands over her body. So many hands. She wriggled to get free, to protect her breasts, to rearrange her skirt, which was riding up. As he moved in, she stumbled.

They were writhing around in a clump of delphiniums when she heard a blessed voice from the kitchen doorway.

What the devil are you doing with my sister, Fletcher? Charlie's been stuck on the Princess for hours.

Sorry Seb, said Graham, hurriedly getting to his feet and brushing himself down. I'll get onto it right now.

Don't bother. He's on his way back. You alright Sarah?

She nodded. As she stood up, she heard Graham grumbling under his breath.

I thought you wanted it, he said and followed Sebastian in.

Sarah stood alone in the garden, shaking. Her phone trembled in her pocket. It was a text from Tom, giving the address of Doctor Adriana Margolis in Tunbridge Wells. Unable to think clearly, she raced up to the attic. Grabbing her bag, she rushed out of the house and over to her car, just as Charlie appeared, limping up the drive. He was unshaven, covered in slime and looked like a hunted animal.

Are you alright Charlie? she asked.

He tried to smile but was obviously in pain.

You're soaked through. Did you fall in?

There was a scrape along the side of the Princess. Seb wanted it gone.

He was staring at her chest. She fingered the crystal.

Do you know what this is?

He blushed. Is it part of a chandelier? he asked.

No Charlie. Get yourself dry, eh?

Right-oh.

The roads were blocked with commuters returning home. Although late in the day, the sun was still blazing down. She took a back road to avoid traffic and found herself three cars behind a tractor. She travelled without thought for an hour and a half, through a tunnel of heat.

Doctor Margolis' residence, when she found it, was a thatched cottage surrounded by flower beds. There was a Porsche in the drive but nobody home. It was coming on for eight. Adriana Margolis may have returned and gone out again.

Sarah tried Tom but it went straight to answer-phone. She didn't leave a message. Doctor Margolis was probably just late. She had to get her story together. Obviously she wouldn't mention anything that might arouse suspicion. Nothing about Vanessa Cardew changing her name. Or Morris Cardew's name in the hotel register. The trouble was, she didn't know what Tom had told this lady.

She wanted to introduce herself as Vanessa Cardew's friend. She'd say Vanessa died, fell overboard. She'd say she knew of her friend's marriage, but not much more, depending on what Tom had told her.

She tried him again. Still not answering. She told herself to concentrate on what she had to find out. The big question was whether Doctor Margolis had seen Cardew since his release. She also needed to know his character, his other interests. Had he been interested in sailing, or art?

There was nowhere to sit down, so she sat in the car and waited, becoming drowsy in the heat.

The phone woke her. It was twilight. She fumbled and almost dropped it.

Tom?

Hi Sarah. How did it go?

She isn't here. I've been waiting, she said, checking in case Doctor Margolis had returned while she slept. There were no lights on in the cottage. What time is it? she asked.

He laughed. You never know the time. It's twenty past nine. She's probably just held up. Listen, I've been talking to a former prison warder at Lewes. He won't see you. He didn't even want to discuss Cardew with me. But he did say one thing which you should know. He described him as an animal, a dirty beast, he said, who fouled himself where he lay. Wouldn't clean himself apparently. Other inmates refused to be in the same cell, so he was in solitary. They had to strap him down to wash him.

Was he violent?

Didn't say. But they had to strap him down, so maybe. That's all really. Warder just went on about the smell.

Headlights turned off the road, lighting up Sarah's car.

Doctor Margolis has arrived I think, she said. Tom, what did you tell her?

Just that Vanessa Cardew had passed away and that you had been her friend. I didn't say relative.

Good. Thanks Tom. Speak later.

Come right over. It's getting late.

Yes. Bye.

Sarah switched her phone off and stepped out of the car just as Adriana Margolis swept over.

Sarah Merrick? she asked, proffering her hand.

In the shadows, Sarah could only determine the woman's bulk, her big earnest features, especially eyes wide as owls and heaps of jet black hair in ringlets.

Doctor Adriana Margolis I presume.

Adriana, she said. Sorry I'm late Sarah. Thanks for waiting. I did tell your friend Mr Leland that I might be held up. Shall we go in?

The front door opened on a spacious living room. Soft lighting picked out elegant bespoke furniture on a generous scale and a

vast picture window. A flip of a switch lit the landscaped garden, a Mediterranean haven. Stone gods peered out, a fountain splashed. Citrus trees, hanging vines, rocks and lapping water, into which a naked boy eternally urinated. Inside, family portraits adorned the walls, though it seemed that the doctor lived alone.

Adriana returned with drinks, wearing a huge billowing kaftan in shades of sunset and spread out on a sofa like a magnificent Greek goddess. Something deeply sensual in her nature.

How can I help you, Sarah? I understand you're a friend of Vanessa Cardew and that she passed away. Recently was it?

Yes. She was a friend but she didn't talk much about her past. I had no idea she'd been married for instance.

So is your interest personal or, in some way, formal? Inheritance or something?

Oh no. That is, I just want to find out. To put my mind at rest, Adriana.

Of course. What do you already know?

Sarah realised that Doctor Margolis was used to leading the conversation. She felt she was being given a consultation and needed to take the lead herself.

I know about the court case. Tell me, what was Morris Cardew like?

A look of distress pierced Adriana's eyes. She took a sip of her drink.

He was a friend of mine. Close friends.

She stopped. Sarah could have sworn that she'd choked. For a long time she said nothing. Sarah began to realise the enormity of the question she'd asked. And that Adriana had just realised it too. It had taken her by surprise. Invisible creatures seemed to swim across her face, currents beneath the surface. These were

not the wistful recollections of happy days at medical school, more like a haunting. Adriana eased herself up from the sofa and left the room.

She returned with a framed photo of a group of first year medical students mugging for the camera.

That's Morris. That's me, she said, pointing.

On the edge of the group, they were the only two not pulling a face. Adriana was slimmer but with those big sensuous lips and soulful eyes. Next to her, Morris Cardew, slightly taller, thin as a weed, stared out intensely. As Sarah studied the image, Adriana, ensconced once more upon her throne, began to talk.

A febrile, somewhat solitary youth, she said. Always preoccupied with some thought he'd had, or some idea he'd read. He hardly ever attended social events.

He was a swot, a nerd, obsessive compulsive you would say. He'd spend hours on some fantastically complex theory concerning interaction between various systems, lymph, blood and nerves was one I remember. He'd also challenge everything every lecturer said, until the other students groaned and lecturers learned to ignore him. He was a strange young man, but compelling. I wasn't at all surprised when he threw it all in for herbalism.

He qualified, didn't he?

Oh he qualified. Even did a year as a GP. Couldn't stand it. Two minutes per patient. Next please. No way to treat anyone, he'd say. That was the thing about Morris, he cared. That's what drew people to him, made him charismatic. And that's what got him into trouble. That and his mother.

His mother?

You know about the trial, you say?

Yes.

His mother was a difficult person. To her, having a son who was a doctor was rather like owning a Rolls Royce. When he chucked it in, she saw it as an act of treachery.

And was it?

It was certainly a rejection of her values, but more a statement of his own intent. If Morris came to believe something, he felt duty bound to honour it, to change his life if need be. Where his conscience beckoned, his life followed. So his mother lost control. And when he brought that woman home, well!

How did he meet her?

I believe I was present. A number of colleagues in his newly formed association were gathered at the Seagull Café in Brighton. They'd been at some conference I think. When I arrived, they were sitting outside in the sunshine. I hardly noticed the girl serving us but when we left, I saw him pass her a business card. I believe that was her.

Adriana flashed Sarah a dark look.

Not that I'm suggesting professional misconduct. On the contrary, she did need treatment. I don't know if I should tell you this.

Do tell me.

I don't want to disturb your memory of your friend.

It's alright. Please...

Well put it like this. Morris confided in me once that he had never, in his life, seen so many things wrong with a single human being. Medical herbalists are trained to notice facial colour, tension, body language, everything. He'd almost gasped, he said. It was like the Pygmalion story, I think. He wanted to save her, cure her, prove his theories on her and had no idea that his

intellectual fervour was love. She didn't realise that he was treating her, because her psyche was in tatters, nor, I suspect, did she notice the love. Excuse me if I'm cynical, but my impression was that, like his mother, she noticed status and wealth. His mother certainly noticed the love and did everything she could to undermine it. Hmm... You know the rest.

They got married.

We were very shocked. His friends I mean. They'd only known each other a few months. The new Mrs Cardew was only nineteen. And I suppose the British penchant for class had something to do with it. I heard several people questioning why an erudite man like Morris would be attracted to someone like her. And then there was old Mrs Cardew, defiant, down but not out.

What about you? How did you feel?

Me? That's different. Would you like another drink?

No thank you. Why was it different?

I was his girlfriend.

Adriana said it blankly, but it hung in the air.

Did that mean you didn't see him anymore?

No. I saw him. Them. I'd visit occasionally. The dynamic in the house was unpleasant. I never imagined what would happen though.

What tipped the balance, do you think?

Adriana shrugged. It depends on your point of view. Certainly the old lady was in the process of redrafting her will, which would have disinherited her son. The rest, in a way, is speculation.

But you believe he poisoned her, don't you?

Indeed. He was convicted of it.

His solicitor mentioned something to me, which I thought was curious.

You've seen his solicitor?

Apparently the poison, digitalis, is easily traceable and it was administered in excess. Sixty times the lethal dose.

I see.

You didn't know that?

No.

Would Morris protect his wife?

Adriana took a moment to understand the implication.

You mean it's... And the defence failed to point this up?

Do you think Morris would cover for his wife, go to prison for her?

Adriana bit her lip. Yes, she said softly. Then banged her fists down on her knees. What he did with his talent! Threw it away on that skinny woman!

Sarah remained silent. When she looked up, Doctor Margolis was staring at her.

You say you're Vanessa's friend. But you have just intimated to me that she may well have committed the murder. Are you sure you are Vanessa's friend?

Sarah flustered. She was aware, in her confusion, of Adriana's deeply intellectual, penetrating eyes upon her and decided that she had to tell the truth.

She told her the whole story, including her suspicion that Graham may be Morris. At one point Adriana padded across to a side table for some biscuits, but she listened intently throughout.

So you are her sister-in-law? she checked, proffering the biscuits.

Sarah took one for politeness and laid it on the side table.

Yes.

And you think your brother's business associate may be Morris. Do you think he might have had something to do with her demise?

I don't know. Is there anything you can tell me that would help establish the truth? Did he have a birthmark, a physical tick, anything? Did he have interests, or hobbies?

No. The opposite. He was possessed by his work.

She crunched into another biscuit. Sarah, casting about for a way forward, remembered the episode in the herb garden.

Was he flirtatious? Did he have an eye for the ladies?

He was interested in women, yes. He was a man.

Sarah's frustration boiled over.

It's so hard to identify someone, she said. I never realised. I've looked at pictures. It could be him. They have qualities in common. Roughly the same build and shape. But I'm not sure. Come back with me, Adriana, tonight. I'll pay you.

No! said Adriana, her voice deep as thunder. Don't ask.

But you can identify him. He could be a murderer. I wouldn't ask, but... Please. I'll drive you there and back.

I can't do that. I'm sorry.

Why?

You've been truthful with me. I'll tell you. I visited him in prison.

You went to the prison?

Just once.

Have you seen him since his release?

Never. That was the last time. It was terrible. I brought him some art paper and charcoals. He always loved to draw.

He drew pictures?

Always.

What?

Everything he saw. Herbs of course. The human body. Teaches you observation, he'd say. But he wouldn't take them.

At the prison, you mean.

Wouldn't speak and he looked. He looked... And the smell. He stank. I'm sorry. It was awful. It broke my heart. He always took such care. Always the fine suits. So fastidious.

Sarah was already on her feet and out the door, thanking Doctor Adriana Margolis, fumbling for her keys, flinging herself at the driver's seat as Adriana called from the door.

Send him my love.

Sarah would have stayed to console the lovely woman but for an overriding sense of terror that flew her off into the night. Cardew's fastidiousness, his drawing skills, his appearance in 2004, his charm and risk-taking. The likelihood that, in prison, he'd have taken to forgery. His knowledge of herbs and crystals. She had to get back. The more she thought about it, the faster she drove.

Turning into the drive, she almost collided with a car coming out. Her headlamps revealed Graham's Bentley, with Graham at the wheel, looking terrified. She opened her car door, stepped out and walked over. The terror in his eyes gave her courage.

Graham, she said. Lovely night for a drive.

He rolled his window down. His grimace may have been an attempt at one of his debonair smiles. She folded her arms and leant on his side window.

So where are you off to? she asked in a honeyed voice, as if she might like to join him.

London actually. And I'm a bit late. So if you wouldn't mind moving your car...

I don't think so Graham. In fact I think Graham Fletcher may not be your real name. I've found out about your past . I know the crime you've committed and I think the authorities might be quite keen to meet you, were I to ring them now.

Graham opened the door of his Bentley and, slowly, got out. Just as slowly, he reached beneath the left lapel of his linen jacket and drew out a gun. He pointed the gun at Sarah.

Just move your car, he said quietly.

She couldn't move, couldn't take her eyes from the weapon. She forced herself to look up at his face. He was smiling.

Just move the car, he repeated, in a whisper.

Here was Morris Cardew. He had poisoned her family or shot them. Nothing she could do now, would make any difference. She backed away towards her car. He followed. She forced herself to concentrate. Turn the ignition. Press down the clutch. Put the gear into reverse. Release the brake. As the little Smart Car rolled backwards, Graham leapt into his Bentley and squealed off down the road.

Sarah manoeuvred her car through the gates, up the drive and, with visions of her brother and his children lying in pools of blood, rushed up the steps into the Grange.

Sebastian was on his camp bed in the dining room and stirred when she turned on the light.

Are you alright Seb? she asked.

Asleep, he said.

His head was warm, he seemed alright. She kissed him on the cheek and ran out.

She found Michael sleeping peacefully in his bed, Anne in hers, head to tail with Toby, both fast asleep. She didn't want to barge in on Charlie, but heard him snoring.

Reassured, she went outside and parked her car. They weren't dead. No one was dead. She locked the house. As the adrenaline left her, she felt incredibly weak and climbed slowly up to the attic, where she fell asleep.

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Charlie thundered up the stairs into the attic and landed with a crash in front of the bed.

Oh you're back, he said.

Sarah blinked.

Seen Graham? he asked.

She shook her head, then remembered.

I saw him leaving last night.

Charlie stared hard at her.

Well you better get down quick and be with your brother. He's going to need you.

She leapt from the bed.

Charlie! What's happened?

He turned back to her. Graham Fletcher. That's what happened.

What's he done?

The thought that Graham had poisoned her brother put her on the edge of panic.

I'll tell, if you promise not to say a word to anyone.

Promise.

Graham has nicked your brother's money. All of it. And he's done it in a way that means we're never going to get it back.

But surely...

No! he hissed. Schtumm! Not your business. You want to help your brother?

Is he alright?

Course he's not alright, said Charlie, turning and traipsing back down the stairs.

Sarah froze, with one thought in her mind. Morris Cardew had taken his revenge, murdered his first wife, stolen her second husband's fortune and disappeared. His petrified look when she'd barred his escape last night... She'd let him go. She'd have to tell her brother, tell him everything.

Sebastian was sitting at his desk in the dining room, glass of champagne in his hand, staring into space. It was the pose Yvonne had assumed aboard the Princess. His laptop screen showed account details. He made no attempt to stop her looking, even when she gasped at the amounts involved. Staring at her brother to gauge his reaction, she realised he was absent. She pulled up a chair beside him and held his hand. It was cold.

Charlie bustled in, all chirpy and jolly.

Breakfast's on! he announced. Tailors'll be here in an hour for the fittings. Better get the kids up.

I'll do it, she said. I'll be back in a minute, Seb.

Kissing him on the cheek, she went out. In the hall, Charlie hissed at her.

Don't tell them what happened.

She woke Michael gently, reminding him that the tailors would arrive soon.

Charlie's making breakfast, Michael. You'll come down, won't you?

He nodded. She kissed him on his forehead and left to wake Anne.

Breakfast was a silent affair. It was had in the dining room, as that was where Sebastian sat. Anne, who had not wanted to leave Toby, eyed her father nervously. Michael, however, ate heartily, seeming not to notice his father's state. Charlie served them, bustling about cheerily.

Mr Grant, the tailor, arrived with his assistant Kevin and stacks of mourning suits in various sizes and styles. Sarah heard Charlie discretely explaining that Mr Graham Fletcher was no longer able to be present. Anne found a simple black dress that fitted her. Mr Grant put it aside and she went upstairs. Michael's suit would need altering. He stood, being fitted, saying nothing, as Kevin fussed about him with a measuring tape. Then he too went upstairs. Sebastian seemed able to go through the motions, raising his arm when asked. While Charlie nipped away to try on his suit, Sarah took over responsibility for her brother.

When Mr Grant and Kevin were done, it was Sarah who saw them out, while Charlie guided Sebastian back into the dining room and onto his bed. When Charlie emerged, Sarah was waiting for him.

Charlie, she said sweetly, I need to talk to you.

I've got the dishes to do, he said.

No, she said. We'll talk in the lounge.

She started as soon as she'd closed the door.

I need you to yell me the truth, she said.

What about?

Everything. Everything to do with my brother's business and yours, and Graham's. Do you understand me Charlie? I'm not the enemy.

What do you want to know?

Is Graham a forger?

Yes.

Did he forge documents for my brother?

Yes.

Is my brother involved in money laundering?

Well. that, and other stuff.

Illegal stuff?

Charlie nodded.

Did Sebastian steal Yvonne's money?

Charlie looked surprised. – No. Why would he do that?

How long have you known my brother?

I told you.

The truth.

I told you the truth. Twenty-five years or more. I never lied to you, Sarah.

Okay. So when did Graham Fletcher come on the scene then?

I don't know. He was always around.

Always? Graham told me it was in 2004, at Biarritz. He said there were gunshots and Sebastian swung his boat by and he jumped in.

That was me. I swung the boat round. Charlie bit his lip. Fuck me... There's something I wish I hadn't done. I should've left him. But we needed someone on documents and...

Did Graham know Yvonne? Did they meet?

You know they met. We were all on holiday together.

Before then. Had they met before?

I don't know. Shouldn't think so. Why?

So you met Graham in 2004, but it wasn't until this holiday that Graham met my brother's wife. Is that right?

Yes. No. We got Graham working with us in 2004, but we'd known him for years.

What? Are you sure?

Course I'm sure. He's one of the top blokes in his field. Fucking bastard. We fucking saved his life you know!

Oh...

You think Graham had something to do with Yvonne, do you?

No. I don't know. Does the name Morris Cardew mean anything to you?

Charlie thought and shook his head.

So many names, identities. Could be. But... Listen, I got so much to do before he wakes up, Sarah.

I'll help you, she said.

While they were doing the dishes, she quizzed him on her brother's business. It was pretty much as Michael had described. Clients approached them to make discreet investments on their behalf, identities anonymous, investments invisible.

Who would they be? Mob, mafia, terrorists, thieves? asked Sarah, stacking the dishes.

Could be, said Charlie, scouring pans. Could be some tycoon betting on his own company cos he knows a deal's going down. Could be your local bank manager. Everyone wants in on it. Everyone who's got a bit of dosh stashed away and wants to make some more.

As they glanced around the clean kitchen, Charlie told her he had to collect some supplies and do a few last odd jobs on the Princess. He had no vehicle and wasn't a driver. Sarah offered to make the trip with him. They looked in on Sebastian. He was fast asleep.

The sense of desolation in the house followed them to the car. Charlie tried to be chirpy but a terrible sadness pervaded everything and hung about his eyes. He was Sebastian's true

friend, thought Sarah. Together they sailed the high seas. There's was a real marriage.

So when the client gives you the money, what then? she asked.

Do what they say. Sometimes they just say make some money out of that. Seb knows how to make money. Mainly though, they'll know what they want.

But how do you get the proceeds back to the client?

Wash it. And give it some bullshit cover story. Listen I don't know the technical stuff, Sarah. I'm just the skipper. Charlie Kipper, world's greatest skipper.

Sarah laughed. Is your name really Kipper?

He shrugged. It's what people call me.

As they pulled up at a chandlery, Sarah turned to Charlie and asked him.

Did Sebastian love Yvonne?

Sarah was shocked at his reaction. His face cracked up and his eyes disappeared inside his head.

...I don't know why, he said. She never gave him anything.

Was he really planning to return to her?

Yes. If it hadn't been for that, none of this would've happened.

The Princess looked just as she had, when they'd boarded her on the first day of the holiday. She helped him get the supplies on board, then sat beside him on deck, sunning herself, while Charlie replaced a spinnaker cleat.

She asked him how Graham had managed to steal all Sebastian's capital. Charlie told her that in order to go legit, he'd funnelled it all into the one account. Graham obtained the account details, encryptions, the lot, and when they'd gone to bed, nicked it. Put it in his own account.

You know when Seb's laptop went missing, that's when he did it. He's probably moved it loads of times since then. It's gone. Thing is to move on.

Are you planning to sail?

What else?

But the children.

That's what you're for.

What?

Sarah was outraged.

They need their father!

You think Sebastian's going to sit in that house after all this? You think that's going to do the kids or anyone any good?

Is that what he's been planning? That I take over from Yvonne?

It's what I'm planning. I reckon the only way to save him is to get him on the boat, dry him out and get him working again. And I reckon that as his sister you might want to help. The summer holidays will end. The kids'll be back at school.

Michael won't. He's eighteen.

Ah, well. Have to sort that out.

Charlie cleared away his tools. Sarah didn't know what to think. She followed him about. She helped him. On the way back, she asked how Sebastian had discovered his loss.

Well it was gone, wasn't it! The account was empty.

So he knew immediately.

No. He thought it was a mistake. Sometimes these sites play up or crash. He was in a panic though. Went to fire off an email to the bank and found an email from that bastard.

What did it say?

It said so long and thanks for all the fish. It's from a book, I think. We used to say it when we'd just made a killing and were sailing away. Soon as Seb saw it, he knew.

What's Graham Fletcher's real name?

Fuck knows.

But you met him in the nineties. You're sure?

He was doing all the documentation for arms trafficking out of the Ukraine, early nineties, when Afghanistan blew up. That's when I first heard his name. There isn't a mob from here to Timbuktu that hasn't had his services. Handy with a gun too, as I recall.

Now you tell me, Sarah thought, with a shudder.

Listen, said Charlie. You don't want to know this. Let it go, Sarah.

On their return, she went to see her brother. She had a feeling that he wasn't asleep. She told him she loved him and would stand by him and that things would get better. She told Charlie she thought he was awake. He said he'd keep an eye on him.

She walked out onto the lawn to do as Charlie had suggested, to let it go. She had been wrong about Graham or Charlie being Yvonne's vengeful first husband. Right to suspect Graham, but... She was feeling trembly from the previous night. Never had a gun pointed at her before. Couldn't quite take it in. Decided if this was the world she was in, deal with it. No point being scared.

Crossing the lawn, she passed the Japanese garden and entered the woodland beyond. She did love her brother, more than anyone, probably. Suddenly she remembered Tom. She was supposed to have gone over for a goodbye drink but, coming away from Adriana's, she'd been intent on getting back to the Grange.

Her phone had been off. He'd have called. He'd be gone now. She said a silent goodbye, and let it all go.

Rich warm late afternoon. Dappled light, sound of children's laughter echoing through the trees like a memory of youth. Sebastian and her, home for the holidays, having a picnic in the woods. And, as Sarah came upon the clearing, she saw a girl sitting in sunlight and a boy's head poking out of the hollow tree. Sarah's heart skipped a beat. It was a mirage, she was seeing things.

Aunt Sarah! the girl called.

Anne, surrounded by drawings, had looked up and seen her. Toby scrambled down through the hollow bowl of the tree, swung from a low bough and dropped to the ground. Sarah recovered and went over.

Looks like heaven, she said. What are you drawing Anne?

Toby answered. She's just finished her first original story. I told her she had to start doing her own work.

Sarah nestled between Anne and Toby, while they plied her with page after page of Anne's new graphic story.

The first thing she noticed was the change of style. Anne's previous work had been gothic, dark, full of intensity and threat. These new drawings were like Disney cartoons. The story, an adolescent fantasy.

The Creature, some glamorous hairy thing, half Neanderthal, half Hollywood hunk, swooped down from the trees and stole away the pretty blond chick, out riding in the countryside one day. He carried her off to his lair in a mystical land full of other cute creatures. And, although the blond bint was scared, she was also excited. And, although she cried help me oh help me! she knew she was his forever. It was teen dream stuff. The thrills of mating.

She didn't know what to say. Psychologically she thought it a good development. Anne needed to be a normal sixteen-year-old. So she complimented Anne on its exuberance and originality. She complimented Toby for having challenged Anne to do it.

I helped her as well, he said, pointing to some kooky hobgoblins doing something rude in the corner.

It's wonderful, she said, standing.

You're not leaving, are you? asked Anne.

Oh well, I thought I'd let you two be. I didn't mean to interrupt. You know, this is where Seb and I used to come, to get away from the grown-ups. Our little private world when we were young.

Don't go, said Anne, patting the ground beside her.

Sarah sat back down. Toby rolled a joint and passed it to her. She listened to them chattering away about art and boys. When Toby challenged Anne to climb the hollow tree, Sarah watched. Time passed and the sun went down.

Returning to the house through the kitchen, Sarah found some fruit juice in the fridge which revived her. She checked that the coast was clear for Toby. When he was safely installed with Anne in her room, Sarah looked in on her brother.

Sebastian was still lying on the camp bed, his eyes closed. Charlie sat beside him, with his hand on Seb's shoulder. Charlie nodded at Sarah. She nodded back and left the room.

Climbing the stairs, she wanted to cry. Something made her look in on Michael, perhaps just the fact that she hadn't seen him since the fitting. She found him asleep, his room a stale tip, lit only by moonlight, his bureau locked. She remembered that Michael had been spying on his father and Graham. Surely he must know what Graham had done. As she was leaving, Michael called after her.

Sarah?

I thought you were asleep, she said.

Yes, he said.

As he sat up, the duvet rolled back. He was fully dressed. Sarah watched him wipe his eyes. They were bleary. He had been asleep.

Were you asleep last night when I looked in? she asked.

He paused then slowly shook his head.

You were awake then?

Yes.

So you know what happened?

Yes.

Then why didn't you stop Graham doing it?

I did.

You did?

I stole the money from Graham.

You've got it?

Every dollar.

Michael stood up, wandered across the shadowy room, found a plastic bottle of water and glugged some back.

Why haven't you told your father?

Michael shrugged. He doesn't need to know. Unless you want to tell him.

But you're going to give it back.

No. It isn't his. He nicked it from the last man. Graham nicked it from him. I nicked it from Graham.

You'll destroy him Michael.

He destroyed his dad.

Sarah sank onto the bed. She realised that Michael was serious. He was taking revenge on his father. An eye for an eye.

You're eighteen aren't you, Michael?

He nodded.

So are you off to university?

No. None of that shit. I'm going to start my life.

And now you've got your stake, your investment capital.

Yes. He grinned. I'm up and running.

Not if I have anything to do with it, she said, rising.

I don't think there's anything you can do, Aunt Sarah. You can tell Dad of course. You'll feel duty bound to tell him. But that won't change anything. It won't get him his fortune back. If anything, he'll feel worse, knowing what his son's done. Beating him at his own ruthless game. If you tell the authorities, your brother may well be arrested. You can be sure there'll be no trace of my activities.

That's appalling Michael. It's the worst thing I've ever heard anyone say. It's cruel, Michael. It makes you cruel. It'll mark you for life.

Don't bother threatening me. Just tell him. I'd like you to tell him.

You don't think your dad was responsible for your mother's death. That was just your excuse, to set yourself up financially.

I do think Dad was responsible. I know he killed her. He left her. He left us.

Yes. Well that may not be true. It isn't true in fact.

Sarah was on the verge of telling her nephew his mother's story. But she stopped herself. She needed time to think. She moved to the door.

Just tell him, said Michael. Get it over with.

Sarah rushed up to the attic and flung herself on the bed. Of course she couldn't tell Sebastian. What she had to do, was tell

Michael about Vaz Crow who witnessed her father's murder, who became Mrs Vanessa Cardew, who may have murdered her mother-in-law.

She had to tell Michael that his mother was a murderess, in the hope that he would view his father in a different light. As, perhaps, the victim of a disturbed woman. But would he? And was it true? Graham wasn't Morris. And there was nothing to say that Morris was anything to do with Yvonne's death.

The point was, surely, to try to work out what was best now. Nothing she had discovered was any use at all. Graham stole Sebastian's money and Michael stole it from him. What to do? Her thoughts went round and round. To tell Seb. Not to tell him. To tell Michael. Not to tell him.

As she drifted towards sleep, it occurred to her that Yvonne had been alone at the guest house. It had been her trauma, her guilt catching up with her. She'd spent the years with Mila. Sebastian was threatening to return. Was returning. There was no way forward. After three nights alone with a ghost, she'd forced herself back to the Princess. But she had nothing left. Drink and fall in. Sarah knew the power that ghosts could wield. The ghost of her career, the ghost of her baby. Don't be disappointed. Drink and fall in.

NINETEEN Day 12 Wednesday 4th August 2010

Sarah awoke with a start, pale milky light flooding the room. In dream, Anne's hunky Neanderthal had morphed into a face she recognised. The face appeared again and she shot from the bed.

Scrambling into any clothes that came to hand, bag slung over her shoulder, crystal wand hanging from her neck, thumping against her chest, she ran to the car. Ignition on, she clutched the wheel and was driving.

The earth had not yet cooled from the day before. Clouds bloomed in fields, sheets of tarmac became mirrors, flashing signals from the sun and a heat haze made everything float. Others off to work, or off on holiday, beeping cars and swaying caravans seemed to vanish between rising mist and glittering light.

Not fully awake, she found her way down country lanes, her actions clear but instinctive, taking the left or the right with a certainty she'd never have displayed, had she been thinking.

The farm was already busy, a pony trek imminent. Sarah made her way through the car park, around the side of the shop, past the paddock, to the herb garden. For a moment she stopped and stared up at the barn. Its doors were open. She took the rough wooden steps to the floor above.

Jacob was sitting on the side of his bed, lacing his boots. He had been their trek guide on the day Yvonne had disappeared. Looking up, he showed no surprise at seeing her.

Sarah began immediately. She was on automatic.

There was a girl called Vanessa Crow, known on the estate as Vaz.

As she told the tale, she watched Jacob and he looked back at her. Almost at once, she knew they were sharing this story. Yet he didn't flinch, not when Vaz watched her father drugged by her mother and aunt, not when she became a waitress at the Seagull Café. But when she said his name, Sarah knew that the eyes peering through all that bushy grey hair and beard, were the eyes

of Doctor Morris Cardew. The erudite doctor and the beast in the cell. Here was the ghost in the machine.

She described the Cardews' marriage, old Mrs Cardew threatening to change her will. The old woman's death. The court case and his imprisonment.

Of course, Vanessa was the poisoner, Sarah said. I know that now.

A muscle in his face flinched.

How could you bear it? she asked. All those years in prison. And she betrayed you, changed her name. I suppose someone as damaged as her might do that. And someone like you might accept it...

She waited, but Jacob contributed nothing. He was staring at the crystal around her neck.

Your friend, Doctor Adriana Margolis sends her love.

No response, if anything the eyes deadened.

According to a prison warder, Morris Cardew became an animal, would not clean himself, lost all hope. Perhaps that happened when he understood that his wife was not going to stand by him.

He was released in March 2004 and somehow found a way to exist here at Haven Farm. Six years passed. One morning a family turned up for a trek and he recognised the wife as his own wife. And she recognised him.

I was on that trek, as you know, and when we stopped on the Downs I noticed happiness in her eyes. I've remembered because it's the only time I even saw a spark of happiness in her. I don't know what happened that evening, if she came to you or you to her. But for three nights you shared a room at a guest house under the names Doctor M and V Cardew.

Again Sarah stopped to allow Jacob to confirm what she already knew. There was one source of light in the room, a tiny window without glass. His living conditions were basic to say the least. She noticed a smell of herbs and pure alcohol which overpowered even the smell from the stables below. His eyes, when she looked back, were staring at an old wooden trunk in the corner. And he kept staring at it, even as she continued.

I don't know what happened during those three nights but from the look of happiness I'd seen in her, I'd say there must have been some love in it. On Saturday morning she returned to my brother's yacht and we set sail for East Head. In the afternoon, when she was alone on board, I saw a blue motorboat scudding away from the yacht.

Some time later, her body was found by a bather and with help brought to shore. She had been drunk since daybreak, as was normal. She didn't swim. She was alive when she hit the water because there was water in her lungs. An accidental death. But there was a blue gash along the starboard, which a blue motorboat might have caused. There was an entry in a guest house register. I don't know if there are drugs or herbs that might allow one to place a living person in the water without a struggle.

The poison which killed your mother was easily traceable. But that was Vanessa's work. Maybe there was no drug. Maybe alcohol and despair were enough. In any case, it doesn't matter. I know you were there.

Jacob hadn't spoken a word and, as Sarah watched him, she heard heavy footsteps thudding up the stairs.

Jacob! Jacob! They're all waiting! ...Oh...

Sarah recognised the big soulful face of Dagmar, the owner of the farm. And Dagmar recognised her. The expression on her face

was almost as if Sarah might be a competitor, come to take him away. It reminded her that she had seen Dagmar and Jacob holding hands across a table and she realised a resemblance between Dagmar and Adriana.

Jacob rose to follow her. Sarah couldn't let him go. She grabbed his arm.

How did you do it? she demanded. Was it a drug?

In the chest, he muttered and left.

There is a pony trek leaving, Dagmar explained.

She smiled at Sarah politely and followed him down.

Sarah felt shockwaves through her body at what had just happened. She couldn't work out if Jacob had answered her. Had he injected something into Yvonne's chest? Did it constitute a confession? Or was the answer in the crystal resting on her chest? She took in the room, more like a hayloft. Her eyes rested on the old wooden trunk in the corner and within seconds she had it open and was poring through the private papers of Doctor Morris Cardew.

They were far more copious than Vanessa's little box file. A history in documents, diaries, photos, books of densely scripted theories, observations, illustrations and diagrams. Sarah knew if she sat and studied all this memorabilia, she'd sob. But she needed proof. To show Michael the truth. He at least had to know. Hearing cries outside and thundering hooves, she quickly selected some documents and photos, stuffed them in her bag and went downstairs.

Standing in the herb garden, she watched a single rider gallop away across the field. She thought it was Jacob. He was pursued by farm workers, including Dagmar, whose round body was quite unsuited to running. Slowly a group of trekkers on their ponies

appeared. They seemed reluctant to follow but interested in whatever was happening.

Sarah suddenly knew what was happening and broke into a run, following the farm workers. The ground was rutted and dry, with clumps of thorn and prickles like bomb blasts, creeping brambles, nettles, knot grass and dust. She couldn't see the rider anymore and after a while she was reduced to walking. Dagmar, ahead of her, continued to run.

At the far end of the field, the land dropped away. Three farm hands were attempting to pacify a horse. Others were staring over the edge. Sarah came to the edge. Below was a small inlet to the estuary, rocks, driftwood and muddy ooze, in which a small blue motorboat was moored. She saw Dagmar, kneeling beside a body in the shallows. She couldn't see the body but knew whose it was. The sound of the farm owner's wailing and the fact that no one moved, told her something else.

The horse was brought under control. Others found their way down to the inlet. She saw people on mobile phones. The police would be called. She had been present at another death, not two weeks ago. She couldn't be present at a second. Looking down, she saw Dagmar staring up at her, as if she had committed a murder.

As she drove out of the farm, she expected to hear police sirens, but the country lanes were quiet. Birds chirruped as they had before, an old van rattled by.

The roads disappeared. An inner conviction propelled her. She must tell them what she'd discovered. It would sort the family, the affairs of father, son and daughter. Allow them to move on. She knew the truth. It vindicated Yvonne, her tragic past... No need to suggest that she'd murdered her mother-in-law. Cast her as the

victim of circumstance. Sarah was clear. The moment had arrived. Tell them.

Driving up to the Grange, she saw Charlie helping her brother into the sleek black limousine behind the hearse. She ran over.

I must talk to you.

Don't talk now. Get changed! Charlie hissed, with an eye to Sebastian.

She hesitated, looked at her brother, propped up in the back.

Now! he pleaded.

Running to get changed, she saw the relieved look on the tailor's face. Without a thought, she threw off her clothes and struggled into the formal black dress. Anne passed her without a glance, followed by Michael. She should tell him now. Give Sebastian back his money, however he came by it. Don't let this go on.

Michael! she called, but he was already down the steps. They were waiting for her. They were late for Yvonne's funeral.

Arriving at the chapel, Sebastian drew himself up, shrugged Charlie aside and strode through the archway. She followed them in.

They were the first to arrive. They sat as the coffin was placed. Sebastian's eyes seemed to have closed. Charlie left him and went outside, returning some minutes later.

Still the other pews remained empty. The vicar walked over to Charlie and had a quiet word with him. The silence was profound. Sarah felt she couldn't move. She could hear the sound of her own breathing.

Just as the doors were being closed, Mila entered and sat at the back. Sebastian jerked his head round to see behind him and

Sarah realised. The Merricks weren't coming. The whole extended family had shunned the occasion. The vicar began his service.

There were just five mourners at the graveside. Mila stood some way off, in the shade of a tree. As the coffin was lowered, the traditional prayer intoned, Sebastian sank to his knees and began to sob. Michael's first reaction was that his dad had let them down again. Anne's face registered concern. Charlie knelt beside his friend, just as Sarah had seen Dagmar kneel beside her Jacob.

But Sebastian couldn't stop. He sobbed, he wailed, he hollered and howled. Michael's expression changed from social embarrassment to distress. His face contorted. In an effort to avoid collapse, he shouted Stop! But Sebastian didn't stop and as the vicar sprinkled earth, Michael fell to his knees beside his dad.

The solicitor had taken a room in the vicar's house in order to read the will. Sarah waited outside with Charlie. Neither spoke.

Sebastian emerged first, helped out by the vicar. Charlie took over responsibility. Sebastian seemed almost catatonic.

Cab's coming, Charlie informed him, looking nervously toward the road.

When the children reappeared, Anne came directly to Sarah.

Your turn, she said.

My turn?

He wants to see you.

Oh. Anne?

What?

Did you inherit?

Michael and me.

The house, everything?

Anne nodded and Sarah glanced over at Michael, who was chattering urgently at his father.

You'd better go in. He's waiting.

She heard Anne, but was mesmerised by what she was seeing. Michael was trying desperately to explain to his dad that he had his money. His fortune was safe. It took Michael some minutes to realise that his dad was not mourning the loss of his millions but the loss of his loved one.

Then Sarah went in. The solicitor advised her with regard to her trust fund, which, having not been drawn in 1989, had accrued. She heard numbers plus interest, plus this, plus that and signed as she was told.

Outside, Anne was waiting beside a cab.

To the marina, she instructed the driver, as they got in.

Why are we going to the marina? asked Sarah.

Dad's sailing, said Anne.

But he can't...

Why?

Well, what about you? What about your schooling?

I'm going to spend a few weeks with Toby before school starts. His parents are coming to collect us.

And Michael?

Anne shrugged. Sarah looked at her. So like her mother. Whatever grief Anne felt, it was locked away somewhere and admissible only through her artwork.

Toby's parents were indeed waiting at the Marina, Toby in the back, proud as a Cheshire cat, opening the door for Anne. Sebastian was on board, seated at the helm, Charlie running up and down, adjusting ropes. The car containing Anne reversed and drove slowly out of the car park, just as a radio cab came racing in. Michael jumped out clutching a computer screen, various holdalls hung about him, leads and plugs hanging out. He rushed

past her and clambered aboard the Princess. Charlie started the engine and, while it idled, jumped ashore.

Everything's sorted! he called.

She walked down to where he was untying a heavy rope.

Charlie? Has Michael given his dad back his money?

Charlie beamed.

Is Michael going to spend some time with his dad?

Boy's a genius. What he doesn't know about computers! We don't need Graham. Here. Grab this. Don't let it go.

He slung her the rope, which she dropped. By the time she had hold of it, Charlie was aboard and throwing the motor into gear. She let the rope go as Michael gathered it in, and watched the Princess glide out of the marina.

She walked to the Grange. It was late afternoon and oppressively hot. On the way she gathered some flowers and laid them on Yvonne's white bed in her opulent white room. Upstairs in the stifling attic, Sarah opened the window, took off her shoes and sat down. Michael had returned her PC and set it up. She turned it on to check her emails and, while it loaded, found the documents and photos she'd stolen from Jacob. She couldn't look at them. Instead, she put them in Yvonne's box file, which she returned to its hiding place in the eaves.

The first email was from Tom. He had arrived in Allihies. It was beautiful, he wrote. Sea and rocks and sky and peace. Wall to wall breathtaking beauty and the people are lovely. There's even a Buddhist retreat, if I find myself going nutty! All in all it's perfect, except for one thing. I have a confession to make. I fell in love with you, knew it immediately I met you. Couldn't say anything then and don't expect anything now, but, please do let me know how it all turns out. Much love, Tom.

Sarah had not told the family what she had learned about Vaz Crow who became Mrs Vanessa Cardew, who became Yvonne Noble and then Mrs Yvonne Merrick, mother to Michael and Anne, beloved of husband Sebastian, murdered by husband Morris, who had also loved her. She might have told Michael, or Anne, even Sebastian. But she would never tell them now. It was past.

I wonder how you get to Allihies? she thought.