

The Days That Change Our Lives

Jim Sweetman

About This Book

The Days that Change Our Lives is the second fiction book to be published by Jim Sweetman. It is a thriller, set in the late 1970s, with a twist or two in the unravelling and an exciting climax.

About the Author

Jim Sweetman has published a range of books on different topics but this is a relatively new venture into fiction. He lives in Suffolk, England.

First published in Great Britain in 2019 by Courseware

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ISBN: 9781898737320

COURSEWARE PUBLICATIONS
Applebarn Court, Westley, Bury St Edmunds IP333TJ

“We don't know the days that will change our lives. Probably just as well.”

Stephen King

When you get that bit older and slow down, there's more time to think about the past - the opportunities you took and the chances you missed. The past may be another country but, sometimes, you can still go back there as a tourist and what happened is still as vivid as ever. A lot of your history has disappeared, the mundane days, the repetitive activities and possibly some occasions you might prefer to forget on purpose. Bad dates, being in the wrong, small acts of unkindness are all there but best forgotten. Then, there are the big occasions taken out and looked at so much they've turned into photographs, the images and impressions frozen in time. What really happened in that moment has turned into the photograph and the video. Family holidays, new babies, city visits all recorded so efficiently that now the medium is the message and they are the reality. In between, there are the other bits, perhaps the ones you don't want to share and they still have the capacity to make you smile, feel warm or cry. Some of these are the life changing days, the pivot points in the flow of life where everything you thought was going in one direction turns out to be going in another. Within those days there are key minutes, even seconds, where that happens. I know that is so because it happened to me.

It seems like a long time ago now but this was how it started. This was how it always started. But, this time, it finished.

Monday: Bad Dreams

The surgery door was dark green, heavy and imposing, three steps up from the street and with railings along the steps. I usually dream in vivid colour and this was no exception. There was a heavy brass knocker at its centre and one of those large slits for letters that spring and snap at unwary fingers. I moved through the door - like you do in dreams without them opening - and down a long narrow corridor decorated like an old railway coach in cream and brown. There was a small wooden hatch placed halfway along one wall and rather too high up to be convenient. Next to the hatch, the word 'APPOINTMENTS' was printed in faded red print on a rectangular piece of cardboard which hung from a loop of string.

At the end of the corridor, there was a waiting room furnished in the worst tradition of public medicine. I took in a worn, threadbare carpet where the pale strings of the backing could clearly be distinguished. There were overgrown sagging leather covered chairs, ageing magazines going brown around the edges and all was heavy with the smell of sweat, disinfectant, stale tobacco and damp clothes. There was a large green plant in a pot in the corner of the room.

The doctor called me in from around the corner. He was elderly, pale yellow-skinned with a papery dry complexion which verged towards scabbiness around the pencil thin mouth. He seemed brusque and offhand to the point of disinterest, fiddling with implements on a table and turned away from me. I wanted to leave, to walk away, and to back out of the dream but it wouldn't let me.

Without undressing, I noticed that I was, quite suddenly, stripped bare laid out for medical inspection. I wanted to break free and found it hard to breathe from what felt like medical straps and bindings as the doctor went to work, his skeletal hands moving firmly over the white flesh gently moulding and squeezing and probing in what was not entirely a medical way.

I tried to speak, perhaps to cry out but only seemed to whimper and groan. At first, there was a sensation which in spite of the circumstances was almost pleasurable as my nipples spread and engorged but it was short lived. The doctor's hands moved more quickly now, squeezing harder and groping, pushing fingers that were now more like claws deep into the flesh. His hands moved in front of me like machines. I thought of mincers, industrial mincers, the sort you used to see in butchers shops with sawdust on the floor. I couldn't move.

The doctor was breathing hard, panting rapidly and his hands were hot and wet. The sockets of his eyes were white and glazed as if he couldn't see me. His white coat swung rhythmically as he pulled and flexed and the stethoscope swung against a greasy hairless chest. I tried to scream, force myself to scream. I wanted to wake and to wake myself but the doctor just came closer. I was going to scream, I knew it.

Then, suddenly, I was awake. Wet with sweat, my heart flashing like a headlight and every muscle in my body tensed. My breasts were still there, each nipple firm and hard. I felt them, in turn, carefully and

methodically as I struggled to wake up and collect my thoughts. Only the familiar knots and veins were there and just below the right nipple I could feel the cyst like lump which wasn't supposed to be there. I let it be and pulled myself around to look across at the alarm and its vivid red numbers. It was 5:28, just beginning to get light outside. Gregory was on his back and snoring lightly. I could make out the mat of greying hair on his chest rising and subsiding as he breathed. He almost had breasts of his own to complement a recently acquired layer of flabby fat and his expanding gut. An extra chin, in its formative stages quivered slightly as well.

I lay there in bed not really awake or asleep, listening to the blackbirds serenading the autumn dawn, the traffic on the motorway in the distance and the clatter of an approaching milk float while I thought about my dream. It was obvious really. I had an appointment at the, strangely named, Well Woman clinic on Friday, to take a closer look at this lump. There was a whiff of private medicine and hypocrisy about using this name for an appointment to find out whether you really were well or nearly terminally ill.

Maybe that was why I had never bothered before to be checked for carcinomas, either above or below as my mother would say; even though I knew that my grandmother had died from lung cancer. Still, you could easily put that down to the cigarettes she incessantly smoked. As far as I knew, up until last week, I was fit and healthy and had no obvious hang-ups about doctors or clinics. The local medical centre was modern and colourful with doctors who, even if a trifle young, always appeared confident, were nice to children and efficiently prescribed antibiotics when you saw them.

Funnily enough, the surgery in my dream, although vastly different from the modern equivalent, was still vaguely familiar. I could trace it back to my childhood; probably lead you to the door of the building if it still stands although I haven't been near there for fifty years or so. I was probably smaller then and everything seemed that little bit larger and more intimidating. It was probably quite an ordinary doctor's surgery for its time.

As for my breasts, I hadn't worried about them either until ten days before and, to be frank, the dream inflates them as they had always seemed, up until then to be quite normal. On the credit side, in spite of breastfeeding two children, well one and a half really, they've retained their outline and managed to hang in about the right places without sagging to my navel. It is true, I suppose, that they have become, in sociological jargon at least, marginalised over the years to the extent that they can be casually flaunted on European beaches, left unsupported under some T-shirts and mostly ignored by Gregory as items of erotic concern.

It is difficult to believe that once, a long time ago, I had achieved a rather surprising and embarrassing climax from having them stroked and rubbed at a student party. It isn't impossible however because I remember that sensation well. It was something nice to remember this morning to counter these repetitive Freudian films which were projected with irritating regularity onto the screen of sleep in the past few days.

As my thoughts rolled on and I worried about my worry keeping me awake I must have dropped off to sleep because, when I woke again, the alarm had fired the radio and Gregory was leaning towards me

trying to work his finger into my crotch. I suppose waking up like that would be as frightening as my dream for some people but I was used to it. Gregory had once admitted that he did it to keep himself awake, providing that tiny vestige of interest which would keep his head above the sleepy waters. He justified this because the radio alarm is set to Radio 4, my choice, and Gregory claimed that Radio 4 in the morning had the invigorating effect on him of a handful of Mogadon. Anyway, it was merely a grope not intended to lead anywhere and he was soon up and about, making tea and shouting at the children.

And that was where and how it all began. Maybe some people would argue that it started later but, there again, others might suggest that I had been heading for it with the precision of a cruise missile for years. More to the point, perhaps a cruise missile had been heading for me. I don't really know but the dream just seems to be a convenient point of location and it unsettled me as did my health scare. Together, they shifted the flat pack furniture of a comfortable life and afterwards nothing fitted together in quite the same way.

Not Just Another Day

Monday started off like, well, Monday. I had a lukewarm shower in what was left of the water, half dried and raked my hair, found some random underwear in the drawer, then pulled on my jeans and a tracksuit top. Gregory lumbered about without speaking and the children argued. James was watching cartoons on one channel and Sarah wanted her week in the stars on the other. Sarah was three years older so it was James who came in crying. I was making their sandwiches and, since it was Monday, had the luxury of wrestling with the choice of supermarket pate wrapped in what looked like a bile coloured condom, some left over ham from the weekend or cheddar cheese slices with the consistency of wet fabric. The ham won on the grounds that it was more perishable.

'Sarah,' sobbed James, 'turned the telly over while I was watching my cartoon.'

'Watch it upside down then,' I suggested helpfully. It wasn't very good but it was the best I could manage. It made James worse. He went back into the lounge. 'Mum says you got to turn back to BBC,' I overheard him say.

'Piss off,' said Sarah. James came back into the kitchen.

'Sarah says you can piss off,' he reported. Each of the last two words was clearly announced and rolled out with emphasis.

'Don't swear, please,' I said. 'Sarah, come here!' I called. I called her name more loudly again and she slouched in. 'Let James watch his cartoon,' I said wearily, 'and don't swear at him or anybody else. It sounds horrible.'

'I always watch the horoscope on Mondays,' said Sarah, 'he knows I do.'

'Well just give it a miss for once. Okay?'

'They'll have finished by now anyway,' she conceded grumpily and then went on in the same breath. 'Don't give me any of that ham. It was really horrible, all salty and stringy. Can I have pate?'

'Too late,' I replied. 'I've made them.'

'Well I'm not eating mine. I think I'll be a vegetarian. I'll just have some crisps and a biscuit.' She went upstairs and James came back into the kitchen.

'Will you make me some toast?'

'No,' I answered. Then, I added as an afterthought. 'I'm just going upstairs. Make it yourself.'

'I can't be bothered,' he said. 'I'll probably just have to faint at school and be taken to hospital. That's what happened to Martin Bowen and that was because he didn't have any breakfast. Mrs Haynes said so.'

'Well, ask Mrs Haynes to come and make your breakfast. Go back and watch the television. Save your strength.'

'There's no point. The cartoons are finished.'

Gregory called downstairs. 'Can you put some toast on for me?' I gave in, cut two slices off the loaf and rammed them into the toaster with as appropriate a display of anger as I could muster. In fact, it is very hard to put slices of bread into a toaster violently and I suspect that James noticed nothing. Looking back, I wish I had gone and watched the horoscopes with Sarah instead of calling her. They might have been some help with what was to come or, better still, might have warned me to stay in the house all week. But, unfortunately, I didn't. I made the toast instead.

Gregory was downstairs within minutes, shaved, dressed and ready for the car. He was carrying his empty teacup and wearing his better suit. The word better describes it well since his other suit was infinitely worse than this one which at least had the merit of hiding the worst of his paunch. His shoes were clean because it was Monday as well. He looked almost smart. He gobbled his toast greedily as he walked around the kitchen reading the sports pages of the paper.

Gregory did everything greedily from home to work and from shopping to sex. If Gregory decided to go jogging then he had to jog further than anyone else. If he needed a personal stereo to listen to on the way it had to be the most expensive in the shop and in restaurants he always chose the most expensive first course with meat in it. He spoke with his mouth full and tiny crumbs snow-flaked down the clean shirt front.

'I'll be late tonight. Tomorrow I'm in Birmingham, staying overnight. Then back home on Wednesday evening.' I wasn't surprised at this. Gregory, as far as I knew at the time, was a consultant. That's a title which sounded rather grand until you realised that he was actually chief salesman for the smallest large producer of ready mixed cement in the United Kingdom.

The people who consulted him were almost entirely second-generation Irish immigrants. 'Ruddy Catholic paddies', he called them at moments of tension. From the accounts he gave, there was not much doubt their joint deliberations were an insult to the grand profession of consulting. He was frequently away on business to the point that the children hardly noticed his absence for the odd night in the week. James sometimes asked where his daddy was and when I told him that daddy had gone to Birmingham, Gregory could as well have been paddling up the Amazon. Come to think of it, for all I knew, he could have been - paddling up the Amazon that is. All I ever heard he did in Birmingham was to talk to his Irish friends in a very loud voice - mostly so they understood better.

This probably sounds a bit churlish but, in most respects, I was the perfect company wife. I went to the annual dinner and was invariably sat next to the most sullen and rudest directors because the managing director thought I was a sociable soul, unlikely either to be offended by their vulgar propositions or lured into embarrassing discussions about the length of their Mercedes saloons. I asked polite questions about cement as well. At home I even tried to talk to Gregory about his work and listened politely to his more, and less, racist diatribes, as well as the endless stream of disgusting jokes, folk myths and stories

which people who travel seem to feed on. Gregory took a final mouthful of leftover, lukewarm instant coffee then wiped his mouth on the drying up cloth before giving me a greasy peck on the cheek.

'Bye kids,' he called upstairs and said the same to me as he walked out through the front door. No one answered. The car engine whined in a disgruntled sort of way, stuttered, fired and he was gone.

I don't really know what else to say about Gregory at this point. I thought I was married to a man four years old than me with an overwhelming interest in cement and a very passing interest in gardening, sex and home decorating. The first of these preoccupied his waking hours and the others he appeared to think about intermittently, so that on a sunny day with no sport on the television he might be inspired to do some weeding or mow the lawn while a nice dinner and a glass of port to follow could lead to some, rather perfunctory, but satisfactory, lovemaking. I'm not saying he disappointed me though.

Being honest, I suppose that I had thought more of the children than of Gregory for several years. Gregory approved of what he described as a liberal tradition of upbringing so that if Sarah or James cried it was up to me to define what the problem was and deal with it. He wasn't a distant father, merely a visiting one and that's how responsibilities were allocated. One upshot was that we had, as they say, come to take each other for granted.

Of course, it may have been just as well not to look too closely beneath the day-to-day life of the family. I had been quite happy to give up work and have the children. I did not feel emasculated by it and my independence was maintained by Gregory's absences. I hated washing and drying nappies so I bought a new automatic and a tumble dryer on the electric bill. We afforded holidays in Scotland and once camped in Brittany, where both children had extensive and colourful attacks of gastroenteritis for a fortnight. All in all, we were probably a typically happy family where shouting at one another and cursing one's children was a feature of domestic bliss, especially when involved with the need for money and everyone's capacity to spend it.

'Can I have 80p please?' Sarah asked while I was finishing the washing up.

'No. What for?' I replied suspiciously.

'Sponsored stair climb, last week, by Kirsty's class. Today is the last day to pay.' I wrestled with my purse and coughed up the last one pound coin.

'Can I keep the change? Dad didn't give me any pocket money on Saturday.'

'No you can't. Oh, all right, yes,' I answered. It was easier to give in than to prolong the exchange. It was already twenty-five to nine and James was in the hall doing handstands against the wall in his underpants.

'For God's sake, James. Go and get dressed. We've got to go in three minutes.'

'Don't swear,' said James, 'that's what you told me.' He ran upstairs. Sarah was still muttering darkly about the sandwiches.

We arrived at St Edward's only a minute or so later than usual, quite an achievement in itself because James had managed to lose a shoe under his pillow and Sarah forgot her PE kit and had to run back for it. There was the normal gaggle of mums by the gate. The school was a typical C of E maintained middle school. It was popular with parents of a certain kind on account of its glaring uniform, a traditional headteacher and the fact that most of the kids from the nearest council estate were eased in the direction of the alternative choice.

I pulled up onto the big yellow diagonal lines by the railings at the entrance and let the children out. I could see Mrs Haynes in the playground and that she clocked my arrival. She was calling one of the older children and sending him in my direction. I contemplated pretending not to notice and driving quickly away but the young messenger was too fast for me. He was quite breathless from sprinting.

'Mrs Clinton,' he gasped. 'Mrs Haynes says that she would,' gasp, 'like to speak to you before you go.'

'Thanks,' I said. 'I'll come over.' Some bell had rung in the distance and the children were massing in lines of blue and grey over on the playground. Mrs Haynes waited for me on the grass at the concrete edge. She made no effort to come towards me which was not only impolite but the exercise might have done her good. Mrs Haynes was, in my eyes, a fat lazy woman who served time as a teacher with a view to an easy life rather than out of any great affection for educational theory or practice. Sarah had been in her class and had apparently coasted through the year, reading as well at its end as she had at the beginning. In the meanwhile, she had become register monitor, a remedial reading specialist for the duffers and, worst of all, the tea lady. I could stomach the rest but when I found she was being dispatched to the grocers at the end of the road for the Haynes's family daily shop that was almost the end. Mrs Haynes did not look very welcoming.

'I'm sorry to bother you today, Mrs Clinton, but I did want to have a quiet word with you. I meant to catch you at the end of last week but you were too quick for me.' She said this as if she had noticed I was skilfully avoiding her. Behind her the classes were settling down into lines. There were more teachers in attendance now.

'It's about James,' she began in a loud stage whisper and cocking her head oddly towards me. 'I'm afraid that he has been using, well I hardly know how to put it, some rather unpleasant language in the classroom in the past few weeks. Of course, I'm worried that it could be picked up by other children.'

'Perhaps he picked it up from them?' I suggested, feeling a bit surprised, quite indignant and a little insulted all at once.

'I think not,' said Mrs Haynes flatly. 'He was really calling people some most unpleasant names and I have a particular dislike for blasphemy which I always try to discourage.' I obviously smirked nervously at the bit about blasphemy because she noticed.

'I may be a little old-fashioned and I know that, in some homes, the Lord's name is frequently taken in vain but it is not in my classroom.' She was beginning to flush and her voice had risen in pitch and

volume. I noticed that the children nearby were now noticeably quieter where they lined up ready to go in

'I really think, Mrs Haynes,' I said through teeth that were beginning to clench, 'that you're making rather a lot of this.' Then, with an attempt at consolation. 'After all every child goes through a phase like this. I'm sure Sarah did.'

'Yes. I'm afraid you're right.' Mrs Haynes was well on her high horse by now. Her round pasty face was mottling and there was a new slightly choked tone in her voice. 'Frankly, I had the same problem with Sarah, the same lack of respect for religion. I can only think that it comes from, I don't know, the home.' The children were lined in silence now and a teacher at the front was saying something but most heads were turned towards the green grass where that tub of lard and I stood.

'Mrs Haynes,' I said suddenly very angry inside. 'I have never heard such a load of utter rubbish before. Children are children and mine are just like anybody else's.' I nearly said what a load of pompous crap but checked myself in time and paused.

'Very well then, Mrs Clinton, I'm sure you are entitled to your opinions but at least I've made my position clear.' She had realised that she had said too much and was now intent on backing away and defending her particular trench.

'Now, look here,' I interrupted.

'So perhaps you could have a quiet word with your children.' Mrs Haynes turned to walk towards the school. First, just standing there, and then walking off. It was too much

'For Christ's sake,' I raged. 'You stupid cow! Have you no idea about children?' There were a few sporadic sniggers from the now rapt group of children closest to us. The headteacher, the timid and churchgoing Mr Martin, was shepherding everyone else towards the school but broke away and scurried into the building, obviously keeping his distance from this unwelcome scene. An unpleasant realisation descended on me as the bulky Haynes departed. I had just given her all the proof she needed. Of course, I should have run after her there and then, knocked her to the floor and rattled her head on the tarmac. I know that now, but it was different then.

I stamped back to the car, hot sweaty and fighting back salty tears of righteous indignation. Under my breath, I muttered words which possibly old elephant legs had never even heard before in her precious, sheltered holy life. At least I thought I'd lived life to the full. Well, more than she had anyway. But, even then, I knew little about what living life to the full might actually mean!

I clambered into the Metro trying to hold on to what little dignity I still possessed. Haynes was on the list; the death list. I always kept a secret list in the darkest recesses of my mind of people whose deaths I would secretly crow about. They were an odd collection and started with a perverted uncle who tried to interest me in some very peculiar gymnastics at the age of nine but, over the years, all kinds of names have been added. There were several television personalities, the odd politician, and my next-door neighbour but two. The beauty of owning such a list is that, if you make sure that everyone on it is older

than you are, there's a good chance you'll get a positive result. Mine had already worked quite well in a number of cases with the odd nasty ailment thrown in for additional revenge.

I was still stark, staring furious. There was no way I could face the shops and had I gone straight home it would have been bottled up all day. So, instead, I went to Sally's. It's important to tell it like that because, honestly, that is the only reason I went there. Her house was near the school and she was likely to be in at that time of the morning having just dropped her youngest, Henry, off at the nursery. She would also share happily in my hatred of the European Lard Mountain and give me a cup of coffee as well. You'll understand that I have to set out these reasons because of what came next.

I knew Sally Ellis socially, rather than with the intimacy of a long and close friendship. She had been Gregory's personal secretary and she and her husband, Ben, had often been guests at our occasional dinner parties. When I got there, only around two corners and into a long cul-de-sac, I was practically in the drive when I noticed something strange. There was our car, navy blue standard issue for all cement salesmen, parked not ten yards down the road - the same car that Gregory drove out of our street less than forty minutes before.

It is easy, in retrospect, to know what to do if this happens, slip the car back into gear and cruise away as silently as possible while filing the event for future reference. If it happens to you, take my advice. That's the best thing to do. Of course I didn't think like that. Nothing connected then. In fact, I don't know exactly what I did think. There was Sally's house, a neat early 1950s semi with a grey front door, a matching garage with a metal door and a matchbox size front garden.

On the drive were Sally's sports car and a space alongside it where Ben's car normally sat. But it wasn't there. Ben Ellis was another teacher, worked in the secondary school and was known to friends, staff and most of his students – at least when out of earshot - as Benny. I had liked him a lot on the occasions we had met. He had a genuine sense of humour and could tell stories about horrible children with a ring of authenticity. He brewed his own beer and mended his own car. My impression was of a nice guy bounded by relative poverty and a so-so career. He was nearly forty and working for most of the time with other people's kids. It did not sound like exciting work to me but he made me smile. We often found ourselves together while Sally and Greg nattered about business and I liked talking to him.

Anyway, as I was saying, I didn't think. I just pulled into the drive alongside the red coupe and sat there. I had come down from the argument but there was a new, and growing, crescendo of pounding in the ears and a tightness in my chest. I felt a bit sick, hot and dizzy and had no idea what to do. Of course, I then did the wrong thing, but I expect everyone does. I was drawn to that house. An irresistible force was calling me from the car and up the short shale drive. I had to see.

In an odd way, I felt dreadfully calm. It was almost dreamlike as if it wasn't me who got out of the car and walked to the back door. That bit was quite normal. Everyone always uses the back door to Sally's house. It was on the side of the house and as grey as the rest of it. Of course, I should have banged on the front door or rung the doorbell but I didn't. I went to the back door and tried it. The latch was off and I walked straight into the kitchen.

I found myself standing in an empty, spotlessly clean, pine panelled kitchen with a muttering washing machine tossing about wetly by the concealing pine door. This was when I should have shouted.

'Hello,' I would call. There would be a pause and an answering shout from Sally. Then, she would bound through from the sitting room, cheerfully doglike. Come to think of it now, she actually did look a bit like a dog. She had a big protruding nose rather flat at the end and those deep eyes which people take pity on. Rather like a Labrador puppy on a birthday card.

'Fancy you being here!' She would say. 'Did you see Greg's car? He's just dropped off some details about some rugby match for Ben to have a look at,' she would gabble. 'Would you like some coffee? I just this minute made some for Greg.'

The trouble is I didn't shout and there wasn't any just made coffee; there were just noises coming from the dining room next to the kitchen. In the house, there were just the four rooms downstairs - a posh front lounge, a kitchen, a tiny loo and a biggish dining room plus a spare sitting about area which looked onto the back garden. Standing in the kitchen, I was only a yard away from its door. So, I walked straight in.

I know I shouldn't have. I really knew then as well but it was all confused. This other person - not really me - was taking over. I was still in the car, hiding under the dashboard which, like most things, is difficult in a Metro.

There was Gregory with glazed over eyes staring straight at me. He was lying back on the sofa, a large leather extended thing to be precise, with his head and body facing directly towards the door. I couldn't see much of his body though except for his shirt front, and his trousers round his knees because Sally, my supposed friend Sally, clad only in a diaphanous housecoat, had her head and hands over the rest of it and her long tangle of bottle blonde hair was moving rhythmically up and down, rising and falling. I should have screamed. I could have run back into the kitchen, grabbed a carving knife and whipped it off there and then. I might have been sarcastic and made some comment about Sally always being a sucker. As it was, I did nothing of the kind.

'Oh,' I said, 'I'm sorry,' and backed into the kitchen. I leant on one of the pine units for a second. I could hear Gregory and Sally. Gregory had registered my presence. Perhaps a shock of recognition had caused an instant ejaculation of the type hanged men are supposed to have, because I certainly read sheer horror in his eyes. If I had been the curse of the mummy's tomb itself he could not have looked much more surprised. I could hear Sally.

'What's wrong?'

'Alison,' Gregory was choking for breath and whispering hoarsely, 'in the kitchen.'

'No?' a whispered reply. 'Oh, shit!'

I didn't stay. I ran away. There was, at that moment, nothing else to do. I know I should have stayed and put the coffee on. They were obviously ready for it. I can see it now. Gregory could have come into the kitchen and put a comforting arm around me.

'Hey, I'm really sorry, Hon, about that in there. I guess me and Sally just got a bit carried away.'

'That's fine by me,' I'd say. 'Sally's a real friend.' Then Sally would come into the kitchen as well and we would look at each other really deeply and then fall into each other's arms and have a really good weep and know that we were sisters. Then, later on in the scenario, Gregory could obligingly be deceased, falling under twenty tons of cement, during flyover construction on the Channel Tunnel approaches and Sally and I could have a comforting lesbian thing until I met an outstanding university professor.

Natalie Wood would have to do the Sally bit, well she would if she weren't dead, and Harrison Ford could be the professor. Knowing my luck though it would all go wrong and I would get stuck with Mary Tyler Moore and Sylvester Stallone!

But it didn't happen like that. It couldn't have because I was out of that door and down the drive so fast they could never have caught me. Also, another problem with the outline is because the sisterly embrace is likely to be a bit confused by couple of teaspoonfuls of phlegm and semen. I think it might give most film directors a problem and it certainly would me! Reconciliation is one thing but joining in is another.

But that's by the way and I don't want to sound like a prude. I think I truly ran off because I was so utterly embarrassed. I suppose I thought - if at the time I could have excavated anything from the confused rubble of my brain - that they would be upstairs in bed making love. No, not making love which is a pretty stupid euphemism and a pretty inaccurate one as well, but having a quickie, shagging, screwing and getting their various ends away. I might have coped with that and been cool disdainful and detached. I could have spoken of betrayal, told Gregory that if he had to do such things perhaps he could make sure that it was not with one of my friends in future. I suppose what I mean is that I could have blamed him. Frameworks exist in any relationship for saying nasty things to each other but this was in some measure different and I didn't have the necessary structures to cope with it in my mental or verbal repertoire.

So, I ran off. And, of course, no one chased after me either like they would in the films.

Road Movie

I jumped into the car, gunned the engine and nearly took the low brick gatepost with me as I travelled back the way I had come. I swerved onto the main road because I forgot to brake as I came up to the junction and headed away from home, an empty and hollow description at that moment, towards the town.

Then, I turned off onto the motorway because that was the simple way to go and I needed to think. Also, if you stayed in the inside lane of the dual carriageway, you were remorselessly sucked down into it so it was the easiest route to take. It was ironic too. There was Gregory's cement in this access road and he referred to it so often that the children used to call it 'daddy's road'.

On the verge of the gently sloping slip road, perhaps halfway down it, there was a man standing arm outstretched. I took in that he had a rucksack at his feet, blue jeans and that his hair was quite long and dark brown in colour. I noticed that he looked clean and washed perhaps because I was expecting him not to.

I wasn't going to stop but I did. It was like it always was. I thought one thing and then went ahead and did something different. I drove straight past, slowed down, and speeded up, indicated, slowed down and then started up again, before stopping almost on the shoulder of the motorway itself. These vacillations and the motions of the Metro exactly coincided with a series of moves and counter thrusts between the hemispheres of my brain. One half of my brain is impulsive and urged me to stop but it's normally kept under control by the other half. This is a kind of social democrat brain and spends its time reflecting on things and then pumping out what sound like reasonable policies which are mostly targeted at preserving the status quo. Flipping the indicator was the first brain's masterstroke and just a quick, unthinking reflex like a knee-jerk. However, it confused good old rational other half because that knew that when the indicator comes on you have to pull in, even though pulling in might be a very bad idea for all sorts of reasons.

So, having come to a halt, I would have been away again in seconds but the hiker had interpreted my actions and was bounding down the slope towards me, his rucksack banging around his knees and his jacket flapping. I leaned across to open the window but the door was unlocked and he opened it first.

'Going towards London?' he asked. His voice was breathy from running and rather quiet. I remember thinking that he looked young rather than dangerous.

'No,' I said. His face looked confused for an instant. The way the car was pointing I couldn't help but be going towards London. 'Yes I am,' I said. 'Of course I am.'

As the car pulled away into the traffic stream, I made an effort to collect my thoughts. It would be sensible to stop at the next interchange, turn round and drive home. There in the tranquillity of the house, I might rage, suffer and try to make sense of the chaos around me. Here, on a busy motorway,

sitting next to a complete stranger who was attempting to make some kind of polite conversation, avoiding twelve wheelers and struggling schizophrenically to decide what to do next, I had no chance.

'Are you going to London?' he asked.

'Yes. No, just part of the way,' I replied. My mind was still in Sally's kitchen hearing the sound of Gregory's moaning. It was, I realised, a sound I knew well as heavily amplified and directed into my right ear. I pulled out and into the middle lane of the motorway and pressed my foot firmly on the throttle.

'Do you live round here?'

'Yes,' I answered, 'about five miles away.'

'I don't know this area at all,' he went on. There was no trace of any accent. 'I've just been visiting friends in Liverpool. I'm a student, at Polytechnic, in London.'

'You look too old to be a student,' I said. My mind still wasn't focusing properly and I was just making polite conversation but he did look older as well. His longish hair made him look young at first glance but his face was older and his voice was deeper and more measured than I might have expected.

'I'm a mature student,' he said as if attempting to convince me while I swerved around yet another huge lorry which belted black diesel fumes as I passed. 'It means I didn't need A-levels to get a place,' he added helpfully. 'Sometimes when I'm there though I feel about eighty and that's one reason why I'm glad to get away occasionally.' I drove on, eyes glued to the road and thought. Somehow, he didn't sound entirely plausible. It was as if he was making too much effort to explain himself.

'What do you do?' he asked. The question made me wonder. I was tempted to lie at that moment, although had I been asked the same question the day before my answer would have been straightforward enough.

'I'm a housewife. I used to be in market research, until I had the children that is.'

'That must have been interesting,' he said, as if it was a closed chapter like describing a holiday you once had. 'How old is your child, did you say children?'

'Nine and six,' I answered, 'a girl and a boy.' As I said it I was seized with an overwhelming feeling of betrayal as if I was leaving them forever. Up to then they had not featured. I was just getting out, escaping, thinking that I was certainly going back. After all I just needed a break. I must have sighed audibly.

'Sorry,' he said, 'is something the matter? I didn't mean to intrude.' I was in the fast lane now with an irate white van inches behind the Metro's rear bumper with its headlights angrily ablaze.

'No. Yes, nothing,' I replied, pulling hard over to the inside. He did not flinch but turned towards me. For a moment I thought he was going to touch me but he didn't. Instead, he leaned across and as the van

drew alongside he raised both fingers and evidently and symbolically gesticulated at the driver. I realised I had a friend. I slowed down and plodded, at a steady 45mph, close to the hard shoulder.

'Thanks for doing that,' I said. 'I should have seen him but it's just been one of those days. I should have seen a lot of things a bit sooner than I have today.'

'Don't worry about it,' he replied and paused. I thought that he was wondering whether he had accepted a lift from an escapee from the asylum. 'I know the feeling,' he went on, 'sometimes I think I've seen too much for my own good as well.' I didn't register this comment at the time, being much more concerned with my own anxieties but it came back to me later.

'I'm trying not to,' I answered, 'but so far it's difficult.'

We drove on and he began to natter amiably. I think perhaps he thought it was important to talk to me. Perhaps he reckoned that he was less likely to end up in a multiple pileup if he kept me talking! He said his name was Finn. He was twenty-five and after six years in provincial newspaper journalism he was going back to college to get a journalism degree and a real job. He had worked in Manchester and Liverpool but hailed from the northern outskirts of London and had returned to the city to take his course. He should have gone to university when he was eighteen but had failed his A-levels at the same time as his father had died. He said this as if the two events were implicitly connected.

I was hearing all this with the rational good listener half of my brain but the rest was still in turmoil as we continued along the motorway. A sudden prospect of instant revenge seemed sweet and perhaps not entirely unattainable. I knew I would have to turn back soon. I would never see him again. The Metro, despite all the claims for its spaciousness, is actually quite an intimate motorcar so Finn was quite close to me. I should also make it clear while confessing this that in no way was this my natural character. It was just a nice - and necessary - fantasy at the time. I never usually stopped to give hitchhikers lifts while alone in the car. On reflection, I couldn't even remember the last time that I had been alone in the car on the motorway. It was certainly a long time ago.

I should admit to my infidelities here, only two - one very brief and the other protracted and painful. The first was a drunken Christmas party with the senior market research team, one of whom researched me pretty thoroughly before practising a clumsy coitus interruptus over a rather attractive low-waisted black dress which I owned at the time. He was very apologetic but I never really found out whether he was fearful of paternity suits or suddenly overcome by blind panic and love for his family. He never spoke to me again, the marks came out of the dress, and I blamed the damp patch on spilled wine. I was on the pill but he never thought to ask.

The other was a friend of a friend and was one of those relationships which are the stuff of cheap novels. There were illicit lunchtime meetings and heartrending discussions about who would be most hurt by our union before anything to speak of had taken place. Plans were laid with immense skill so that his wife could visit her mother while Gregory was away; even when Gregory first joined the company he travelled a lot. That night Alan parked his car three roads away and slunk into my bed. The choice of that verb is deliberate and appropriate. After 'slinking' in, he accomplished his business and

then like a cat on hot bricks was ready to leave. I tried to sympathise and relations dragged on. We met in pubs, after his pottery evening class and clinched in car parks but, even from the start, the relationship was as heavy and clayey as his misshapen pots. He presented me with one and I kept it as a kind of souvenir for some time afterwards. Eventually, Gregory used it in the shed to keep his paintbrushes standing up in.

So, I wasn't entirely innocent and, in these various ways, passion had infiltrated my marital relationship. I was, therefore, in no way behaving normally in engaging in a discussion with myself which said that - were this man to make an advance towards me - I would be unlikely to resist. That is a clumsy way to put it but that was how it seemed. I felt angry, blind, stupid and cheated. I thought, also, that what I had witnessed was part of a wider affair and that I had probably been deceived over some longer and as yet undefined period of time. I finally felt, as anyone must in similar circumstances, that I had been passed over for another. Sally was a bit younger than me and, to be blunt, curvier. Even when she was pregnant with Henry she looked elegant and sexy. Truthfully, my ego was damaged and in need of restoration. Something could have happened instantly with this man so that it required no introduction and no clumsy preliminaries and that would have been fine, but I knew that wasn't how the world normally worked. What I hadn't realised what this was not a normal day!

He was still talking and I understood vaguely that he had been telling me something about a holiday or trip - to Russia, I think it was or maybe somewhere in Eastern Europe. He was suddenly asking me if I'd been there.

'Er, no,' I said, trying to catch up with the drift, 'but it would be nice to travel more.' There was a large blue sign ahead which stated that SERVICES were eighteen miles away and a junction number something was imminent.

'Would you like to stop?' I asked. 'For something to drink?'

'The next services,' he said, 'are eighteen miles away.' He spoke as if I'd missed a sign. We passed the three slashes sign which the Highway Code says means a junction is approaching.

'I suppose we could turn off and find a cafe.'

'Yes, if you're desperate.' He spoke with total innocence and without a trace of irony in his voice.

'I don't want to hold you up,' I replied with equal innocence as we passed the second warning sign. Of course, you never know with words. Perhaps the Freudian slips were just meta-language codes for sexual invitations. If they were I wasn't aware of it. I could see the slip road.

'Actually, a cup of tea would be nice. I've been on the road since 8 o'clock.'

'Alright then, if you're sure.'

'Yes.'

I swerved off the motorway with as much anticipation as I had joined it. There was a bridge at the top of the slip road.

'Left or right?' I asked.

'Left,' he said. We went left and within a few hundred yards or so there was a lay-by with one of those mobile tea vans parked at one end. Mobile is a generous description. It looked as if it had not moved for years. One tyre was flat and the wheel hub was supported on blocks of wood. The van had obviously once been cream then re-sprayed a vivid blue, so that now there were cream splashes and patches where the clumsy topcoat had peeled and fractured. The windows were dirty but it was clearly open and serving.

'That'll do,' I said, so at the end by the van I pulled back into the lay-by. There were a couple of trucks in there but the lay-by had obviously once been the line of the bend, now tidied by road improvements and it was long and tree-lined. I drove past them and stopped in the shelter of some shade and a broken gateway leading to a field of dark, burnt stubble. It stretched away endless and desolate for miles.

'Nice view,' Finn said. 'Tea or coffee?'

I reached for my bag off the seat behind me.

'My treat,' he continued.

'Thanks. Coffee, please.'

He pushed open the door and was gone. I wound the window down. It was a warm autumn day and above the truck radios and the buzz of the road I could hear the last bees in the hedges and lapwings in the fields. The lapwings rose, circled and descended again in this charred landscape, their cries mournful and tinged with fear and sadness. It was strange to sit on a late summer roadside looking into a vision of winter.

I ignored the view and swivelled the mirror. Considering the events of the day so far I thought I might have looked worse. I took off my jacket and placed it on the back seat with my bag then unbuttoned an extra button of my blouse, looked down at my cleavage, fastened it again looked back in the mirror, saw nothing and finally unbuttoned again. I moved the mirror back and round slightly. I could see Finn standing at the van. He had taken off his jacket and it was slung back over his shoulder. Standing up, he was attractively slim and his jeans were faded and fitted. I watched him get served; he paid, and then turned back towards the car. I watched for a moment only and then readjusted the mirror.

The tea was warm and sweet. 'I'm sorry,' he said, 'I should have asked if you wanted sugar but, actually, they seem to pour it in whether you want it or not.'

It wasn't coffee and I never have sugar in my tea but, somehow, there it felt right and I realised I was grateful for some extra energy. It was hot and I sipped it slowly from the top, cupping my hands around the mug.

'Makes a nice change,' said Finn.

'What does?' I asked.

'Tea in a mug, instead of some foul tasting plastic object which burns your fingers and makes the tea taste awful.'

'Are you due back at college today?' I asked, making conversation.

'Yesterday, to be honest! I'm missing a class today. Well, a discussion anyway. I was supposed to have done some work for it so I've got off that as well.'

'Will you be in trouble, can they take away your grant or something?'

'I don't suppose that anyone will be so much as aware that I'm missing. I expect that if I disappeared for a month or two there might be comment but my landlord wouldn't notice until the rent stopped coming. I was struck by the contrast with my own situation. It occurred to me that Gregory must already have been wondering about where I might be. I tried to work out what he would do. Go straight home remorsefully to beg forgiveness or go to the office instead and send Sally round in his place. On the whole, I suspected that he would go to work, come back at the normal time, eat his tea and fall asleep. It would be difficult for the children running about and then going to bed, to have a scene. The oppressive normality and situation would make any recollection of the morning so bizarre as to be unthinkable.

'I'll take your cup back,' he said, reaching towards it.

'Sorry,' I said. 'I was miles away.' As he took the mug I felt the touch of his fingers. I noticed that he smiled.

I got out of the car as he did. I needed to stretch my legs. For a moment, we stood on either side of the car looking out over the fields. I flattened the front of my skirt and tucked in my blouse. There was a warmer edge to the day now and the sun was fighting through the mist.

'I don't suppose there is a toilet along there?' I asked.

'No chance,' he said. He paused. 'I'll just take these back.'

He walked back towards the van. I pushed past the broken gate into the field and walked along the hedge away from the tea-van and the trucks. There was little obvious shelter but within about fifty yards there was a protuberance of hawthorn hedge wide enough for me to squat behind. The field edge, a thick hedge and a band of tussocky grass perhaps a yard wide, was the boundary between the normal road surface of the lay-by and the blitzkrieged nature in the field beyond. As I walked back, I registered Finn leaning on the bonnet of the car. He looked up at me as I approached and I was conscious of him watching me. Then, he walked along the hedge towards me. We stood facing each other on the narrow grassy path.

'Peaceful, isn't it?' He said, swivelling to look out across the fields. 'Those are funny birds over there.

'Lapwings,' I said, 'or peewits. It depends where you live.'

'They're very pretty,' he said. 'God knows how they survive in this mess, though, with everything just burned to the floor.'

'I think I know how they feel,' I said. I didn't mean it to sound quite as plaintive as it did. It was just what struck me at that moment.

'Poor you,' he replied and as he spoke his hand brushed mine and held it loosely for a moment. I think he was about to take it away so I turned towards him and as I did so his arms came round me. His torso and arms felt lean and wiry and I could smell soap and perspiration. I lifted my face up so that he could kiss me.

That was how it happened. It's nothing special and it probably happens countless times a day to people who have never met each other before. I don't know what the statistics are for being made love to while hitchhiking. On the whole, I think Finn was more surprised than anything. He stopped kissing me for a moment and just looked at me with a smile on his face as it might be Christmas morning or he had just won the pools. I realised then that I was, in the simplest terms, a boost to his ego.

With Gregory I often felt like a reservoir plus a pump, designed to flush out his system when he felt the need and this was pleasantly different. It was also rather quick. He stretched out the jacket which he was still carrying on the grassy verge. It was tussocky and lumpy as we, at first sitting, toppled sideways still embraced. It was an urgent, torrid scene. His hand was up my skirt and he was already hard as I pulled down my tights. I felt him push in to me with a groan. I could feel tussocks of grass like fists pushing into my back and his kisses on my neck. I felt him thrust, once, maybe twice and burst inside me. Overhead, I could hear the crying of the birds.

Service Station Blues

Afterwards, we both stood up and dusted ourselves down rather briskly as if a gust of wind or a mound of grass had tipped us casually on top of one another. When that sort of thing takes place you're supposed to be drunk enough to be able to bluff your way through or maybe you can be distracted and swallowed up by a crowd. Another possibility is the 'pretend it never happened bit' which is probably preferable to the 'intimate follow-up'.

Here, I was even more confused than I might usually be - if such events are ever normal or usual - because part of me felt that somehow I'd used Finn. It was a not altogether unpleasant feeling and, perhaps, I needed to use somebody then but it left me unsure of what to do next. I wondered whether I should buy him lunch as a reward! The thought made me snigger as I came back to the car and opened the door.

'Penny for your thoughts?' said Finn. It was the first time he'd spoken.

'Nothing much there,' I replied. 'It's just a funny world really.'

'You're telling me.' He shook his jacket and brushed the grass off it. We both laughed at each other across the car. It was a good feeling.

'Thanks,' I said as I sorted out the keys. 'I'm glad that happened.'

He stashed his coat in the back on top of his rucksack. 'So am I. It was ace.' That was it.

We avoided further eye contact while I found the key, the engine spluttered into life and I reversed back into normality. There were the trucks and the tea van with the traffic buzzing behind us but, as I pulled away, I could see the clump of hawthorn which concealed the field beyond.

When I turned off the motorway originally the thought at the back of my mind was that this was the place to turn back to face reality. Now, it was not so easy. It would have cheapened the event somehow to have dropped Finn off instantly but, more relevantly, I was incapable at the time of finding the vocabulary to cope with it. In a way, it was essentially embarrassment which drove me back to the long ribbon of the motorway yet again. I promised myself that I would stop at the next Services, leaving Finn, well set up for another lift and then head northwards again. But nothing ever happens as you expect.

I should have realised that by then. In one way, I was numbed by events yet, at the same time, my senses and perceptions felt needle sharp. In the field, it had been a bit like at Sally's. There, half of me stayed in the car while the other half went into the house. I felt the same sense of detachment with Finn as if I could stand outside myself and see the lumpy grass, my little heeled shoes kicked off, my knickers hanging on one leg, navy skirt around my waist and his tight slim buttocks pushing into me with his blue jeans around his knees and his shoes and socks still on unlaced. The day was unfolding like a series of photographs, sharp contrasted prints, like the police take after murders!

Surprisingly perhaps, we chatted and small-talked as I drove on. He had seen all kinds of films and plays in London which I'd fancied seeing and was happy to talk about them. We didn't talk about him or me. That was a pity in the end. The trucks seemed less menacing and fewer in number and I was soon close to the service station. Finally, I summed up the courage to speak.

'I think I should drop you off here, if that's all right. I've got to turn off at the next junction and that is a bit quiet so you're more likely to get a lift here.' I hoped desperately that the next junction was not some vast trunk road or a motorway interchange.

'Yeah, that's fine. Would you like to have some lunch before you go? It's gone 12.'

I had the old trouble. 'No, I ought to be getting on. I don't know really.'

'It's up to you,' he said.

'Alright then.' I pulled off the carriageway, turned in and parked.

There was a long covered way leading to the service station entrance and despite the number of cars only a few people to be seen. 'Thanks for the lift,' he said, before getting out of the car then leaned across to kiss me chastely on the cheek. It struck me that I might have been his aunt. He turned into the back to retrieve his rucksack then back to me.

'Can I leave this here until we have had something to eat? It saves carrying it about everywhere.'

'Of course,' I said. 'But don't leave anything valuable in it. The locks on this car are a joke.'

Inside, the main forecourt was crowded. In the toilet I sought out my composure, deciding to fall into the auntie role which appeared to be offered to me. I'm not keen on farewells or introspection and this seemed a good way to avoid either. In some ways, I wished I could have dropped Finn off and ridden into the sunset - films again!

I came back into the restaurant with its acreage of plastic tables and chairs all bolted to the floor where Finn was waiting. I picked up a long bread stick packed with limp lettuce, anaemic tomatoes and waxy cheese - a Ploughman's Snack it was called. It was just the sort of snack to accompany the wasteland by the lay-by. I could imagine the unconcerned drivers of vast yellow tractors which drove hundreds of furrows at a time for miles upon mile of endless field. They would have savoured the synthetic taste of the salad, screwed its enclosing cling-film into a tight ball and flicked it onto the damaged, scorched earth. Then, having revved up their heavy engines in clouds of black exhaust they would leave great pits in the clotted surface where the huge ridged wheels ground in the living clay. I ate the bread stick though. I was hungry.

Finn sat opposite me quietly eating a similar roll, his eyes casting around the landscape taking in people, listening to snatches of conversation. Then, all at once, he seemed overly aware and suddenly on edge. The fingers on his hand were drumming silently on the plastic salt container. His eyes met mine as I watched him.

'What is it?' I said. 'Is something the matter?'

'No, nothing,' he replied, through a mouthful of ham and bread. 'I just thought I saw someone I'd rather not meet. Not today anyway.'

'You haf enemies?' I asked in my best Greta Garbo. He didn't look amused.

'Yes, he replied, I do.' It was said emphatically yet quietly and with, I thought, an edge of fear. It was unexpected and I was nonplussed. He had seemed so casual before, so laconically confident, chatting in the car about recent plays and films.

'Look,' he said, 'it's all right but I think I'd better go.'

'You haven't finished your coffee,' I replied rather absurdly. It already had a thin skin across its surface.

'It's okay. You stay here. I can just get my stuff from the car and go. It is open isn't it?'

'It doesn't lock on the driver's side. Don't steal it will you?' He stood up.

'Bye then, Alison, and thanks.'

'You remembered my name,' I said trying to be light-hearted. He pointed to my purse lying open on the table by my bag to reveal my neatly printed name and address.

'I hadn't forgotten though,' he said. He touched me briefly on the shoulder as he passed the table then he was gone. I sipped my coffee reflectively and pensively. Once again, when everything began to fit together, something had knocked the picture out of shape. Someone, or something, had worried Finn but I had no idea what. I looked down at my cup and stirred the coffee with a kind of plastic stick offered for the purpose. There was my bag and my purse, the name tag on the purse still legible in its neat leather holder courtesy of North Western Cement. I looked at the clock. There was plenty of time to be home to pick up the children and tea could be out of the freezer. I had to think what to say to Sally, and to Gregory. I wondered whether to tell anyone else about what happened. Should I tell Gregory casually that I'd taken my revenge and calmly intimate that there were many other lusting and available young men to be found if required?

Of course, I had no idea then of the duration of his relationship but it seemed more and more that the kind of activity I had been witness to was not of the sort associated with first dates or spur of the moment fumbles. If I admitted about Finn, Gregory might just laugh in his condescending way but, now, it was my private victory and I did not want it to be spoiled. Frankly, there were no scenarios to explain why Gregory should have been at Sally's, let alone at that time of the day. Little scissors snipped at my confidence, recollecting odd occasions, times when Gregory had been out at strange hours, meetings attended by none of his colleagues but there was nothing substantial to ensure conviction or to convince the jury meeting up in my brain. I finished my thinking and my coffee at about the same time when I was interrupted by a whoop of sirens from outside. Both my thoughts and the debris in the plastic cup were equally grey and muddied.

My attention was distracted by a commotion near the door of the service station which pointed out to the car park and away from the motorway. There was a crowd staring out across the tarmac and away to the right towards the exit. Some people were pointing; a few running as well and others were hushed and quiet. I noticed that the matching members of staff by the matching counter were huddled and talking. The girl on the till also stopped to talk to them and there was no one queuing for food. The few people in the restaurant were looking out of the windows. Then, more people hurried in talking excitedly. I gathered there had been an accident of some kind. I heard someone talk about 'brakes' and someone else about 'not having a chance'. I picked up my purse, put it back in my bag and left the restaurant.

I had to ease past the crowd outside the door. 'What's happened?' I asked a man who was standing gaping with the rest of the crowd. He was a typical sales representative in a cheap suit and vulgar tie. I shouldn't mock really since Gregory had been one of just such a group for so many years but it wasn't pleasant to see this gang of adults so obviously intrigued by someone else's misfortune.

'A lorry,' he said. 'Gone out of control. It hit somebody.'

'How awful,' I said. I wasn't worried. I knew my car was at the other end of the car park, near the entrance. As I walked out to it, I could see the pulsing blue lights and the white and orange of the emergency vehicles. Just past the petrol pumps, a huge red 12-wheeler had ploughed through some fencing and was now at an angle on the grass bank. I recognised it at once without having to see the name on the back. North Western Cement bulk carriers have been pointed out to my family on roads all over the country for years. I'm told that when full they weigh 60 tonnes and, if the brakes fail, they must take a lot of stopping.

I almost went across at that point, wondering whether to tell them the company telephone number and who to ring and whether I should find out who the driver was and whether he was all right. I didn't. I knew the police could find a lot of information instantly and they had probably already contacted the company so, instead, I headed back to the car. I could see a thin trickle of vehicles driving round the accident and out. I remember thinking that Finn might have more chance of a lift from the slower traffic. It was only when I got back to the car and saw his rucksack and coat still sitting comfortably on the back seat that I felt a twinge of anxiety. My first reaction was that he must have gone to see what had happened. He would be back promptly

I sat in the car for a minute or so. It was ridiculous to be held up like this and I decided to see if I could find Finn. I left the car and walked the length of the car park. Everywhere, little knots of watchers gathered in still clumps staring towards the flashing buzz of activity by the exit. Their eyes were bright and excited, almost delighted at this sudden break in the monotony of another boring day. I searched the faces but there was no sign of Finn. I was closer now and could see that a heavy crane had been drawn up and there was the bleep and crackle of radios in the air. Businesslike, the emergency crews in yellow oilskins directed traffic around bright, freshly painted cones. I pushed on through the watchers almost to the front looking for Finn's jeans and shirt. Twice I thought that I saw him. The second time I

called out to a stranger but he turned towards me and I had to make out that I was waving and calling to someone beyond him.

The cement carrier was leaking oily liquid on account of the angle at which the truck was perched. Firemen were propping its body with long hydraulic jacks and beneath the cab a flaccid airbag like an old rugby ball was inflating into life as a generator on the fire tender accelerated. Suddenly, the juggernaut shifted slowly upwards and outwards. The crowd seemed involuntarily to step back too. Then the cab moved, independently of the back and the driver's red door swung lazily open as it lifted into the air. There was no one in the cab. I could see some bustle in action now on the far side of the cab. There was a group of firemen and police almost beneath the lifting chassis and there was something else besides. A man next to me spoke.

'They've got him out then. Poor beggar. He never had a chance.'

An ambulance reversed up to the front of the lorry. There was a stretcher and I peered across and thought I saw a glimpse of blue denim among the yellow and the black uniforms. There was no haste as they eased the sheeted stretcher into the brilliant white ambulance. No flashing lights as it drew away. No certainty either but, deep down, I was sure that it was Finn who had been killed and that body which literally minutes before had pumped with life inside me was now crushed, broken and dead. I walked away in a daze. There were some seats. I sat down heavily and I thought I was going to be sick.

What happened in the next few minutes is still confused. I remember that someone asked me if I was all right. I know that I went back into the cafeteria and ordered a cup of tea. I sat there for a long time staring into the cup. Nothing made sense. I could not help thinking of the way Finn had left the table and about what he had seen to frighten him so much. I felt I could see what happened next. In a desperate hurry to leave he must have crossed over to the lorry park, perhaps to find a lift without waiting conspicuously at the service station exit. It must have been on the way across that he was struck by the runaway lorry. But, then, I realised there was a flaw in my logic because his rucksack was still in my car.

Surely it would have made sense to collect it first unless he was so frightened that he knew my car was not safe to return to? That was nonsense. I was getting fanciful. I tried to pull myself together as one is supposed to these moments but the more I tried the more I felt if I was falling apart. I looked down at my bag, my hands playing nervously on the name tag on my purse. Had he really remembered my name? I was not even sure if I had told him it. Yes, I probably had before the lay-by rather than after. I looked at the tag. 'Alison Clinton' was easily legible as was the address and the North Western Cement motif which is meant to be a crown on top of a skyscraper but which has at times been compared to a vibrator! The same motif had embellished the cement truck outside. What a bleak coincidence!

I began to realise that I was now faced with a particular problem. Finn's jacket as well as his rucksack were both in my car. It was likely that he was therefore carrying no identification. I remembered what he said about no one missing him should he disappear and shuddered inwardly. Common sense dictated that I should drive directly round to the police depot on the service station, state my business and declare the bag in the car but my other half knew there would be questions to answer. When did you

pick the lad up, madam? At what time? You were driving very slowly then? Ah, you stopped?
Whereabouts did you stop? What for?

It would be like those rape cases where suddenly the lawyers turn on the witness. Did you know that the deceased had recently had sexual intercourse? Is there something you have been concealing from this court, Mrs Clinton? I could imagine Gregory in the public gallery with Sally by his side to give his hand a comforting squeeze as I was escorted away! It was daft but I knew I did not want to go through all the questions. I wanted to get away. The service station seem more and more like an enclosure, a stage with only one entrance and one exit where a monstrous tragedy had just been enacted. I was trapped in that arena and the play was not yet over. I knew I would have to face the police but maybe later rather than sooner.

I finished my tea, went out to the car opened the door and sat in the driving seat. It was all so familiar and yet so unreal. I should have been sitting outside school listening to the play on the radio and waiting for the rush of little bodies to begin. I was looking idly at the clock on the dashboard when I thought of the children. It was nearly 3 o'clock. I would never be back in time to meet them. I left the car and went back inside through the shiny glass doors of the service station. I had to find a phone.

Thickening Plots

The telephone booths were what the designers like to call open-plan, set in the middle of a noisy concourse where every footstep had an echo and every voice jangled. I sorted my change. There wasn't much but there was enough. Then I dialled Sally's number. I had half a plan in my head.

She answered quickly which was as well because I was already halfway to putting the receiver back into its vertical cradle. My plans often go that way.

'Hello,' she said. She sounded normal. I don't know what I expected really but she did not sound like a woman taken in adultery as the Bible has it or even one who has been devastated by personal guilt.

'Sally, it's me. Alison.' Putting this together was difficult. I rushed onwards without giving her a chance to react. 'I'm not going to be at home this afternoon. Can you pick up the children for me?' I was trying to sound cold and distant but it was ridiculous. This was a conversation I often took part in and it was essentially friend to friend, woman to woman, both familiar and supportive at the same time. Sally was trapped in the same discourse.

'Yes, of course,' she said but then I noticed a noticeable tension creeping into her voice. 'Alison, where are you?' she went on. 'I need to see you. I want to talk to you.' I was surprised by this sudden shift in the conversation.

'Mirewood services. On the motorway. Be home later.' I was trying to be brisk. I mentally kicked myself for saying anything about where I was.

'I'm so sorry,' she said. 'I'm so really sorry about everything this morning but you've got to come back. Everything is going wrong.' You don't say, I thought, but didn't speak. The pips bleeped.

'Be back later,' I called over the last pip then let the line go dead. I had another coin resting in the slot provided but not pushed in. The conversation seemed naturally terminated because I had no idea of what to say next. It is never easy to have any sort of serious personal discussion down a receiver and I certainly could not find the words to speak to Sally. I was still standing, holding the receiver to my ear until it jolted me back to reality with a monotonous hum. I hung it back on the wall, left the booth and sat down on a slatted wooden bench to think. It was time to face the police, time to face Sally and time to face Gregory.

It was a few minutes later when I went back out into the car park. My mind was still whirling and I had to focus on what I would say to the police. I wanted to say that I had missed all of the accident because I was eating but then I could not know what had happened. I might feign total ignorance and leave the jacket and rucksack for them to make the connection yet that would hardly be credible in view of the commotion which had taken place. I was still trying to decide and almost back at the Metro, or at least at the end of the row where it was parked, when I saw the man.

At first, I just registered him as someone getting into or out of the adjacent car then I realised that he was actually getting into my car. For a split second, I thought it was Finn and that I'd been mistaken and that he was alive but that feeling was short lived. This man was bulkier and wearing a heavy blue jacket, a donkey jacket. He was climbing into my car!

'Hey,' I called out. 'Stop it.' It was not very original but then I'm not too good at that kind of ad-libbing. I wanted to shout and sound ferocious but it came out rather well-to-do and squeaky.

'Thief! Help!' I shouted and began to run towards the car. I had no idea what to do but the spectacle was improved and people actually looked at me. The culprit heard as well. He turned as he was backing out of the car, saw me coming and ran. I reached the car and leaned on the rear window, panting for breath and watching, as if in a film, this heavy figure lumbering across a traffic lane to the transport cafe in the lorry park beyond. Someone asked me if I was okay but no one gave chase. A little crowd gathered around me.

'Are you sure you're alright?' an elderly woman asked. There was a dapper, efficient man with her. 'Check that there's nothing missing,' he said. 'Fetch the police.'

'No, really,' I panted recovering some composure, 'there's no need. Let me to see if anything is gone first.'

'You're not safe anywhere these days,' said another woman. She had come to see what was going on. 'I don't know what it's all coming to.' She was speaking into thin air and being studiously ignored by the other couple. They evidently felt that this was their adventure and she was muscling in.

Meanwhile, I looked into the car. It was a pointless exercise because I knew there was nothing in it worth stealing. The radio was still there and so was a handful of loose change which I keep on the dashboard car parks. The rucksack and jacket was still on the back seat but the former had been unstrapped and opened while the latter was inside out with the lining showing.

'Don't worry,' I said to my rescuers. 'Nothing is missing.'

'We should still get the police,' said the little man. 'I can just pop over. Mother, you stay with the lady.'

'No really,' I reiterated, 'thanks but nothing's gone. There's no point.'

'You're very lucky, he said. 'I expect he was after the car then.'

'I still think she should get the police though, don't you, Robert?' It was the old lady who spoke, ignoring me now.

'Well, perhaps there's no need. They won't find anyone over there.' He was pointing towards the transport cafe area and even if they did we couldn't identify anyone. 'Could you?' he asked turning to me.

'Sorry,' I said, I was only half listening. I just wanted to go and drive as far away from this awful place as it was possible to go.

'No,' I said with conviction. 'Not a chance. I was just running. I didn't stop to look. Look,' I said, 'I think that I should go now.' I searched in my bag for the car keys. 'Thanks for your help and everything.'

I could tell that they were still fussing as I drove away to leave them standing still talking by the new space I had left in the row of parked cars. I steered left for the exit and then right, looking across to the transport area where the thief had disappeared. There was nothing much to be seen there but a small low building almost surrounded by a cluster of trucks of all sizes and types from pickup trucks, to vans and juggernauts. As I drove from the service station to cross the motorway, among them I noticed the distinctive red and the phallic crest of North Western Cement - sometimes it seemed to be everywhere.

Funeral Rites

I didn't stop by the police patrol post at the edge of the service station either. If I'm honest, I actually accelerated past it, fearing that, at any moment, some burly police constable would step out in front of the car, hands raised, and accuse me of concealing material evidence. I looked, and drove, straight ahead and felt immensely relieved to be back out into the flow and thrust of the main carriageway. In my mind, a new plan was slowly taking shape.

I decided that, now I was heading north again, I would stop at the same lay-by and discreetly and reverently leave both jacket and rucksack there. It seemed, somehow, like a proper thing to do, to leave those pitiful items in that natural enclave between the roads in the fields. If they were found, they were found. It would not matter. If, by some extraordinary twist of circumstance, my presence I was traced to that place I would claim that I had left Finn there and driven on my way.

Looking back, I can see that I was probably in a state of shock but, at the time, I had this feeling of extraordinary calm. The road seemed to bowl by and the twelve-wheelers were sluggish as I sped by in the outside lane. The sun was starting to hang lower in the sky but it was still a bright and sharply defined day with crisp shadows lengthening and shrinking behind the trucks as they moved. I was soon taking the slip road on the other side of the motorway and I crossed over the bridge and found the lay-by.

The cafe was now closed. The whole site which had bustled energetically enough earlier was now silent. There was no commercial traffic to be seen. I pulled up in the same gateway, turned off the engine and sat for a moment. I half expected that when I turned round the rucksack and jacket would have gone - disappeared into a dream - but when I looked they were still there as large and green as life.

I pulled the wind-cheater jacket easily over the seat and shoved the sleeves back through the armholes to fold it neatly. Then I heaved the rucksack up and over the top of the passenger seat. It was open and as I wrestled it across the seat cover some odd items of clothing spilled from the top. It was obvious from the way that it was still so full that, while my thief had unfastened it, he had not had the time to go through its contents.

Now, I'm generally a private person. I'm not the kind to pick up other people's letters and read them or to go poking in other people's diaries. If the rucksack had not felt so bulky, I would never have thought to look inside. If the top had not been opened, I would not have unfastened its remaining leather straps and, if the shirts had not fallen out of the top, I would never have attempted to stuff them back. It was while my hands were pushing a pale brown corduroy shirt back into the rucksack that I felt the bags and realised that there was something other than clothes inside. There was one plastic bag, neatly fastened with a plastic tie, then another and, then, another.

Soon, there were five bags laid out on the floor in front of the passenger seat. It was like feeling inside some bizarre Christmas stocking! There was also an alarm clock and some socks and underwear were

screwed into a bundle inside a shirt. Then, there was money. More money than I had ever seen in real notes before in all my life. There had once been a cheque when we bought our second house but that was the building society's money and had no reality apart from the paper it was printed on. But, this money was real. There were wads of £20 and £10 notes tied with rubber bands which piled up on the floor with the little bags.

I said before that I had lived a little bit and, although the evidence provided so far to justify that statement is skimpy, it is the best I can do. Anyway, a passing acquaintance with student parties and a daily reading of the intellectual press was enough to set various bells clanging like Big Ben inside my head. These were drugs; narcotics, opium, heroin, LSD or whatever it was called. It certainly wasn't glue and neither was it the damp pointed leaves which Gregory's friend Simon smoked in an old Indian pipe and passed round after dinner so that, in the morning, the lounge smelled like an old bonfire.

Simon called it his 'homegrown' and groups of mature adults, including me, were expected to sit listening to old records and waiting for a 'buzz'. I found this to be an almost embarrassing experience and more often than not found myself sitting and waiting for an effect which rarely arrived. If it did, it was invariably unexpected and then I would find myself crawling on hands and knees into the kitchen to make black coffee while the units stretched out above me and the kitchen door swung like a giant gate.

More commonly, I would find myself all too sober and fighting off the chartered accountants and the estate agents from our circle of friends who had suddenly seen a vision of heaven in various parts of my body and now wanted to take me outside on winter evenings to watch the stars move. Predictably, the next day they would deny all knowledge of what happened. In point of truth, I honestly think that in most cases this was not the stock answer - they really had forgotten. Meanwhile, I would be left inwardly promising to try a bit harder next time and to hold the hot damp air in my lungs so that I could see the stars move too.

The wads of notes were not the end of it. Right at the bottom of the rucksack was an object loosely wrapped in thick brown waxy paper. It was heavy and I could not tell what it was from the shape. The paper was wrapped along worn creases and inside was a black metal pistol with a wooden inlaid handle. I had never seen a pistol before except in films and then they were mostly waved by cowboys. This one had a neat, squat shape - shiny in places but showing some signs of wear where the sheen had been worn away - and it sat in my hand uncomfortably. I was holding a real gun. It felt very strange.

I remembered how once, in the summer before I went to college, I was friendly with a boy who worked in the factory where I had a temporary assembly job. The work was repetitive, clicking electrical circuit boards together, and I was glad of the distraction which his attentions offered. He was older than me and seemed, in contrast to my impoverished state at the time, well-heeled. One night he took me out to the cinema, even called for me and saw me home. I felt rather grown-up. On the way back home from the film the night was warm and the streets were quiet. Although I wasn't that experienced, I did know that a quick smooch on these occasions was customary and I had no intentions of resisting as he eased me into a doorway. I enjoyed his kisses while engaging in a series of discrete movements to encourage him to feel my nipples, engorged at the very idea, while superficially trying to stop him. It was a

common enough practice then among my circle where sex was confined to 'above the waist' with any other searching hand politely removed. This activity ensure that our various hands were frequently entwined and as I removed his hand from my waistband for the second or third time he allowed mine to drop on to and locate - a complete surprise – the hard shaft of his naked penis. It was unexpected in every way. Slipped out of his trousers without me noticing, unexpectedly hard and firm, unexpectedly smooth and I hadn't expected it to be there. I let go instantly, pulled away and acted appropriately shocked. He fastened his button fly rather shamefacedly and we kissed a little more then went home. Such is the stuff of adolescence. Looking back, I'm quite surprised he didn't ravage me on the spot but then maybe he realised that it was a first time. Holding that pistol was a similar feeling - something which it was possible to imagine and yet the reality was indescribably different from the fantasy. It was hard and firm as well, exuding power and danger. I carefully wrapped it back up in its wax liner.

I realised now that it was impossible to leave the rucksack but I had no better idea of what to do with it or what to do next. Eventually, I put the clothes inside the jacket and wrapped them together, then put the plastic bags, the money, the gun and the alarm clock back into the rucksack. I climbed out of the car and walked round through the open gateway into the field. It seemed impossible that I should have been here only hours before but it was real enough. I tucked the ball of the jacket as far into and under the hedge as I could reach. I suppose I wanted it to stay there rather than be found and desecrated by some old tramp. If I had had a trace of religion about me I might have decided to pray at that moment but the lapwings had gone and there was no congregation.

Quite suddenly, I felt alone and frightened, bound up in recent events that I could neither control nor understand. It was quiet and dusk was beginning to fall as I walked back to the car. I saw the truck almost immediately and before I reached the door. It was actually more of a large van of the kind used to ferry men to and from a work site. Like its bigger brothers it was the same deep red and the same thrusting crest was emblazoned on its side.

The lay-by was otherwise deserted. The tea-van was shuttered and closed. I remembered the bulky man in the donkey jacket and looked around nervously.

I dived into the car, started the engine quickly and spun the tyres in the grit as I pulled away at speed. As I turned back onto the newer tarmac of the road I looked back over my shoulder. The truck was no longer in the same position. It too had moved away.

It's a funny feeling being followed. Very peculiar and frightening on dark nights when there are no people around, your shoes tap on the pavement and you start to hear echoes and an accompanying rhythm to your feet and heartbeat, but just as bad on motorways at dusk.

I knew the van was following me as I left the lay-by. I almost felt its tangible presence and once I caught a glimpse of it just before I turned back onto the motorway. The ribbon of the road was quieter now, as dusk was falling, and there was the odd sidelight glimmering. The sky to the west was banked in flat pink cloud so the concrete surface of the motorway took on a reddish tinge. The red van settled down somewhere behind me as I headed north.

I put my foot down hard on the throttle and the Metro did its best but I think the big van was hardly stretched to keep up. It takes a lot of power to hump twelve big navvies around from one pile of wet cement to another. I knew I was being followed and tested my certainty on a long hill where, having chugged to the top, I went flat out on the downward slope. There was a large, long furniture lorry in the inside lane also in top gear and using its momentum to build up speed. I shot past at full revs then pulled in hard, right in front of it, letting my speed drop away. The driver flashed his lights but I suppose he could just have been being friendly. Even if it was in fury it was reassuring to know that there was other human life in the machines around me, other lives being lived out in all their lovely sameness and repetitive daily grind. I reached the bottom of the hill and as I had expected the cab of the red van appeared almost at once alongside the higher cab of the lorry which followed me. Looking across, I saw the driver momentarily, a middle-aged loutish figure in a bulky dark blue jacket, then the van faded from sight back behind the lorry; almost as if it had gone into reverse.

Although I saw the figure for only a moment, I had no doubts that this was the same man who earlier had been engaged in rifling my car, or rather rifling Finn's rucksack. I punched the accelerator again and soared up the next hill with the watching van discreetly in the distance. It was clear to me that I was being followed rather than intercepted. Anything could have happened at the lay-by where, blissfully unaware of my escort, I'd stopped for so long. As I drove, I tried once again to force the disparate events of the day into a meaningful pattern.

I abuse, and am abused by, my children's teacher. I find my husband enjoying an indecent assault from his old personal assistant. I pick up a hitchhiker who is later run over. He has a lot of money about his person. I am being followed by my husband's employees. The hiker is run over by one of them. Nothing meshed together. At a more domestic level, it struck me that, having told Sally where I was, she could have easily told Gregory - for all I know she could have been sitting on his knee as well while answering the telephone! He could have contacted one of their drivers; they nearly all have CB radio these days, and told him to follow my car discreetly. That would be like Gregory, wanting to keep tabs on me, but not letting me know.

That fitted, yet it did not explain Finn's sudden panic which, I still assumed, had made him careless or blind to the truck which killed him. I didn't know what scared him so much or what he had seen. I re-ran the scene in my mind, the tasteless food, the idle chatter. He had paid although I had wanted to. I had not wished to take money from a poor student. There was an irony there in terms of the contents of the rucksack. What was Finn doing anyway with the money and what I was sure were drugs of some kind? He said he had come from Liverpool. Was he a courier, an errand boy or the central figure? It didn't fit. He was pleasant and friendly. Drug barons were unlikely to hitchhike on motorways either! Why was he hitchhiking? He could have bought himself a car with the money in the rucksack or at least hired one. If he didn't drive he could have taken a taxi; he was rich enough. That didn't make sense, neither did his panic.

I remembered that he had been talking, he knew my name and I wondered if he had really remembered it or had read it from the tag on my purse. I suppose that, in a way, I wanted him to have known my name when we made love and not just to have read it later.

Then it struck me, not like a bolt from the blue, but more like a slippery worm gnawing from my intestines to my brain. An insidious thought made the connection and it would not go away. What frightened Finn was the name tag, not my name but the little gilt letters embossed on the red leather and the little gold crest alongside. He was right to be frightened if that was so because then he wasn't run over; he was murdered.

On the Run

I checked the mirror in a panic but that was stupid. I was in no immediate danger on this darkening motorway and I flicked on my headlights as the sun finally began to set and felt a terrible bleak chill run through me. I had been right to be so scared, to feel so alone. I could have been there still, under the hedge, murdered as easily and casually as the pull of that pistol's trigger or the foot on the throttle of the truck. I had to bite hard to keep control. I think I could cracked easily then but I didn't. Instead, I talked to myself. I told myself not to imagine such stupid things, to be brave, to pull myself together, and that this was good old England where nasty things never happened. It was hard work but it partially succeeded and I was a bit calmer, or possibly onto the next level of madness, when I reached the familiar junction. I had resolved to go to Sally's, pick up the children and cross town to my mother's. Then, in the morning, I would face Gregory, the police and whatever. I remained in the face of everything that had happened to me an accomplished procrastinator.

The street lamps were on as I retraced my path from the motorway and into the maze of streets where Sally lived. I could no longer see the van behind me in the near darkness and I realised that this system of blind alleys could either entrap and snare me or, possibly, help me to disappear. The estate was constructed in a broadly oval shape, into which the cul-de-sacs wound and twisted, like maggots in an apple. There was no actual centre but, instead, a cluster of streets linked by a pattern of pedestrian walkways. Sally lived in one of these clusters, in the core of the apple you might say, but this meant that there were a number of possible approaches to her house. At a moment when there were no lights visible behind, I swerved into one of these worm ways, switching off the headlights as I did so and allowing the car to cruise to a halt. I looked behind, as a set of headlights and a large vehicle passed the mouth of the road, but I was unable to tell if it was the van. I restarted the car and drove to the sinuous end of the smaller road I was now in and to where it petered out in a tiny turning circle.

I knew that from here there was an alleyway which ran alongside Sally's drive. I stopped close to the end, inside the tarmac circle, and climbed out of the seat as quietly as possible. There was no unusual sound. I could hear the sound of a television in one house, somewhere a dog barked and there was a buzz of traffic in the distance. I reached back into the car and pulled out the rucksack. It was less bulky now, without the clothes, but still quite cumbersome. I left the car unlocked and stepped into the shaded entry.

It was truly dark now and lit only by a feeble glow from a kind of cone-shaped lamp at each end. The pebbled paving stones were uneven and lifting so I trod carefully. At the end, I paused and peeped out. It was as well that I did so because there was a familiar saloon in the road not twenty yards from where I watched. It wasn't Gregory's but it was the same make, same colour and with a similar registration. There was no need to look twice. I jumped back my heart pounding. There were two men in the car which faced in the direction of Sally's house so luckily they didn't see me. I backed further into the alley. From a point halfway down it, I could see the back of Sally's house. There was a light on as well. It was, though, two gardens away.

There are probably some estates where it is common to have people taking shortcuts through one's garden but the Oaklands Estate was definitely not of that kind. Populated by socially mobile managers, each house determinedly set up the pretence that it was detached and isolated. Since most of them were semi-detached, this was a difficult objective to reach but it was achieved, in some degree, by thick screens of Leylandii and other assorted coniferous shrubs. The first fence, adjacent to the alley, was a relatively easy climb with planks of thick timber nailed each side of the posts to create a sturdy painted set of steps. On the other side, I narrowly missed a cold frame and scampered across the lawn and around a vegetable garden to squeeze behind a garden shed.

My unsuitable shoes had sunk into soft earth and hard spiky bushes scraped my face. The fence was slatted and tall but behind it there was a tiny gap. I pushed behind the timbered side of the shed between it and the pleated fence. The gap was only inches wide but the fence gave slightly and I was able to ease myself along. At the end of the garden, I forced a way through between fence and wire netting and found myself standing in the midst of a coniferous screen. Peeping forward, I could see into a lounge framed like a television picture with an open curtain and French windows. There was a man sitting in an armchair, reading a newspaper, with a wife hovering about, moving occasionally into what looked like the adjoining kitchen. Then, a child came into the room. The man put down his newspaper and she, it was a young girl, sat on his knee. Then, he stood her up, stood himself and they were gone.

I felt guilty, a voyeur feeding hungrily on this natural domesticity as a refugee from a world turned on its head. As they left the room, I moved like a shadow along the back fence. There was a hiss and a flash of eyes as I confronted their cat. It fled. I reached the fence. Hours before, encountering the cat would have required a stiff gin at the very least to calm me down. Now, that was just the new normality. In this changed world, I was starting to realise how all things domestic were a danger and threat.

At least one thing now helped me. As a teacher with only twelve weeks holiday a year, Ben Ellis was unable to find the necessary sense of urgency to accomplish even the simplest tasks around the home. Thus, under Sally's sparkling veneer, I knew that there were plug sockets which were permanently fused, water pipes encrusted with leaking verdigris, pictures waiting to be hung and, to my great relief, a fence which many neighbours would go to law over!

It was meant to have slatted planks running vertically, like a real fence, but several were loose and broken. There was a gap large enough for the cat to squeeze through and handy for me. I didn't care by now. I snagged my tights for the umpteenth time, caught my hand on a nail and pushed. Another section of the fence dropped away and I was through. I could now see into Sally's lounge but it was in darkness. The light I had seen was in the kitchen but there was no one in there. Then, I saw a figure coming into the kitchen, walking to the window and filling the kettle. It was Ben and he looked as if he was whistling or singing to himself, while staring vacantly into the darkness. Above all, he looked unconcerned and relaxed, not like a hunted man. I stood up a little higher. He was making a cup of coffee. I saw the man, the coffee powder, sugar and spoon; saw it stirred and saw the milk added. I could almost taste it. Then, he picked up the mug, walked back into the lounge, suddenly bright with light, and flicked the television on before settling into a chair.

I eased myself towards the French windows and tapped on them. It was a light tap and he heard nothing. I turned my hand round and wrapped with the stone in my engagement ring. He at once looked round surprised. I saw him look at me, uncomprehending at first, and then recognition dawned. He stood up and came straight to the window, unfastened the catch and pulled open the heavy glass door.

'Alison,' he said. 'What on earth?' I must have looked more than a little dishevelled and it was hardly a normal way to arrive.

'It's all right,' I said, with my masterly capacity for understatement. I felt utterly drained, my feet felt like lead and my body began to shake. 'Pull the curtains, lock the doors, I'll tell you about it.'

I collapsed into a chair with the rucksack clutched across my knees and the tears began to roll. They were silent, uncontrolled tears which just poured, for me, for Finn, for everything and dripped onto the canvas on my knees as they ran off the backs of my hands.

Ben did not interact or say anything but I heard the reassuring clunk as the Yale lock dropped shut, a hiss from the kettle and the clink of a glass.

A large brandy, a cup of tea and several feet of kitchen roll stemmed the tears. Ben said nothing. He just sat down and let me draw the strings of my personality together in my own time.

'I'm sorry,' I said, finally.

'Don't be,' he replied, 'tell me about it.'

'Where is Sally?' I asked. 'She was supposed to be picking up Sarah and James from school.'

'Gone,' he said. 'Forever, I hope.' I was surprised at that and the finality with which it was spoken but more worried about the children. He passed me the telephone. It was a pushbutton phone on a long lead. I dialled home. The phone rang and then the line went dead. It was as if someone at the other end lifted the receiver and then replaced it. I redialled my fingers increasingly shaky but there was only the vacuous bleeping of an engaged tone.

'Try your mother's,' said Ben.

'Why?' I replied agitating the buttons.

'Because I found Henry at Sally's. That's all.' He was looking at me almost quizzically. I dialled the number.

'Hello, mum,' I said. 'It's Alison.'

'Oh, hello, love,' she answered. Once again normality struck.

'You've missed the children.' My heart just lifted sank several inches in my throat. 'They're both asleep. How was Gregory's father?'

'Fine,' I replied, relieved. 'At least I think so,' I cautioned. I was pleased that I had.

'That's good,' she answered, 'falls can be worrying at his age. Do you remember Mrs Brooks? You won't actually but your brother would. She was always spoiling him. Anyway, she fell over outside Sainsbury's last week and broke her hip. She must be over 80. How old is Alec?'

'78,' I lied, quick as a flash.

'Are you driving back tomorrow? Don't worry about Sarah and James. John will drive them over to school and pick them up. He's not working tomorrow.' It was all falling into some kind of order. Gregory's father had obviously had a fall, we had rushed to his side, and Mum had the kids. I knew the rules of the game now.

'I hope so,' I said, 'but I can't be sure,' I added realistically as my imagination condemned Gregory's father to a prolonged stay in hospital. 'Listen, mum, seeing as it has been such a nice day today, give the kids a day off school tomorrow. There's a teachers' strike coming and they might have been sent home anyway.' Ben was now looking even more perplexed. 'Take them out somewhere nice for the day seeing as dad is off work. It will save making that drive across town twice as well. Take them to the safari park. They'd love that.'

'So would your father,' she said, 'but only if you're sure?' She must have thought that I'd finally flipped. It is traditional in our family to revere education not to go taking days off because the sun is shining. I don't think that I, or John - that's my older brother ruined by the attentions of Mrs Brooks apparently - ever had a day off in our lives, except perhaps for royal weddings and state funerals.

'Certainly,' I replied. 'Go and spoil them for once. I'll ring you tomorrow and let you know what's happening. Okay?'

'Yes, all right dear. Tell Greg that we're thinking about him and his dad. Pass on my regards to Alec.'

'And you say hello to the lions for me.'

'Yes, I will. Bye.'

'Bye.' The line went dead and I passed the receiver back to Ben. He looked at me closely again. While I was on the telephone he must have taken in my tramp-like condition and been aware of the bag still hugged close to my body.

'I wish somebody would tell me what's going on,' he said in mock despair, emphasising the 'me' but tinged with a note of real desperation. 'I come in at five, find a house deserted and a cryptic note saying that Henry's at my mother's and that Sally has had to rush off to help a friend and has no idea when she'll be back. Then, a couple of hours later, you turn up looking like you've just been dragged through a briar patch backwards and that's funny because your husband is, I suspect, the friend in question. I ring my mother as well and she is sitting on some ridiculous story too. I think maybe you and I have been deserted, Alison, but it doesn't make much sense.'

'You seem very laid-back about it,' I said.

'I am in a way,' he answered. 'The event is no great surprise but the timing is confusing in the extreme. It doesn't make sense at all.'

'What event?' I asked. The whole day seemed utterly confusing to me. It was a shock to find someone for whom it was all pretty average.

'Sally and your husband - Gregory. It's been going on for some time. I would have thought you might have realised.' He sensed I looked as if I hadn't. 'Look,' he said, 'it's only surmise really. Maybe there's nothing in it and sorry for mentioning it. You look as if you've got enough on your plate already.' He paused and I could tell that he thought he had been undiplomatic and was trying to make up for it.

'Talking of which are you hungry? Maybe you'd like a shower as well?' I accepted his endeavours to paper over a truth which was growing more self-evident by the second.

'I'd love one,' I answered. 'I'd love both.' I had quite forgotten about my appearance but what I really wanted was some time to think.

Upstairs, I ran a deep hot bath. There was some bath oil there so I tipped a liberal amount in. I was glad to get out of my clothes. I locked the door and piled them on the rucksack. There was a full-length mirror. I stood in the steaming, foaming water for a moment and stared into my dirty, tearstained face. It was like meeting a stranger. Then I sank down and plunged my whole body into the foam. It was peaceful with my eyes shut and the water resonating in my ears. I felt utterly detached.

So, Gregory and Sally was not just a quickie in the lounge. That was obvious really. Ben had just, perhaps inadvertently, delivered the confirmation. So had Gregory and Sally eloped, run off together, done a bunk? That seemed unlikely. If that had been on the agenda, why wait until now? She had not worked for Gregory since Henry was born. There was another quick seesaw in the solar plexus. Henry? But I was past caring. I turned the hot tap on and then off with my foot. I still had no clear idea of what to do. I had felt alternately scared and then terrified in travelling here and safer on arriving but, maybe, even that safety was just an illusion.

When I thought about it, I could not envisage cement trucks pounding through the walls of a house in a quiet suburban estate. I wondered if they knew where I was. If they, whoever they were, were watching the front of the house then, hopefully, they might assume that I had gone elsewhere. Also, I still had no idea whether, or how, the money in the rucksack connected with this mysterious them. The best idea seemed to be to lie low for a while. I climbed out of the bath and was towelling myself down when I heard the telephone ring. I unlocked the door and rushed headlong at the stairs, Ben was picking up the receiver as I arrived.

'Ben Ellis,' he said.

I'm not here, I mouthed silently, shaking my head vigorously. Not here!

'Oh, hello, Greg,' I heard him say. 'Alison? No, I haven't seen her at all. Is she lost?' he asked mischievously. There was a longish pause.

'I'm sorry. I can't help you.' Pause. 'Yes, of course I will.' Another pause. 'I expect so, and you too, goodbye.' He was looking at me as he put the telephone down. 'You look better for that,' he said. 'That was your anxious husband seeking news of your whereabouts. Was I right to decline information?'

'Yes,' I said. 'Thanks. Sorry, I'm dripping on your floor.'

'Think nothing of it,' he said. 'It's rather appealing actually.'

I pulled the towel a little closer round me and went back upstairs. I couldn't face putting my dirty skirt and blouse back on. I went into Sally and Ben's bedroom which faced the front of the house but did not turn the lights on. I eased to the window, opened the curtains slightly and could just see the watching Ford, a few yards along the road. I pulled back and went to the top of the stairs.

'Ben,' I called softly. He came into the hall. 'Can I borrow some clothes for this evening?'

'Sure,' he answered. 'Help yourself.'

'I can't see much in the dark and I can't put the light on. There are some men watching your house.'

'What?' he said, moving towards the front door.

'Don't!' I called softly. 'Come up here and look.' He ran up the stairs and I stood aside to let him pass. 'They are outside the window to the left. Two men in a blue Ford.'

'I can see them,' he whispered, after crawling on hands and knees to the window and peering through the bottom of the curtain. 'How do you know they're watching the house?' he asked, crawling back towards the door. 'They look innocent enough to me. Even Greg couldn't afford two private detectives!'

'I just know. That's all. Find some clothes for me and I'll tell you.'

Ben crawled back in the direction of the chest picked out by the light from the open bathroom door. He opened the drawer.

'Knickers?' he asked. 'Red? Blue? I think these are white. They were once anyway.'

'Doesn't matter,' I said, smiling for the first time at the absurdity of our situation.

'One bra, non-matching coming over.' He opened another drawer. 'One pair jeans, denim, one shirt, sort of tartan. One jumper large blue. That's mine.' Having finished his search on hands and knees, he crawled out of the bedroom to my feet and slowly stood up.

'It's nice to see you smile,' he said. 'It looks like you've had a rough day.' He put his arms around me and kissed me on the forehead. His arms felt warm and reassuring. I was only wearing the towel. I don't think I would have put up much resistance but he just held me for a moment.

'I hope they fit,' he said. 'I'll go and sort out some food.' He turned and went downstairs while I got dressed. The bra was too large so I put mine back on while inwardly cursing Sally. I found a hairbrush in the bathroom and brushed at my hair. It all felt better. The rucksack remained in the bathroom and, after some thought, I hid the contents in there. I found a cupboard built into the panelling around the bath and one side of its interior was loose so that it was possible to reach through the side of the cupboard and underneath the bath. It had probably been removed at some time by an enthusiastic plumber.

I carefully stuffed the plastic bags and most of the money into the spidery darkness underneath the bath. I weighed the pistol in my hands and then returned it to the rucksack, covering it with the clothes I had taken off. Then, as an afterthought, I reached back into the gap and removed one of the wads of banknotes. Then, I carefully pulled the panel back into place and shut the cupboard door.

Downstairs, I found Ben frying sausage, eggs and chips in generous quantities. The potatoes were pre-cut and frozen but the meal still tasted delicious. I realised that I had had not eaten since the anaemic Ploughman's at lunchtime. He also found a bottle of red wine. As we ate I talked. I told him about coming to the house that morning but did not go into the details. He was still quiet when I told him about Finn, but not about the lay-by, and about the lorry but I said nothing about the contents of the rucksack. I told him the house was being watched. He let me finish.

'You know,' he said, 'I've known about Sally and Gregory for several years but, to be honest, I thought that it was all over now. It started when she was his personal assistant, before that she was Wilson's secretary. At least I think that was his name. I was quite glad when she left, I suppose. I put up with it because she liked the job. It made her feel important being more than just a secretary. You know things like that matter to Sally.'

'How did you know?' I asked. 'I don't think it ever occurred to me.'

'It's hard to say really, just the odd thing which happened. Sally being away a lot. I thought that when Henry was born it would end.'

'Henry?' I said. It wasn't intended as a question but it sounded like one.

'It's all right,' he replied. 'He's got my eyes. He was conceived in Tenerife and I don't think there was a cement conference in the region at the time!'

'I'm sorry, I didn't mean it like that,' I answered.

'Don't worry, it's daft anyway to be sitting here discussing those two when we are being spied on and some other poor sod has been killed. What I can't understand is just what the connection is between it all. It doesn't make sense. Do you think that Greg is following you or, at least, using the company to follow you? And, if so, why?'

'God knows,' I said. Then the telephone rang.

'Shall I answer it?' He asked.

'No, I don't know.' He picked up the extension receiver and motioned for me to pick up the other telephone in the hall.

'Hello, Sal,' he said, 'where are you? What's going on?' I got the telephone and put it to my ear as quietly as I could. I was worried that I might be heard.

'Listen,' said Sally. 'Is Alison Clinton there?'

'No,' replied Ben. 'Should she be?'

'She's caused a load of trouble today. She's gone crazy and messed up some work that Greg, Gregory was involved in. We've got to speak to her it's really important.' There was again, in Sally's voice, the same hint of desperation which I'd not heard from her, at least not before that afternoon.

'Who's we? Where are you?' asked Ben. 'Why is Henry at Mum's?'

'Forget it,' she said shortly. 'Just be grateful it's not your business. If she turns up then ring their place at once. Gregory's got to speak to her. It's urgent.'

'Why didn't he go to the police if she's disappeared? Why did she go anyway?'

'It doesn't matter,' responded Sally coldly. 'It is just absolutely essential that she calls home and goes home. You must tell her.'

'Why should I see her? What about you?' asked Ben. 'When are you coming home?'

'As if you cared.' said Sally ironically. I wanted to put the receiver down at this point but I kept it in my hand. I was afraid that it would click.

'I was just asking to be polite,' said Ben. Then, he stopped speaking. 'She hung up,' he said to me as I walked back into the lounge.

'I know. What shall I do?' I said.

'I don't know. We need to think about it,' he replied, but there was no time to think. Instead, there was a ring on the front doorbell.

'Kitchen cupboard,' he hissed. 'Quickly!' The cupboard was roomy. There were coats and a vacuum cleaner to climb past. I pulled the door shut behind me. I heard Ben unfasten the lock on the front door. There were voices but I could not clearly understand what was said and although it must only have been a couple of minutes before he came into the kitchen and reopened the cupboard door it felt like an eternity.

'That was the police,' he said. 'A Detective Constable Roberts. You have been reported missing and he had heard that you might be coming here. Apparently, your car has been found abandoned a couple of streets away. He thought I might have seen you.'

'Has he gone?' I asked. 'I think I need to see the police as soon as possible.'

'Not that one. He wears brown shoes. I never saw a policeman in brown shoes and if he was a policeman then I'm in cement. At least my brain is. I told him you hadn't been here but if you turned up I'd give the station a ring. Then he said not to bother but perhaps he could call back tomorrow sometime just to check. He was very civil, I'll say that.'

'Then who was he?' I asked.

'God knows. There are certainly a lot of people keen to see you this evening, Alison.'

'I think I should ring Gregory,' I said. It was not a prospect I looked forward to but it seemed the only choice and he was the only person who could explain anything. I think Ben agreed because he handed me the telephone, so I sat down on the sofa in the lounge and dialled home. It was the same sofa which I had seen Gregory splayed out upon that morning; when I had last seen him in fact. I had hardly finished dialling the number when a strange man's voice answered.

'I'm sorry,' I said. 'I must have the wrong number.'

'Mrs Clinton?' said the voice. It was smooth, clipped and authoritative.

'No, yes, who is that?'

'It doesn't matter,' intoned the voice. 'Your husband would like to speak to you. He's just coming to the telephone.' It was almost like listening to a robot but then Gregory came on. 'Alison,' he said.

'Yes,' I answered trying to be cold.

'Alison, look I'm sorry about this morning. I really am.'

'You should be,' I interrupted.

'You should have talked to me first. You should never have gone and done all this. I never knew that you had any idea.' I was confused by this.

'Ben seems to have known for ages. I expect I'm just stupid or blind.'

'I don't mean about Sally. You know I don't.'

'Well, just exactly what do you mean then?'

'I'm sorry about that. I suppose it all had to come out sometime but not like that,' said Gregory. 'I mean about the other business. About Astle.'

'Who?' I asked, genuinely perplexed.

'Astle,' he said. 'Don't play games, Alison, this isn't just a joke or a way to get revenge on me. Other people are involved.'

'Gregory,' I said, 'I haven't got the faintest idea what you're talking about. I don't know anyone or anything called Astle. It was beginning to dawn on me that, in fact, I might. Could there be some connection between Finn and this Astle? But I was not at all sure that I wanted to let on.'

'You shouldn't have done it, Alison. This is bigger than you and me. You could have really screwed it up.'

'I think you did that,' I replied. 'This morning!'

'For God's sake stop it. I'm sorry, I've said so. Now you have got to stop messing about and give it back.' There was an edge of nervy panic creeping into Gregory's voice.' I had the impression that he was making this call in the midst of several people. There were muttered voices in the background then the original smooth voice returned.

'Mrs Clinton?' It droned with only the slightest modulation. 'Yes,' I answered.

'You have something which belongs to us which we would like returned. I'm not exactly sure how you came by it and your husband's account does not make a great deal of sense but that is by the way. At the moment we would just like it returned.'

'What is it?' I said. 'Who are you?'

'I am a colleague of your husbands. A business associate and what I am called is immaterial. Some arrangements, for which he was responsible, have not been carried out effectively.' He made the last words sound clinical and threatening. 'I have the task of putting things right. I don't want to discuss this over the public telephone any further Mrs Clinton. I think we should meet tomorrow.'

'I'm not clear why,' I said.

'That is as maybe. In the meantime I would ask you not to leave the house or to attempt to contact anyone else this evening. Also, please don't try to go back to your car. It has been transported to your house for you. It might have caused an obstruction where it was.'

'What did you say?' I demanded, angry now. 'How dare you move my car?'

'We did dare, Mrs Clinton. I repeat stay where you are and nothing will happen. I will call you again at 10 AM tomorrow. We have some other enquiries to make before then. Remember though, do not leave the house. By the way, we know where your children are staying so please do as I say. It would be best for all of us. The line went dead.'

'He's rung off,' I said to Ben, 'and the bastards have stolen my car.' Ben came back in from the kitchen with the brandy bottle. He produced two shot glasses from his pocket.

'Who has? Start from the beginning and tell me about it.' After I had recounted the conversation, Ben poured me a hefty measure of brandy.

'So, Astle might be Finn and someone who is working with Gregory, doing something shady, thinks that you are in cahoots with him. Then, if you think of what they did to him, there's plenty of reason to be worried.'

'The children,' I said. 'What about them?'

'They'll be all right,' he said. 'Gregory will see to that. It was just an obvious threat but they're not that clumsy. Look.' He lifted the telephone and passed the handset over. There was no dialling tone.

'I think they'll do what they say. Also, the neighbours here are nosy and if we made a lot of fuss, they might find the police here in droves and it is obvious to me that they, whoever they are, don't want that so it will be all right tonight.'

'I suppose so,' I said. I did not feel that confident.

'There's something you haven't told me,' he said. 'What's in that bag you came in clutching to your body?'

'Money,' I said. 'Lots of money and some kind of drug wrapped in plastic bags. At least I think it's a drug. I'm frightened. I hid it upstairs.'

'I'm not surprised,' he replied, 'it worries me too. What on earth is going on and why did Gregory get involved?'

'I wish I knew,' I answered. 'I wish I knew.'

While I finished my coffee, I could hear Ben checking the doors and windows downstairs then he went upstairs and I could hear him moving about above my head. The house was in silence but I knew that outside was a threatening chaos. I flipped on the television from the remote control on the table. There was a news item about somewhere in Africa but the sound was switched off.

Some people were running along a dusty track, carrying rifles. They looked dirty and tired and, in their eyes, I could read the look of being hunted - the same wide-eyed look I had seen in the bathroom mirror. The news ended and there was a regional summary. I pressed the mute button to turn on the volume. There had been a bus strike in Manchester, an insignificant member of the Royal family had opened a hospice in Birkenhead and some children in a village near Chester had composed a pop song which was to be released for Christmas. There was nothing about the incident at the service station. Why should there be? It was just another road accident statistic. I turned off the television and felt very tired.

Ben came back downstairs and into the room. 'I've made up the spare bed in the back room,' he said, 'you look done in. You ought to get some sleep.'

'I won't sleep,' I replied.

'You will,' he answered. 'Nothing is going to happen until tomorrow. All you can do is to wait for that call and you need some rest. I'll stay up for a while.'

'Perhaps you're right,' I answered. It might have been the brandy, the food or the warmth but I felt suddenly exhausted. I think that I was too drained emotionally to stay tense. I struggled upstairs and went into the back room. There were clean sheets, a heavy duvet and a warm electric blanket. I undressed quickly and climbed between the crisp edges of the clean linen. The bed felt soft, old and enclosing. The events of the day chattered madly through my thoughts but, quickly, waves of tiredness deformed and distorted them. Nothing had happened. It would all come right in the end.

It was just beginning to get light when I awoke with a jolt. I was being chased in a dream. I couldn't remember the details but I was running to get away. I strained my ears to hear anything but the house was quiet. In the distance, an electric milk float was trundling somewhere; it was too quiet. Wide awake, I went along the landing to the toilet. Out here, I could hear Ben gently snoring in the front bedroom, it was a relaxed soothing sound and I stopped to listen to it. The door was open and by moving a little closer I could see him. He was lying on his back, covers thrown back, wearing nothing but black underpants; ready to jump to my defence. I felt a surge of affection for my saviour of last night and protector and I didn't want to go back to that other bedroom alone and wait for day to break. So, instead, I crept around the side of the bed, slipped under the cover and listened to him breathe some more.

I didn't expect to but I must have fallen asleep because when I woke up again I was on my side facing the window and Ben was pressed against my back with his arm loosely thrown across me. I could feel him there. I squirmed, wondering what was becoming of me after my lay-by exploits yesterday and now in bed with another man. It was then that reality kicked in and the thought of the day ahead and, simultaneously, Ben roused and eased himself away from me, not quite fast enough so I was aware of what was there. We were facing in opposite directions.

'Hello,' he said, 'that's a nice surprise.'

'I couldn't sleep,' I answered. 'I was scared.'

'Me too,' he said, 'and thanks.' I was conscious of him sitting up, and then he must have leaned towards me kissing my exposed shoulder. 'Don't worry,' he said, 'we'll get through.'

Then he was up and away, heading for the bathroom. I lay there a moment longer wondering about that simple brushed kiss and thinking it was the nicest thing that had happened to me in a long while and then I was out of bed too and getting myself back into his wife's clothes. It seemed a strange world.

I didn't want to look out of the bedroom window. It was light outside and any watchers would see the curtains twitch. I didn't want to give them that pleasure. Instead, I went downstairs into the kitchen, filled the kettle and plugged it in, then walked through into the front room where I knew that I would be able to see out of the window through the front hedge. It wouldn't be a good view but I would be less

likely to be seen. I wasn't surprised to see the car still parked just along the road, at least I could see the shape of a car and I was pretty sure it was the same one.

Ben came into the room. I had heard him ringing his school to say he was ill and wouldn't be in and I felt reassured. 'Still there?' he asked.

'Yes.'

'No surprise then. Tea or coffee?'

'Coffee please. Then we make a plan, okay?'

A few minutes later we were sitting in the shiny kitchen. There was a steaming mug in front of me.

'What now?' he asked. 'Call the police?'

'I don't know. Go round, give them what they want I suppose. That's the drugs and the money,' I added. 'Get the kids and see what happens. I don't want anything to do with this stuff. I don't want it carrying on.'

'Is that sensible?'

'I don't know. Who's committed a crime? Maybe me! I'm the one with the loot! Also, I don't know how Gregory and Sally are mixed up in everything. If there's an easy way out shouldn't we take it?'

'Agreed,' he said. 'I don't want to be caught up in any of this.'

'I'm sorry if you think I got you into it,' I said suddenly conscious that I was to blame for most of this.

'Don't be daft,' he said, 'I was in it already. I just don't want to get in any deeper, except maybe with you.' He reached over and put his hand on mine. It was a simple gesture. 'We'll get out of this,' he said.

'Thanks,' I answered. I meant it too. 'What next then?'

'Go to your place, give them the money, the drugs whatever. Get out, get the kids then sort out life. That's the big one.'

'You're right.'

'One thing at a time then. First off, do you think it is safe to go round there? Should we call the police instead?'

'I don't know, what would we say? I seem to have been involved in arranging a murder and, somehow, I've got the cash and a lifetime supply of drugs. How would that look?'

'Not the best.'

Greg and the rest could just look blank and say how I was always a bit wild and getting into trouble. I sniggered.

'Okay,' said Ben. 'We wait for the phone to ring, go round to yours, give them the stuff and leave. That's us in the clear and nothing can happen on a suburban estate in broad daylight, can it? Any sign of trouble we call the police and leave it to them.'

'It's almost a plan,' I said.

'It's a start anyway.'

And, at ten o'clock the phone rang, right on schedule. Whoever had turned the line off turned it back on.

TUESDAY: Life among the Animals

At ten minutes after ten, we were in Ben's car heading back to my house following instructions. I had retrieved the bag from the bathroom. After thinking about it, I wasn't sure I wanted to give the gun to anybody so I unwrapped it and slipped it into my pocket. I had some idea that I might throw it at them as we were leaving after all the deal was done. I didn't want it! At the last minute, I slipped a big roll of notes into my pocket as well. I was hoping they wouldn't count it and I was telling myself it was for emergency use only.

The street looked entirely normal. I don't really know what I'd expected or why anything should have looked different but the normality of it was somehow odd given the circumstances. I was extremely glad that Ben was with me. There were cars driving by, a delivery van in the distance, the odd barking dog and some aimless pigeons. It was my house, my road but everything was not quite right. I was also glad that Ben was driving. It stopped me from thinking too much and changing my mind too many times on the way. We pulled up outside. Ben turned off the engine and sat there for a moment.

'Are you coming in?' I asked.

'Yes,' he said. 'I wouldn't leave you.' He reached across and squeezed my hand. I reached down and picked up the bag which was between my legs in the front foot well. My mouth felt dry and I could feel myself shaking inside as I looped my hand around the rucksack handles.

'Let's go then,' I said.

We walked up the drive to the front door. I wasn't sure whether or not to ring the bell or to fumble around and find my key but I didn't have to do either. The door was on the latch so we were clearly expected. I pushed it open and we were in the hall. The sitting room door was open as well. I walked in, Ben close behind.

Inside was like some kind of tableau, very still and arranged. Greg was sitting on the sofa next to Sally, sitting up, not touching. Behind the sofa was someone I'd not met before but I guessed he was the voice on the phone from the night before. He had slicked back gingery thinning hair, a rodent-like face largely concealed by slightly too large dark sunglasses, an open necked shirt in some anonymous pale colour and what people used to call a bomber jacket. He didn't look particularly like a drug dealer or a gangster.

To the side was some kind of heavy. I would have put money on it that he was the person who had followed me from the service station and he shifted round towards the door as we came in as if he was there to block our escape. He was big enough to do that quite easily, thickset and vaguely threatening.

'Hello Greg,' I said, full of bluster. 'What are these people doing in my house and what are you doing?' Then I tailed off. I felt choked. I had planned a little speech about betrayal, loyalty and stuff like that and how I felt cheated and made to look like a fool but I couldn't get it out. I was too nervous and full up and I didn't want to cry. Greg looked up. He looked miserable.

It was the man behind him who replied. It was the same smooth slightly menacing voice. He spoke quietly.

'I see you have the bag, Mrs Clinton. That's good. And you, looking quickly at Ben, must be Mr Ellis. I'd like to deal with this quickly.'

'I want to know what's happening,' I said, finding a voice at last. It wasn't quite my normal voice, slightly high pitched and a little tremulous.

'I think you know very well. You have caused us enough trouble.'

'Me?' I caused nothing. I was trying to sound indignant rather than despairing but it was too squeaky.

'Next time you want to get back at your husband for fucking the neighbours, find another way to do it. Now hand over the rucksack to my friend behind you and we can all get on with life.'

The heavy came up behind me. I felt his hand take the weight of the bag, a slight tug and it was gone.

'That's good.'

'Wait,' said Ben, 'you're not getting away with this.'

'I am, Mr Ellis, just like your wife has been with Clinton here.' I was conscious of Ben moving and the heavy quickly placed a hand on his shoulder to slow him.

'Don't do nuffin' stupid,' he said. The voice was drawled so that somehow the words sounded more threatening.

'Now,' said the smooth voice, 'what are we going to do with you?'

'We're going,' I said, 'that's the deal.'

'It is not that easy.'

'You have your bag back, the drugs, the money and now we never need to see each other again. It's over,' I said.

'If only life was that simple, he said slightly exasperated but still flat and toneless as if some irritating child was in the head teacher's office. If only ...'

'No,' I said. This was going wrong and I was beginning to feel angry and hot. I wanted to cry. All this was not of my making. They had caused it.

'We will need a few days,' he said. 'Time to finish things and then maybe you can be free. If you do as you are told. Handcuff them,' he said to the heavy, 'while I think'. He added a name but I didn't catch it.

Something clicked over in my brain. This wasn't how it was meant to happen. Suddenly I felt the sense of threat I had when being followed on the motorway. There was a rising sense of fear. I wasn't going to be handcuffed.

The next few seconds are a bit of a blur but I know I felt the gun in my pocket and reached for it at the same time. Mr Oily Smooth suddenly looked startled, might have said something like 'Don't be stupid' and then there was an enormous flash and crash together and the mirror behind his head simply exploded in a huge shower of glass as he dived to the floor, sunglasses and all.

I never liked that mirror until then. It was a gilt reproduction we had as a wedding present from a relative of Greg's – too large for the room and too ornate for my taste - but it did me proud in its final moments.

'Go, Ben, go,' I shouted, grabbed the rucksack back and together we tumbled out of the lounge through the hall and out of the front door. The heavy stood back, slack jawed, slightly shocked and making no attempt to stop us. Ben got to the car before me, unlocked it and dived in. I followed and we were off. I was laughing.

Nothing was funny, it was just hysteria but we had escaped from something - at least for the moment. I had had no idea that the gun would go off, no recollection of pulling any trigger and had narrowly avoided killing any one of several people since I wasn't making much attempt to point it. The destruction of the mirror was a fair price to pay. I realised that I was still holding it and, rather gingerly, I parked it back into the rucksack in the foot well of the car.

'Well, you're full of surprises. What now?' asked Ben. 'Got a spare bazooka concealed about your person?' Now, we were both laughing.

'I think I have to go to the police. Someone is bound to report the noise from the house knowing the neighbours. I don't think I have other options. This is too crazy.'

'You're probably right. I'll come with you. At least we're going in the right direction.'

'No,' I said not really meaning it. 'You're not really involved in this like me and you're taking time off from school. Drop me off at the precinct and I can walk-through. It's broad daylight so I'll be quite safe.' I wasn't sure how safe the precinct would be but I could be certain it would be reasonably busy. The way we were going it would be quicker to walk through the precinct and I knew how the traffic could snarl up round there.

'Okay, if that's what you want. I can wait in Market Way. There's parking there.'

'Are you sure? I don't know how long I'll be.'

'If you're too long I'll come and find you.'

'I've no idea.'

'I'll tell you what. You go to the police station and tell your story. I'll leave it a bit and then come to the front desk like I've come to pick you up. You can let me know then what's going on.'

'It's a plan, if you're sure you don't mind.'

'Of course, I don't mind and be careful.'

On the drive into town I tried to collect my thoughts. All I could do was say exactly what had happened. I didn't want to protect anyone or anything. I just wanted to feel safe. I suppose I was still slightly in shock from the events of yesterday and the morning. Otherwise, I might have come up with a better strategy since my plans seemed to have a habit of not turning out right. It wasn't long before we arrived at the north end of the precinct.

'Market Way,' said Ben.

'Okay, Roger, understood,' I answered mustering some bravado.

'And be careful,' he said as I opened the door. I reached for the rucksack.

'Come back for that,' he said putting his hand on my arm. Tell your story and come back for it. It's safe here.

'It's the evidence,' I replied.

'Well be careful. Where's the gun?'

'In my pocket.'

'Leave it here with me. I'll nip back home and put it with the stuff in the bathroom. It'll be safe there. If you put it in the bag and got it out in front of them! They might shoot you!'

I did as he asked. 'Look after it and yourself, I said. I fastened the rucksack carefully at the top, opened the car door, and went, trying to look more confident than I felt inside.

An Unexpected Hand

The Fulham Road police station was on the Eastern edge of the shopping precinct. I knew where it was but I had never been there. The precinct itself had been developed in the 1950s and might have once been called brutalist in style. It was basically the shape of a cross with bigger stores in the middle and smaller ones towards the arms so that it almost faded away. It didn't provide much choice of routes and certainly little chance of escape but, at least, there were plenty of people there.

What made me nervous as I walked down there was that I had the slight feeling that the police might simply laugh at me. A deranged woman in not quite fitting clothes with a bag of cash and drugs ranting about kidnapping and gangsters might not be too convincing. I would not have been surprised if they had simply told me to go back home and pop a few tranquilizers!

In the precinct, it felt safer amongst a crowd. How I envied the strolling unemployed, the harried single parents with pushchairs, and the pensioners all with somewhere to go in the shops today and with safe comfortable lives where they knew what they were having for dinner and what was happening tomorrow and next week.

Of course, it wasn't that safe! I saw the two men before they clocked me. They were standing outside a coffee shop looking like people look when they are pretending to be having a discussion but probably aren't. One man was taller than the other. One was wearing an overlong raincoat and carrying some kind of hold-all or briefcase. They were both looking at me. I sensed it, and then they both moved.

Not more being followed I thought and quickened my pace but this was different. It was simply an intervention and the taller man was suddenly in front of me. I might have dived round him and run but I didn't. There were people around us.

'Excuse me,' he said. 'Mrs Clinton? Might I have a word?' He was well spoken, not what I had expected, and under the open mackintosh there was a smart suit and what looked like some old school tie.

'I'm so sorry,' he went on, 'I think you have had a rough morning and I want to put things right. May I have just a few minutes of your time?'

'Go on,' I replied rather rudely, I wasn't inclined to trust anyone today. There was something slightly clipped and regimental about him, his shirt stiff, white and laundered. He went straight to the point.

'Mrs Clinton, I believe.' he said, 'I have been asked to collect some belongings which I think you have acquired. A bag or a rucksack perhaps?'

'Wait,' I heard myself say. 'I want... I need some questions answered first.'

'I'm sorry, madam,' he went on. 'I have just been asked to collect a khaki coloured rucksack from you. I see that you have it?'

'I don't think I can give it to you,' I said. 'There are things someone has to explain. I want to know what happened to the owner of the bag. I want to know some answers.'

'Mrs Clinton.' He pursued the point as if dealing with an obtuse recruit. 'Please, I can see that you have it!' I noticed his face was glossed with sweat under his smart coat and starch exterior. He was scared of me! My triumph though was short lived because his exasperated eyes suddenly swivelled round the flagstones. I looked towards the Library wall where his eyes had rested. There was a man, standing and leaning on the railings, at the top of the steps, looking idly into space. I looked round again. There was another man in sight, messing about with the shoelace at the end of one of the entries which joined the little precinct to the main section.

'Give it to me,' he said. The ultimatum was obvious but, worse, I realised with a blinding and unstoppable intuition that Ben had been right. If this man had the bag there was still no guarantee of free passage for me. I stalled for time.

'Wait,' I said. 'How do I know that if I give it to you, you'll leave me alone?'

'You don't,' he said bluntly then turned to nod to the man by the Library who began to walk, easily and unhurriedly, down the steps. He put his left hand into one pocket of his mackintosh and brought out a pair of black leather gloves. He began to pull them tightly over rather puffy, white hands.

'Just another mugging,' he murmured as if to himself. 'They're so common these days and even a little crime can have such frightful consequences.' He leaned towards me and in front of me. I was trapped. I looked to the side but then saw his accomplice from the Library all at once cease his determined walk in my direction. He suddenly braked and tried hard to look as if he had just forgotten the latest Barbara Cartland novel! With an exaggerated tap on his own head, he turned and reversed back up the steps. My captor was equally taken aback and I quickly saw the reason for his discomfort. A young looking policeman was standing in the centre of this concrete wasteland and looking round officiously.

'A slight postponement,' whispered the overcoat, moving away. I grabbed his arm and tried to scream. It wasn't very loud and was more of a squawk but it attracted the attention of the young policeman who walked over. I sensed he was trying to look more assured and cool than he was probably feeling.

I'm not really a person who is easily moved to tears by emotional moments. Oscar Award ceremonies and sporting triumphs leave me cold but I could turn on a creditable imitation. The overcoat tried to pull away but I hung on. As the policeman came nearer, I took a calculated risk and released my grip. Now it was the overcoat's turn to release some dynamic energy. As he bounced away, the policeman caught his arm.

'Excuse me, sir, but hold on a moment.'

'Let go of me at once,' spluttered the overcoat. He sounded more rattled than ever and his clipped airs were beginning to fall apart.

'All in good time, sir,' said my rescuer. 'Now,' turning to me, 'Madam, what seems to be the trouble?' I looked up at him. He was quite tall, even younger than at first sight and almost smooth skinned. His face was pale and his lips were a thin, only just pinkish, line. I pulled a few extra sobs from the theatrical repertoire.

'Thank God,' I blasphemed dramatically. 'Thank God, you're here. This man ...' I paused to draw breath.

'Take your time, madam.' I thought the overcoat was about to speak. He must've opened his mouth anyway. 'That's enough, sir. We'll just hear what the lady has to say if that's all right.'

'This man assaulted me, officer,' I said as one who struggles to pull oneself together, dabbing at my eyes with a tissue which I found in my pocket.

'Absolute nonsense,' said the overcoat.

'Thank you, sir. Now, be quiet. What happened, madam?'

'I was just going to the library,' I sighed. 'And I sat down to wait for it to open. I don't think it opens until ten today. And he came over to me and...' I paused to sob twice.

'Go on,' said the policeman. I could tell he was beginning to show some interest.

'He got his...' another pause, and I whispered, '... thing out. He tried to make me...' I trailed off, letting his youthful imagination assemble the story.

'This is rubbish,' said the overcoat.

'Keep still and shut up,' snapped my new ally. 'Did he touch you at all, madam?'

'Yes,' I whispered. 'Here.' I indicated the general region of my breasts. It was enough. He was instantly on his small radio, summoning assistance as the phrase goes. The overcoat had gone very quiet. I continued to look distressed.

'It'll be all right,' the policeman said to me. 'Lucky I came along.'

'The woman is mad,' said the overcoat. 'It is all lies, I never touched her.'

'We will sort that out the station,' he answered briskly. Then, he carefully wrote down my name and address in his little notebook and within what seemed only seconds half the police station appeared to have arrived. There was a van at one entrance to the precinct and a big saloon at another. My policeman was evidently enjoying being the centre of attention. The overcoat was hustled away to the van in silent protest while I was invited to the car by a policewoman.

'Is this your bag?' asked one of the policewomen taking the rucksack from me helpfully. 'It's heavy,' she said, 'what have you got here?' It wasn't really a question and said in quite a jokey way but I must have panicked.

'Yes,' I said as she looked at me slightly curiously. 'It's just some odds and ends. I was taking them to the Oxfam Shop. They were heavier than I thought so I stopped for a rest by the Library.' As we reached the big orange and white saloon, she opened the boot and packed the rucksack in.

'Don't worry,' she said reassuringly. 'We'll drop them off on the way. We have to go past the shop anyway. A few minutes later and we were there. 'I'll take them in for you,' she said. 'You stay in the car and get your breath.'

'But, the bag,' I said. Then, trying to think quickly. 'Just leave the whole lot. Tell them I'll come back later for the rucksack and sort out what is there for them. It will save time.' This last argument evidently carried some persuasive power. She walked round the back of the car, opened the boot and I just saw the flash of khaki rucksack as she passed the window and entered the shop. Fortunately, she came out almost immediately. 'They're very busy,' she said. 'I said you would call in later to pick up the bag and sort things out.'

'Thanks,' I replied.

'Not at all,' she said with a smile, 'it's all part of the service.' It was really rather ironic to see a policewoman neatly dumping a pile of vital criminal evidence in the Oxfam Shop. I hoped the nice old ladies in there, in the hats with pins, support stockings and mohair jumpers didn't mistake the contents for sugar and put it in their morning tea! The thought of being responsible for an influx of drug crazed geriatrics onto the streets, as well as everything else was more than I could face.

Still, at least I felt safe again cosseted in the back of the big Rover. I thought about what to do. When we arrived at the police station, I would ask for a senior man, someone important in plain clothes - with a spark of intelligence even. He would listen sympathetically to what I had to say, nodding his head sagely on occasions, as if this was the final set of pieces in a bigger jigsaw. He would thank me profusely, maybe talk about the reward, and offer me police protection for life. I should really have learned by then that nothing happens quite as you expect!

The Long Arm of the Law

The Police Station was an imposing concrete edifice set into the side of a hill. The windows were narrow arrow slits in the blank wall of concrete. Whether this was to resist a nuclear blast or civil commotion I was never quite sure but the overall effect was sinister and discouraging. The Rover swept up the narrow drive round and to the back of the building where there was a large car park. The policewoman opened the door for me.

'Are you all right, Mrs Clinton?' she asked. 'Just follow me please.' We went through double glass doors handily reinforced with wire mesh into a bleak institutional corridor. There were a series of small rooms leading off on each side of the corridor and I was escorted into one of them. 'Interview Room 3' it stated helpfully on the door in black Baskerville type. There was another wooden sign hanging on the door. 'Occupied' it blandly stated. The room was small and virtually square and there was a table in it and three chairs. Not much else. On the table was a metal ashtray overflowing with pile of stubbed cigarette ends.

'Have a seat, Mrs Clinton,' said the policewoman. She was brisk, small and dark but not inhuman. 'Can I bring you a cup of tea? Sugar?' The tea arrived in a plastic cup, the sort that burns your fingers until the tea is lukewarm. I sat and looked at the cigarette ends as I waited and I wondered what stories they could tell of lengthy interrogations, the final cracking, and the confession? I was there for what seemed to be a long time. The door was shut and it was relatively quiet. Long periods of silence were followed by sudden footsteps and the slamming of doors far away in the depths of the building. I was there almost an hour before anything happened. I felt inclined to stand up, to walk out and enquire as to what was holding them all up and to say that I would be happy just to give a statement and go. I had already decided in my own mind that some modest perjury was going to be helpful and I knew that Ben would be starting to wonder where I had disappeared to. I was worried about the bag as well. As usual, my brain just kept sorting through the options so that decisions could be postponed. I sat there.

Eventually, my original policeman returned. He came into the room and slammed the door behind him with more firmness than was necessary.

'Well, you've led us a right dance this morning, haven't you?' he said. I was surprised. His thin lips were tight and compressed now. He looked angry and his pale face was flushed.

'I'm sorry,' I replied, 'I don't understand.' It was true I didn't.

'You probably don't, I suppose. 'A few weeks in Abbey Manor might help. It just makes me look as daft as you.' Abbey Manor, by the way, is our local mental hospital or bin, depending on your point of view. I think that the constable intended the latter interpretation. He went on.

'Anyway, your husband is here to take you home. You're lucky not to be charged with wasting police time frankly. You've got Councillor Williams to thank for that.'

'Who?' I said. I was having difficulty in taking all this in.

'Councillor Williams. He is the gentleman you just had a go at and,' he added in parentheses, 'the one who nearly got me done for assault and not following proper arrest procedures. That's why I'm so happy.'

'What do you mean?' I was indignant. I believed my story even if he didn't. 'He assaulted me.'

'Yes dear, of course he did. Fourth time this month I gather. Your old man must be at his wits end. Come on. You've wasted enough time. We ought to make you pay for the tea.' He stood up and waited for me to stand as well then half opened the door. As I walked past, instead of pulling the door back, he let it remain partly closed and with his spare left hand he pinched my bottom.

'No hard feelings, though, eh?' he said. 'You had me fooled. You should try it on me next. I'd take you on.' He was smiling but vicious. I could see was daring me to run down that corridor and scream my accusations and he knew I couldn't. I pulled the door back myself and stormed through it. There was another pair of glass doors and a desk. I pushed through to find a reception party. There was Gregory, for a start and with him the overcoat and behind them a man in a thin grey uniform with a peaked cap who might have been a chauffeur.

'Gregory,' I said, in chilly amazement. He came straight over to me.

'It's all right now, darling,' he said. Gregory was not given to calling me 'darling' even in moments of intimacy and certainly not in public. 'I've come to take you home.' He steered me towards the desk. There was a sergeant there with three stripes on his uniformed arm. At least I think that made him a sergeant. His face was scarred with acne and unusually hairy with bushy eyebrows and nostrils that sprouted like flowerpots which gave him a comical look like a laughing policeman who had forgotten how to laugh!

'Just sign here please, madam,' he said

'What is it?' I asked.

'Just a form to say you've been here and that we looked after you,' he murmured both casually and patronisingly as if it was a regular occurrence. I signed a rather scribbled signature. 'If only you knew,' I thought.

'Now, maybe, you should say that you're sorry to Councillor Williams.' he went on. 'We already have and it's your turn now. What's more, his driver has offered to take you and your husband home.' The overcoat looked at me and extended his hand towards me. I looked the other way.

'No matter,' he said to the wider audience as if some generous offer had been rebuffed. Then, he turned to Gregory with a softer concerned voice. 'I just hope she soon gets better. Is the car ready, Johnson?' He asked, in a more normal voice, turning back to his driver.

'Yes sir,' replied the minion. He moved off towards the doors and we followed. 'Many thanks for your help,' said Gregory to the desk sergeant as we left.

'No trouble, sir,' was the reply. On the steps outside the sun was suddenly bright.

'Let go of my arm, Gregory,' I said firmly. 'I'm not your mother. I can walk.' I thought that the overcoat who was walking in front of us looked around anxiously but Gregory, just for a moment, faltered and forgot that he was my prison guard as well as my husband. His grip slackened and I was down the steps and away, cannoning into the overcoat who toppled on the bottom steps and lurched against his car. I heard a voice shout my name and a car door fell open in front of me. I collapsed through it, head sideways almost on Ben's knee, as we shot away, trying to reach back and pull the door shut behind me while the car swerved and weaved its horn blaring. I thought we must be in the middle of a gangster car chase and didn't give Ben much chance. There was the grate of dented metal somewhere around us as the car veered madly round a corner then slowed immediately to join a regular little stream of town traffic. Again, it was that sudden sickening lurch from chaos to order. I dared to sit up.

'Have they gone?' I asked.

'Who?' asked Ben. He looked pleased with himself.

'They were after us. Back there.'

'No, they weren't,' he said laconically. 'The problem was it was a one-way street.'

'Ben Ellis,' I said, 'you are a real pal.' I squeezed his left leg and leaned over and gave him a quick peck on the cheek. 'How did you know where to find me?'

'It was all my fault really,' he said. 'I decided to nip home as I wanted to hide the gun but I wasn't happy letting you go on your own so I came straight back and stopped on the double yellows. I saw Greg going up to the police station and I knew something bad was happening so I followed him into the precinct. You know the rest.'

'Well thanks. Sorry about the bag though.'

'Is it at the police station?'

'No, the Oxfam shop.' Ben laughed. He was driving the car, too fast away from the police station and the town centre.

'Where?' he asked, incredulous.

'The Oxfam shop. The policewoman asked me what was in it so I made this story up about going to the Oxfam shop, so we dropped it off there.'

'Should we go back?'

'No, maybe later. I'm scared now.'

'Well it's only a load of drugs. At least you didn't donate a gun! Where next then?' he asked.

'Kids,' I said, 'we have to get the kids or they'll use them to get back at us. I want them safe. I have to find mum and dad.' I surprised myself by how much I wanted that at that moment. The adrenalin surge was pumping into protecting my kids and that was all that mattered.

'Where?' repeated Ben.

'The Safari Park, that's where they'll be.'

'I'm on the case,' answered Ben, flooring the throttle so that the car lumbered into action as we headed for the by-pass.

More Animals

On the journey along the bypass to the safari park I told Ben what had happened. He listened in silence.

'Sounds as if you accused the wrong chap,' he said. 'That, and being a woman, does not appear to have helped your case!'

'Too right,' I said. 'You know, though, I can't make Greg out. He was so artificial this morning. I don't know if he was nervous or just plain terrified, but there was something up. Who is Councillor Williams anyway?'

'I've no idea. Maybe you've just been threatened by the mayor! Even now they've put your house on the council list and are moving in homeless gypsies. Why are we going to the Safari Park anyway? Borrow a lion to defend us or are we going to hide out in the bush?'

'We aren't,' I replied, 'but I think the children should.'

The Safari Park had seen better days as the initial novelty of wild animals stuck in cold climates had started to wear off but the kids liked it. I also knew my parents and how they were made of that solid and predictable stuff inside which meant that nothing would get in the way of a plan to visit the Safari Park once that was decided on. Knowing how my Dad enjoyed the place was the icing on the cake. That was definitely where they would be.

It was five or six miles along the dual carriageway. Ben was driving way beyond any sensible limit but the road was quiet.

'This is mad,' he shouted above the noise of the engine.

'Yes,' I said, 'kids first though.'

'Mad woman with gun tries to take revenge on hubby's girl,' said Ben.

'Something like that.'

'You'll only get ten years for being emotionally deranged.'

'Thanks,' I said then, 'thank you. I couldn't have done any of this.' I tailed off.

'Don't be too sure, you're tougher than you think, Alison Clinton.'

I reached across and squeezed his arm as he drove.

'You're kind,' I said, 'very kind.'

'Just for you,' he said. It was said so nicely. I felt myself filling up, sniffed a bit.

'It'll be okay,' he said. 'We'll find your kids and then go and check on Henry. Fast as we can.'

We were going past a slew of signs telling us that the Safari Park was coming up, decorated garishly with friendly elephants, cheeky monkeys and sinister looking lions caught mid snarl, and then we were there. There was a longish drive up to the pay booths and no-one else around. Autumnal weekdays in term time were clearly quiet.

There was a sallow youth in the pay booth, tall greasy with long unkempt hair, slightly spotty and able to convey disinterest without really trying. I had the window down before I caught his attention.

'How much?' I asked.

'Depends what you want,' he replied slowly.

'Everything,' I said, 'all the bits where you can go in the car.'

'That's £40 then,' he said. 'If you really want everything.' Clearly, many of his clients negotiated their way out of various enclosures. 'You get some food as well, he added, for the monkeys,' as if to make the offer more exciting.

'Fine,' I said peeling two twenty pound notes off the bankroll in my pocket. 'We're in a hurry,' I added. He looked impressed for the first time bustling around the ticket machine and passing over some elaborate bits of card. 'You can only go in an enclosure once, follow the signs and do as they say, no reversing and don't get out of the car. If you break down, use your horn.'

'Yes,' I said, 'of course,' and then the barrier lifted and we were inside. There was a fork in the road, one way to Shop and Restaurant and the other to Monkey Jungle.

'Which one?' asked Ben.

'Monkeys,' I said confidently. I knew my parents well enough to know that the shop and the restaurant, gifts and snacks, would be deferred until the end of the visit. All we had to do was go round until we caught up with them. They'd be here somewhere given their likely start time.

'We just have to go round and catch up with them,' I said.

'Might be easier said than done,' answered Ben as the gates to Monkey Jungle opened.

The monkey's usual fun was to jump onto slow moving cars and helpfully remove anything loose, targeting windscreen wipers and aerials. They were not prepared for us moving at speed and weaving through the traffic.

'For God's sake, don't kill one,' I called out. 'The RSPCA will be on to us.'

'Think of them as rats,' he replied.

The monkey horde approached the car hopefully and in numbers. This looked to be the kind of vehicle where everything might be slightly loose. Windscreen sealer, window blades and number plates would all be susceptible to tiny agile monkey fingers. They were expecting a treat, approaching like baboons with their tails in the air, ready to pounce and they must have been surprised when Ben's car swerved past a row of much newer cars festooned with monkeys and full of giggling people.

Fortunately, we didn't take any of them with us, the monkeys that is, as Ben gunned towards the exit slowing down slightly as we reached it to avoid antagonising some kind of safari guard in a Land Rover. We needn't have bothered - he appeared to be asleep and the gate opened automatically.

We were now in a stretch of open country and the road, although well-made, was narrow running along the side of a slope. Presumably, this was a buffer area to stop the monkeys being too worried about the lions or maybe to stop the lions from salivating too much at the thought of juicy monkeys. As a result, the road curved around as if it was idly crossing some northern moor. Ben seemed to appreciate that we had to pass as many cars as possible in order to find my parents but the drivers, being solidly British seemed to take this as some kind of personal insult. We got past the first few cars with ease but the next one evidently took the view that he had a place in line and might miss his place or perhaps he thought we would distract the elephants. Anyway, he deliberately took the middle line, occupying the highest point of the road riding an invisible white line.

It was probably the stress of the moment but I think perhaps Ben did the wrong thing. He flashed his headlights. At this, the man in front - I was sure it was a man - in some large German car chose to slow down rather than to pull politely to the side and let us pass. Ben flashed his lights again and the car in front slowed more. Perhaps the driver had had a hard time in Monkey Jungle or maybe the experience wasn't living up to expectations but I got the feeling he might be cross.

'Careful Ben,' I said, 'there'll be a chance to get past him further on.'

'Hold on,' he answered and promptly swerved up the slope and onto the rough pasture. It was fine for Land Rovers but not the surface of choice for us. The car bumped and banged roughly as Ben accelerated to overtake. As we pulled alongside the other car, the driver looked across at me and did a good impression of a snarl. He was fat, red-faced wearing glasses and sat next to a scowling woman in a coat staring straight ahead impassively. The driver mouthed something. It looked rude and then Ben was in front bouncing back on to the road the suspension clattering angrily.

Of course, because we were British this now had to turn into a race. As Ben sped up so did the car behind and being a product of the mighty German motorcar revival it was likely to have more horsepower than we did. We made for the elephant enclosure at speed. The entrance was guarded by a set of double gates so it was necessary to enter a kind of airlock where one gate closed behind before the one in front opened. As we pulled through the first gates so did our pursuer. If this had been the A12 I'm sure he would have been out of his car banging on our door and shouting, full of rightful indignation and rage but there were lots of notices saying that getting out of the car was forbidden and dangerous. I thought that it might be a good idea to turn round helpfully and smile apologetically but that was clearly

the wrong thing to do as all I got in return were raised fingers on both hands and what, even with my limited lip-reading skills, were clearly expletives.

'He's cross,' I said to Ben with my capacity for understatement. Ben just sniggered.

'Fuck him,' he said. I realised that he was a man too. If Gregory had been in his position, I would probably have sympathised with the man behind. We came up behind him too fast, flashed our lights and swerved past boy racer style. We were in the wrong but, today, I realised that I enjoyed Ben's reaction. I was glad he had not made apologetic gestures, mimed how sorry he was and waved the big car through. Maybe things were getting to me and in this new world. I liked the idea of two hulks facing up to each other and mine being in front!

This was a short lived chain of thought so I did not have time to regret it. The gates in front opened and we were off. Of course, it is one thing to scatter a few monkeys and to push your way past a line of cars but quite another when elephants and rhinoceroses are involved. The notices advised people not to stop but to drive slowly. Ben ignored the second part of this advice which seemed reasonable at the time since the elephants and a solitary rhino were well away in the middle distance but then the road curved around and we were coming back towards them, going too fast. There was a line of cars and three or four elephants, smaller and hairier than in the pictures but still pretty big. There must have been some kind of feeding station to attract them to where the cars went by or perhaps one of the drivers had a bag of illicit buns to feed them. Ben put his foot on the brake and the car stopped but there was a bit of a squeal and he then started to manoeuvre his way through the herd. What I hadn't noticed before was that the main attraction here was a young elephant which was playing up to the cars and ambling between its mother's legs. It was a sweet sight and no wonder the cars had slowed and queued but there was no sign of mum and dad in the line. Ben eased around to the outside of the line of cars between them and the elephants. There was a smaller space but it was certainly possible to drive through.

I think we would have been fine if he hadn't hooted as the last car in the line decided it would be nice to be closer to the elephants and eased across the road. I'm sure it wasn't deliberate and they were just getting a better view. The car pulled back in and we were through. Well, almost, apart from a much larger elephant straight ahead in the road with big tusks and its ears flapping and out at the sides. It did not look happy. Maybe the hoot was some kind of insult or challenge in elephant language. Ben stopped, so did the elephant beady eyes sharply focused on the car. It was a classic stand-off.

'I don't like the look of this,' I said.

'Me neither,' replied Ben. I think he had met his match.

The stand-off ended suddenly. A camouflage coloured land rover was quickly between us and the elephant, swerving in from off road. The elephant saw it before we did and shied away turning off the road in the other direction. The land rover followed but not before the driver caught my eye and held his finger to his lips and indicated by raising and lowering his hand that we should shut up and slow

down. I nodded and made what I hoped were small apologetic waves and then Ben was off again, foot down heading for the lions not taking the slightest notice.

'They must be here somewhere,' he said.

'They will be,' I answered. 'We just have to catch them up.'

We did just that, but maybe not in the best place.

Life with the Lions

The lion enclosure in a safari park is probably not the ideal place to meet your parents and kids after they have had a day out. In fact, it may be one of the worst. As we drove in through the double wire gates there were constant notices about keeping windows closed, driving sensibly and never getting out of your car. The repeated mantra was that lions can be very dangerous!

To be honest, they didn't really look the part. A lot of them looked slightly mangy, lounging a few yards away from the roadside as if even the odd succulent pedestrian wouldn't tempt them to get their feet. They eyed the passing cars with deadpan faces. Occasionally, one or two would get to their feet and with a slow wobbling gait move to join another group. There was the odd cuff of a paw and some indeterminate grooming taking place but not much else.

Wherever there was a group of animals there was a slow line of cars, either stopped or moving very slowly. It was relatively easy for Ben to drive around them without causing offence so we made good progress and, then, in the distance I saw my mum and dad's Austen in a shade of pale creamy green which meant they got it for rather less than it should have been.

'There they are,' I said, 'in the next group of cars. They must have stopped to look at a lion.'

As we came up to join the group, I saw that the 'main' attraction was in place. It was a big male lion standing shotgun over three or four females and, of course, a group of cubs frolicking around the lionesses. It seemed a fairly harmless gathering and attractively photogenic to the gawping families in their cars. The Austen was at the far end of a line of cars and I don't think Ben won any prizes in the popularity stakes by driving in front of the others and jumping the queue as it were. He didn't please the big male lion either. It didn't look too happy at having the happy family scene interrupted by someone driving a little too fast and a little too close.

It wasn't easy to attract the kids' attention as we pulled up alongside my dad's car. They didn't recognise Ben or his car and I was in the passenger side so I had to lean I front of him waving and making faces while my family was still staring at the lions cavorting lazily quite close to the car.

'Wind the window down Ben,' I said. 'Then they'll hear.'

'You sure,' he asked.

'Yes, shout at them!'

At around this point, James noticed me, waved back and evidently said something to my parents who looked across at me in a mixture of surprise and shock. I could see my mum mouthing, 'It's Alison' to my dad.

I gesticulated to my mum to wind the window down and shouted across. 'Hello, mum, I've got to talk to you; we're in a bit of a hurry.'

My mum was still opening the window. 'What,' she said. 'Now?'

'Yes, now.'

'It's almost lunchtime.' This seemed an odd reply to my question but was typical of my mum, preserving the natural order in the oddest of circumstances.

'We've got to rush.'

'Is it about Alec? Is he alright?'

'Yes, he's fine.'

'Are you coming for lunch then?'

'No. I need you to take the children on holiday.'

Both children were watching this interchange with amusement from the back seats, smiling at the strange behaviour of the human adults. They probably thought the lions made more sense.

'But what about school?' asked mum.

'Yes, but we have to go, oh, and, mum, this is my friend Ben. He gave me a lift.'

Ben nodded. 'Hello,' he said, 'pleased to meet you,' as if the lion enclosure was the normal place for such niceties.

'Hello, Ben,' said my mum, 'I'm Joan. But wait, Alison, what about the cat?'

'I'll sort the cat out. Trust me. Now we have to go, Mum, things to do.' James was leaning across now to look out of the open window. 'James,' I said, 'stay back in the car.' At this point I realised that this was all going to be slightly more difficult. My parents were set in their ways and the idea of going on holiday in term time, let alone any decision about where to go and the cat was going to be a challenge.

'Hold on mum,' I said, 'I'm coming over. Tell James to move across.'

'Here, in the lions!' said mum.

'Yes, no time.'

There wasn't either. The enclosure stretched ahead for some way undulating through artificial savannah with occasional lines of parked cars. I knew how long it would take my dad to find his way around them. There was nothing for it. We had to hurry.

'You can't do it here,' said Ben, reading my mind. 'There are lions!'

'Watch me,' I said, opening the car door running briskly round to the other side and throwing open the back door of my dad's car.

'Move,' I said, bundling myself quickly inside.

James was on the side closest to me and, to give him his due, he moved fast across the seat. Sarah was a bit slower but she made space.

'Mum,' she said, 'this is mad.'

'It's fun,' said James.

'I know,' I said, 'trust me. Dad, keep driving.' It was so good to see my children after all that had happened. I put my arm around James.

'What the devil is happening?' said my father but he started the car and we followed the queue.

'Sorry mum,' I said. 'Hello, dad. I haven't really gone mad. I'll explain it all later.'

'But,' said my mum.

All the best authorities argue that if you want to tell a lie, the best way to do it is to tell half the truth. It adds credibility and abuts reality in a way which is satisfying. So, rather hurriedly, I admitted that the story about Gregory's father was a ploy to conceal marital discord. I explained that I had discovered Gregory's affair and realise that it was well established. Thus far I was grounded in truth ready for the big whopper. This was that Gregory was about to leave the country with Mme Fifi, or whoever, whom he had met while at a sales conference in Paris two years before. Of course, the sales conference had really taken place and I thought they might remember it. This helped me launch whopper number two which was that he had hired private detectives to steal the children and to abscond with them to France. My parents are serious readers of the tabloid press and were well acquainted with the standard 'tug of love scenarios' so that the ongoing lie possessed a number of additional reference points for them to relate to. I needed time to sort things out and I wanted them to take the children away for a few days. They bit on the hook of the story but were less than certain about the indecent haste I was proposing for their departure.

'No time now, later I promise. I need you to take the kids and go somewhere for the week. Don't go home, just go.'

'We can't do that,' said my mum. 'We'd have to get stuff and tell the neighbours. There's the cat as well. Don't be silly, Alison.'

'You have to go, it's dangerous.'

This was getting tricky. My mother could be quite stubborn. Luckily, my father came to the rescue.

'I don't know exactly what's going on, Alison, but if you say this, we'll do it. But you go and talk to Greg and sort it all out.'

'I will. I promise. And I will make sure the cat is alright and I'm forever grateful.'

I think my dad was thinking about some catastrophic marital breakdown and custody issues and maybe at the back of his mind he was doing something primitive about holding onto his grandchildren and keeping them safe and contactable. He came through for me.

'We'll go to my brother's place. You can get hold of us there.'

'But what about Parsons?' asked my mother. Parsons is the company for whom my father does a little part-time work. He is paid a pittance considering what he knows and he is quite aware that he is as well.

'Stuff Parsons,' he answered. 'If I'm so indispensable they should pay me a bit more.'

'Thanks, dad,' I said.

'The seaside it is then,' said my dad. 'We'll lie low until Saturday and on Saturday I'll call John and tell him where we are. That way nobody, not even you, knows where we've gone.'

'What about clothes?' said mum, bearing down remorselessly on the realities of life.

'Marks & Spencer credit card,' said my dad emphatically. 'I knew it would come in useful someday.' He was drawing on strengths I hadn't seen displayed for years. This was war for him!

'There's no need,' I said. I opened my bag and peeled off another fifteen of the notes and gave them to my father. 'There's £300 there, dad. It's all quite legal and it is mine,' I said lying twice more. 'Look after it.'

We went for a quick double act, where he refused and I insisted and I managed to force the cash on him.

'We don't have a key,' said my mum. 'We'll have to phone them.'

'We'll find one,' said dad. 'There's one in their shed.'

'I'm going,' I said. 'Look after them. Kids, you're going to the seaside. Have fun!' I held tightly to James and put my arm further to find Sarah. I felt a lump rising in my throat but I bit on the tears. 'I'll see you soon!'

'But, wait,' said my mum.

'No time,' I said, opening the door as my dad ground to a halt.

'But wait, the lion,' was what my mum was trying to say. It was a lioness actually and it was idling towards the front of the car in an inquisitive way as it stopped. I ran round the back but when I was at the rear bumper me and the lioness were about the same distance from the open passenger door on Ben's car.

It was a stand-off and I was not sure the lioness would blink first. I looked at the lion and the lion looked back at me. I was rescued by Ben who just at the moment sounded the horn. The lion jumped back in surprise and I leapt for the door and slammed it shut with me on the inside.

'Now, go.' I said.

He did just that, swerving past my dad and into the open space our quick discussion had left. The open curves of the artificial veldt with one way traffic and a regularly notified speed limit of 20 mph were inviting to an unreconstructed boy racer but, as we went on, the gaggles of stopped cars were more of a problem. Ben swerved and negotiated his way through them.

'At least, there's no pedestrians and bikes,' he said laughing. I think we were both still slightly hysterical.

However, there was one more problem. We were being chased. A Land Rover in the same camouflage colours as the one from the elephant enclosure was pursuing us - presumably because we had broken almost all of the regulations posted at the entrance.

Ben kept going but at the double fenced airlock that marked the edge of the enclosure it was obvious we would be caught. However, Ben had other ideas, swerving in at the last minute behind a sporty Jaguar so that the gates closed behind even as the Land Rover caught us up.

That left them a dilemma. Stop us and hold up the sporty, rich client in the Jag or give up on the chase? Luckily, they gave up. It would probably have been difficult to decide what to charge us with anyway so the gates opened up and they let us go free.

'It's not far,' said Ben as we got back onto the road towards town. I leaned across to him. I knew where he meant.

'After we check on Henry, what then?'

'I'm not sure,' he replied. 'It's you they're after so I think Henry is safe enough at my mum's but we can check. Afterwards, maybe we should make a plan!'

Out on the open road again, Ben drove more sedately. There was not a lot of traffic.

I knew where his mother lived in the less well to do area of the town if you were being snobby. There were older terraced houses, arcades of slightly dilapidated shop fronts, council estates and municipal open spaces. She had been there a long time and must have seen the area change around her. His father was not there. I didn't know if his parents were divorced or his father had died.

'It's just your mum isn't it?' I said.

'Yes,' he answered, 'my dad died when I was fifteen. Something to do with the war. An old injury of some kind. He had bronchitis as well. I can remember that he was often ill.'

'That's a bad time to lose a dad,' I said.

'Yes, but I suppose it made me a bit more of a man. There was stuff I had to do and we got along. I missed out on uni though and got into teaching through going to college. That makes it hard to get on in teaching. No point in ambition if you're not an Oxbridge man.'

'Do I detect a bit of a grudge there?'

'Not at all. I learned through doing a load of different jobs. Made me see how people really live and how they learn as well.'

'It must have made you a better teacher.'

'I hope so.'

We were close now, driving through streets of similar houses arranged in parallel streets. Ben clearly knew the area.

'Was this where you were brought up?'

'Mostly, yes, or where I escaped from. We're nearly there now.'

Ben swung the wheel and we turned into another network of streets and then pulled up outside a small terraced house.'

'This is it,' he said, undoing his seat belt. 'I won't be long.'

'Be careful,' I said.

'It's okay, no funny cars here. But just in case, get in the driving seat. If I don't come to the front window and wave within ten seconds go. Go to the police. Some different police! Okay?'

'Yes,' I said. I held his hand for a moment and he was gone. As I moved round the car I was relieved to see a movement behind the curtains and a wave. It suddenly struck me how much I cared for this man, not just for what he had done to rescue me but over a long time as a friend. I wondered how I hadn't recognised my feelings but perhaps I was too busy being the wife and mother and maybe he saw me as off limits and just a friend. Now, it seemed the most important thing in the world that he came through that front door and down the drive. Sometimes, we just don't see things that are right in front of our eyes.

He wasn't long. As he walked towards the car I clambered out of the driver's seat and there was a moment when I paused and he stopped. We were close together, face to face and for a moment I thought he might kiss me. I gave his hand a squeeze and moved round the car. That was all but I felt that something had changed in Ben as well. He smiled as he got into the car.

'Thanks,' I said. 'What's happening?'

'Henry is fine, playing with some trains. Mum has heard nothing from anyone. She rang our house and got no answer so she's wondering what's happening. Like your mum and dad she thinks it must be domestic.'

'What did you tell her?'

'That it was and that it would be sorted soon. She's fine now and enjoying a prolonged spell of being a helpful granny instead of a cheap babysitter. Let's go and have some lunch and think about what to do before the police and everyone else catches up with us.'

'Don't forget the school attendance officer!'

Ben laughed. 'I think that's the least of my problems,' he answered.

Lunch Break

The Alderney Arms was a perfect place to stop. We came upon it by chance, an old motoring tavern set well back from the road with a large empty car park in front of it. Ben saw it before I did and swerved in abruptly.

'Here we are,' he said, 'ideal.'

Outside and inside, this might not have been the perfect description. The exterior looked tired with off-white rendering and black window frames and inside was a bar which had seen better days, smelling of beer and stale cigarettes and with the kind of brashly patterned carpet that your feet sank into in the most unnatural way. We were the only customers although it was just after noon. There was a table by the window with a couple of beer mats to decorate it and I noticed that it was, at least relatively, clean. I sat down in a curved window seat while Ben headed for the bar. It took a while but, eventually, a man who must have been around forty arrived, puffing slightly as if he'd made his way from the other end of the building. He was slightly overweight and unfit like anyone who drank a bit too much beer and inhaled everybody else's cigarette smoke all evening.

'What would you like?' he asked. He spoke cheerfully and seemed eager to please.

'What have you got?' replied Ben. 'Is the bitter on?'

'Yes. I've just cleaned the pipes.'

'Then I'll have a pint please and a half for the lady.'

'Coming up,' said the barman, 'I'll bring them over.'

'And some food? Have you got a menu?'

'I'll bring the drinks over first.'

Ben came back over and sat with me. 'We have beer,' he said in a stage whisper, 'but food appears to be an uncertainty.'

'It's a start,' I answered.

The end of the bar unfolded and our host carried the two glasses over to the table. He stood there slightly embarrassed. 'We don't actually have a menu at the moment,' he said. 'We only moved into the place yesterday and you can see there is quite a lot to do.'

'Maybe a sandwich?' asked Ben.

'Now that is a possibility,' he answered. 'One moment.'

As he walked away, I noticed that he had a slight limp. He went back behind the bar and I heard him call to somebody. There was a conversation that I couldn't catch. He came back to the bar.

'Ham,' he said, 'white bread. I think that may be it. Sorry.'

'Sounds excellent,' I answered and he looked instantly relieved.

'Two of those then,' added Ben and the barman disappeared again.

'So, what's the plan?' he said.

'Sneak back to the Oxfam shop and get the bag. Maybe lie low for a day and consider our options. I don't think the local police are going to help but I do know that people are going to be looking for us.'

'That might include the police, seeing as you are a fugitive from justice and they will have my car details as the getaway vehicle.'

'I suppose so. Let's ditch the car and find somewhere to stay for a few hours.'

'Ditch the car and walk?'

'No, we'll buy another one.'

'Just like that! He laughed. What with?'

'Money, cash, we have plenty. And a gun!'

'What next?' he asked.

'We should go to my parents' house and feed the cat. I owe them that.'

'For a moment I thought we were going all Bonnie and Clyde and ready to hit the highway, robbing the odd bank on the way. This doesn't sound as glamorous!'

'Well, then we can get the bag and stay there for a night. They've gone to my uncle's.'

'Okay, that is the urgent cat problem solved. Now, what about the drugs, gun and impending marital breakdown?'

We were interrupted by the arrival of our sandwiches brought over by a lady who was clearly the matching half of the publican. She smiled. 'I told him we couldn't do any food today but does he listen, so I hope these are okay?'

They looked simple but good as she set them down, fresh buttered bread and thickly cut ham on a tray with a mustard jar which had seen better days.

'I think they'll do perfectly,' answered Ben, 'just what we need.'

'Are we your first customers?' I asked her.

'Not quite,' she said, 'we had a couple of what must be regulars in last night but you're the first food order. This is our first pub as well. It's a new life!'

'What did you do before?'

'I was an orthopaedic nurse and Steve was in the forces. That's where he got injured and I got to look after him in hospital. The rest is history.' She smiled, clearly enjoying the retelling.

'Quite a change then.'

'And I got rid of a bastard of a husband, excuse my French, along the way so, yes, a big change. We have plans for this place. No money but lots of ideas! It's going to be good!'

'Best of luck, then,' said Ben.

'Sorry,' she replied, 'I'm talking too much, enjoy your sandwiches. Is there anything else you need?'

'We're fine,' I said. 'I'd like a story of my own to match that.'

Ben looked at me. 'Don't say anything,' I said, 'just eat.' And, he did.

Back to the Fray

It's funny how even in the worst of circumstances you can feel better after some food. In spite of all that had happened in the last twenty-four hours or so, I felt okay. We could get through this if only there was an endless supply of ham sandwiches.

I had put Ben on the right road for my parents' house, the sun was trying to shine and this could almost have been a normal day. About a mile down the road, we passed a garage forecourt. Along the front of it were a line of cars for sale.

'Car,' I shouted but Ben had already noticed and was turning round in a side street. We headed back and pulled up on the forecourt. There was a garish sign to tell us that this was Value Cars and that they were Never Knowingly Undersold. I don't think that meant anything in the context of used cars but the reassurance was nice.

'Do we need to do this?' asked Ben.

'I think so, we need an unmarked vehicle!'

Getting a new car was more difficult than it seemed at first sight. All I wanted to do was to stop, hand over some money from our role of crispy notes, and drive off in a limo. Achieving that involved listening to a lot of patter but then we probably weren't the typical customers! The salesman who popped out of a small booth like a jack in the box on our arrival was smooth and ironed in contrast to the rather messy forecourt. He was wearing a shirt with a contrasting white collar, and dripped equally with fake gold bangles and aftershave as he eased us perfunctorily round the models in the showroom. They were all Swedish and expensive.

'Actually,' said Ben, after a while. 'We just want one for less than £1500. We don't care what it is so long as it goes.'

'Fast,' I added. The salesman looked at me with utter disdain as if the last ten minutes had been a total waste of his life as he walked out of the showroom onto the concrete apron. There was a line of indeterminate old Fords and Vauxhalls out there. Ben studied them with what I could see was relative incomprehension masquerading as interest. I located a red one which had a speedometer set out to go up 140 mph on the dial so it had to go quite fast really. It also said 2.8 on the back which I knew was more than double my cars 1.2.

'This will do,' I said. It had £1375 printed on the windscreen in transfer numbers. Ben looked a bit doubtful as he walked around the car.

'Tell you what,' I said, 'we will give you £1000 cash,' I went on, 'and the Morris over there.' I pointed to Ben's car. The salesman might have been an oily so and so but he knew a bargain when he saw one. He must have realised that in the auctions Ben's old car would easily notch up a hundred pounds and a big

old Ford Capri is not the easiest car to sell. He made some pretence of peering round the old beige car but I had a sense he would not refuse.

'Are you sure you know what you're doing?' Ben asked.

'No,' I replied peeling out my wad again to pay the salesman. He caught a glimpse of the money and was back on the Swedish executive cars on which madam might like to make a down payment. I politely declined and counted out the notes while he pleaded on and Ben rummaged in the glove compartment of his old Austin - it was not a Morris at all – for something to prove that he truly owned it.

'Just as well I leave everything in the car,' he said, tracking down the registration document and heaving a lot of other stuff into a nearby bin. So, within about twenty minutes and after some perseverance and confusion we were back on the road, hammering along at ninety with the radio going full blast and the sunroof wide open. It was like being in an American Road movie so that I was expecting to sweep around a long bend into a deserted one-horse town with a single bar and tobacco chewing cowboys or hillbillies, with denims and long beards. Two days before this would have seemed like madness but now I knew anything could happen. Of course, what was really there though over the brow of the hill was only the foggy haze of town and the ribbon of the motorway beyond.

'You know,' Ben said. 'I was quite fond of that old car.' He paused.

'This one is all right too.' I said and squeezed his knee again and he laughed. 'Your place or mine?' he asked.

'What's really good,' I said, rummaging in my bag is that, I've even got the door key. I directed Ben through the town and it was good to feel anonymous. At one moment he pointed.

'Look, that's my school over there.' It was an extended concrete building rather like a prefab built on a varied pattern with one or two storeys. There were some bullied, stubby trees and a long drive down which streamed a cascade of brown and yellow uniforms mixed with various colourful variations. 'The ones that stand out are the sixth formers,' he said, as if reading my thoughts.

'They all look very smart,' I said, 'not a vandal to be seen.'

'That's the beauty of uniform,' he replied, 'you don't recognise them until they mug you.' He paused for a moment. 'But then you find out the real vandals are the councillors like that Williams and the company executives who will do anything, even sell their own grannies for a few quid. It makes you think.' Then, as if to stop or prevent all thinking about school and work, he punched the accelerator and we were away again the force pushing me back into the seat. I continued my directions and we were soon only a street away from my parents' house.

Fountains Hill was at one time, probably about the late Edwardian period, a fashionable place to live. The tall houses were brick built and bedecked with balconies, elegant chimneys and the occasional conservatory. It was probably the upkeep of paraphernalia such as this which set in motion the decline of the area. The ornate, wooden balconies rotted and became unsafe while the chimneys tilted in gales

and had to be lashed in place with giant wire stays, or expensively rebuilt, and the glass in the conservatories cracked and darkened as the frames started to sag. In a town south of Watford, one blessed with a few academic institutions, such properties would become the haunts of the intellectual fringe and be restored with bright orange emulsion and Nicaraguan prints on the walls but, here, the neglect had been persistent and the decay irresistible. The houses on the hill also formed an enclave among sprawling council estates as the local authority building programme moved out from the centre of town to engulf the old suburbs. I still liked the area though. I was born in the house on Fountains Hill. I played in the long, rambling gardens there and climbed the mature trees without ever noticing the chill breeze of impending decline.

'Nice here,' Ben spoke breaking the silence. I looked at him uncertain as to whether he was having me on. 'I mean it,' he said. 'These are real houses with character. Not just boxes with pseudo-Georgian porches. I could fancy one of these.'

'How about that one then?' I said indicating my ancestral home with the monkey puzzle tree in the front garden, the low brick wall and the laurel hedge.

'Fine,' he replied as the car pulled to a halt outside.

'Go just a bit further,' I asked. 'Don't park directly outside.'

'Okay ma'am,' he answered saluting chauffeur-like.

I think we were still a bit excitable from lunch and the new car and perhaps not being as cautious as we should have been. We walked past the ever open wrought iron gate and up the front path. I called the cat a few times but there was no sign of him. I wasn't surprised since he was probably asleep inside. The porch was dark and cool. It always brought back memories of boyfriends and lingering embraces on warm nights. Ben was close behind me as I turned the key, pushed open the door and walked inside. I sensed, instantly, that there was something wrong. I don't know what or how. Then, I felt a terrible blow to the back of my head and shot forward or rather was propelled and crashed into the newel post at the bottom of the stairs. I was conscious of my face, sliding on white paint of the stair wall and the sudden coolness of the tiled hall floor but that was all.

Captives

Forget what you have ever read about waking up somewhere completely different and coming back to consciousness because it is not like that at all. I would have liked very much to have woken up, almost anywhere else, but I didn't. What, in fact, happened was that I had the horrible sensation of being dragged across the tile floor, and then a carpeted space, by my feet, at a time when my brain was somewhere else altogether. It was not pleasant nor an experience to be recommended, it was one of the most awful times of my life. I had no idea what was happening, no idea where I was going or why. I had this awful sense of giving in, of conceding defeat on every front, and just waiting for events to take their course. It wasn't my fault, it was modest concussion but it was still horrible.

I was dragged, pulled and thrust, into a dining chair in my own parents' house, in their own living room, in the house where I was born and I felt so bruised that I was unable to move or to concentrate on where I was. I remember vaguely thinking that interrogation as practised by police, security services, MI5 or whatever must be a doddle. After a compulsory collision with a single set of banisters, I was ready to tell anyone anything they want to hear! I think that, at that moment, I would happily have confessed to anything that was suggested to me. Any statement that had been thrust under my nose, at that moment, I would have signed.

The reason was simple. I had never, in a lifetime of middle-class rough-and-tumble, ever been subjected, in quite that way, to such a battery of physical force. And yet, of course, nothing had happened. I had merely fallen over in the course of enquiries against the stairs. It is something which probably happens a good deal but it shook me to the core. My head hurt, back and front. I could feel a lump the size of a conker welling up on my forehead and the back of my neck felt as if it had been summarily dislocated.

Otherwise, I was more conscious as rough hands threw me into the straight-backed chair. I had lost all composure but I tried to concentrate on where I was. It was difficult. There were faces in front of me but they rotated and blurred with a dreadful yet inevitable slowness so that whenever I made the effort to focus they seem to rescind to the final point in an endless landscape. I could hear voices, calling to me from a distance.

'Mrs Clinton, Mrs Clinton?' they urged.

'Yes,' I managed to murmur as my hands went up to my face. There was no blood just the enormous and spreading bump situated above my left eye.

'Come on, Mrs Clinton. There isn't much time. Wake up please.' I opened my eyes and the room was still a blur, nothing was right. Even the fireplace seemed to be moving and unfocused. Then, there was a new blur in front of me and much closer to my face.

'Mrs Clinton,' it said. 'It's time to talk.' I struggled to open my half closed eyes because the voice was rattling like tin cans in my semi consciousness. It was the voice of the telephone from breakfast time.

'Where have you been all day, Mrs Clinton?' the voice almost crooned but there was a sarcastic edge. 'We've been so worried about you. What a little dance you've led us!'

'There's nothing...' I said. I was going to say that there was nothing to say. My mind was blurred, although I knew the voice, but even as I spoke I was hit by a crushing hand which smacked across my cheek so hard that my head rolled against the high back of the dining chair. Probably, in torture terms, this was nothing. It might have been called a minor slap in the face but I was so unprepared. I had nothing, no faculties either mental or physical with which to resist. There were tears in my eyes. I couldn't see straight.

'What do you want?' I asked. It was a question but delivered so flatly it came out like a statement. I would have said anything at that moment to avoid being slapped again.

'The bag,' said the voice. 'Just the bag.'

'The Oxfam shop,' I mumbled. 'It's at the Oxfam shop.' Even as I spoke another cracking blow knocked my head back to the opposite edge of the chair. 'Please,' I wept. 'The bag. It's at the Oxfam shop. The police... They left it there.' I braced myself for another blow but it did not come. Instead, there was a face next to mine, so close I could feel the angry breath on my mouth.

'The Oxfam shop? You left the bag there?'

'The policewoman,' I whispered. There was a hand at my throat, at necklace level. 'The police. They took it in there.'

'Why?' said the voice, still low, close, steady and controlled.

'I asked them too,' I mouthed almost voiceless and then as an afterthought. 'I didn't want them to know. To look inside.'

'Shit!' said the voice but not loud and spoken quietly and with refinement as it was a long saved venting of displeasure rather than a moment's frustration. I was left then. There was a buzz of voices in the distance in the front hall. I slumped forward and let my head rest on my hands. Both sides of my face felt hot and my head hurt. The voice returned. I felt a hand on the top of my head, wrapping my hair, then sliding down the side of my face onto the burning red skin.

'I'm sorry about this,' said the voice, as balanced as ever, 'but we had to know quickly didn't we?' The way it was put made me almost want to agree and I was biting back hot tears. 'So now we'll just go and get it back, won't we?' The hand was caressing the side of my face. I nodded dumbly. A piece of kitchen roll appeared under my nose as the hand was removed. I blew my nose, wiped my eyes and looked up.

The room was all so familiar with its big plaster fireplace, the pictures on the wall, the armchairs and the curtains. Standing in front of the fireplace was the man from earlier in the day and his accompanying heavy. He was talking on the telephone. I heard my surname mentioned and then I realised it was Gregory he was referring to. Also, the name Williams was mentioned. Evidently, the councillor was still

on the scene. As I began to pull myself together I remembered Ben. I spoke, interrupting the conversation. My voice sounded strange and strained. 'The man I was with? Is he alright?'

'Safe,' said the smooth man turning my way for a moment. 'Very safe.' He turned instantly back and paid attention to what was being said on the 'phone.

'If you do anything to him, hurting, I mean I won't give you the bag.'

'Oh, yes you will,' he said, interjecting the comment into the flow of the conversation he was engaged in. 'Otherwise,' he paused for a moment. As far as he was concerned the discussion seemed to be at an end. He finished talking on the 'phone and walked out of the room with the heavy as if making plans. He came back in within a minute or two.

'Right, Mrs Clinton, let's go. Your old friend Councillor Williams is going to drive us to town. We are going to the Oxfam shop and you are going in to get your bag. Any confusion or embarrassment is going to have very serious consequences for your friend, Mr Ellis, so be warned and be sensible.' I nodded again. The flow of the words was like a headmaster's lecture, designed not to be challenged or refuted.

'I need to go to the bathroom first. I need to wash,' was all that I could muster in reply as I stood up.

'Ted,' he said, still speaking quietly. Take her to the bathroom. The other man came back in from the hall. He was tall with gangly, disconnected limbs and his features were strange, with small eyes closely placed together and a thin large nose between them. His mouth was open and his teeth were protuberant and discoloured. His head was small in relation to the lanky body.

'Come on then,' he mumbled so that it was difficult to make out what he was saying. His smooth boss brought in my handbag which I must have dropped in the hall. I stood up gingerly and followed the minion up the stairs. The bathroom was at the top and to the left so that he had to stand to one side to let me through. I went past him and he smelled of rank, day old sweat. I pushed the door closed but his foot, in a heavy boot, was set against the frame.

'Excuse me,' I said.

'I'm stayin' here.' He ran the words together with a slight speech impediment on the sound of the S. 'Ain't lookin' though.' I began to suspect he was simple minded. 'Just listenin',' he slurred.

I washed my face with my mother's flannel. By the side of the basin were James's and Sarah's toothbrushes slotted into a rack. I shuddered to think that the smooth talking man downstairs must have been waiting at the house for them. I was just a bonus. I had to use the toilet, adding degradation to the pain, watching the boot in the door tapping aimlessly up and down. He smirked as I pulled the door open.

'Feeling better?' he said. He was sniggering to himself so that his lips pulled back from his teeth like a horse snarl. 'Look in the mirror,' he sniggered. It sounded like a single word ending in 'raw' and he spat slightly as he laughed and pointed. I turned back and through the angle of the door I could see the toilet

seat and cistern, reflected in the glass. It made me feel sick. I know how prisoners feel now, and it is not the confinement which breaks the spirit as much as the sense of perpetual observation and an endless intrusion into personal privacy and space. I walked quickly down the stairs and was ushered directly out of the door, through the porch, and down the path. There was a car, waiting in the road with the chauffeur standing by it. It was the same as I'd avoided entering before but this time there was no Ben to save me.

The red Capri was still parked a few doors along, where we had left it. I got into the car, sandwiched in the back between the smooth organiser and the stinking half wit. The councillor, still in his overcoat, was in the front. Nothing was said as we drove into town. I could tell that Williams was tense and he kept drumming his gloved fingers on the dashboard whenever the car stopped or slowed. I realised it was close to 5 o'clock and that the Oxfam shop would be closing soon. The man called Ted was smelling as badly as ever in the confined space so I was almost pleased when the car eased into Corporation Street where the shop was. The streets were quiet in the falling dusk and the lights were beginning to brighten. Councillor Williams turned round and spoke to the man on my left.

'What's happening, Martin? Who does what?' I noticed, again, that he was sweating and anxious.

'Nothing special,' said the voice softly. 'Mrs Clinton is just going to go into the shop, nice and quietly. Aren't you Mrs Clinton?' I nodded dumbly. I had every intention of doing so. The confidence and bravado of the afternoon seemed like complete nonsense in the growing darkness. I had no allies now and nowhere to turn. Even the police were closed to me and they would only laugh. I wasn't thinking really, just sticking it out and hoping that if they had the rucksack they would let me go eventually and that this entire nightmare would be over.

'We're here, Mrs Clinton,' the man, whom I now knew to be called Martin, hissed. 'You know what to do.' I nodded again. Ted got out of the car and held the door open for me, a leering smile crawling over his face. The driver stayed put in the front. The Oxfam shop was brightly lit inside but its windows onto the street were cluttered with plants in the doorway, hanging Indian blankets, wicker baskets and African masks. As I neared the door, the lights shone through the eye holes in the masks. Then, it was like passing through a jungle and finding, just beyond it, a suburban living room. The style was post-war and 50s, but as if turned on its head in disarray. The armchairs faced the wall, with antimacassars piled in their seats, along with garish cups and plates. There were pictures, in cheap gilt frames, on the floor with lampshades and piles of coats, while handbags hung from hooks on the wall. There was a low counter, spread with knickknacks, old cutlery and cheap jewellery. There were two elderly women standing behind it, one of whom moved away as I approached.

'I'm sorry,' I said. I must have looked a sight with my bruised face but the other woman turned to me without moving a muscle. 'Yes dear,' she replied, urging me briskly to say more. Her hair was pulled back tightly but I noticed that her eyes were sharp, brown and penetrating as if inspecting me. 'My rucksack,' I continued. 'I left a rucksack here this morning.'

'Yes, dear,' she said efficiently. 'It's here.' It was as well, just behind the counter. She held it out to me. 'My,' she went on with an exaggerated glance at her watch, 'it's time to shut the shop.' Then, back to me. 'Well, go on, dear. You can use the back door.'

Slightly bemused, I walked down through the shops long interior past the racks of clothes. The other woman was standing there and beckoned me into a smaller backroom but as I went through the door an arm took mine urging me forward.

'Come on, quickly. There's no time!' I recognised the voice.

'Gregory!' I said. Behind me I could hear shouting and the rattling of a door.

'Move!' Was all he added, hassling me along another corridor where great black plastic bags were piled stuffed with old clothes. There was another door in front of us which he pushed open and I was out into the air. There was a car in front of me with the engine running and its lights blazing. It was my mini. I lurched – was half pushed - into the back as Gregory crowded into the front after me. Sally, who was in the driver's seat, crashed the gears, over revved crazily and we were out into the road. Next to me on the back seat was my rucksack. Gregory was looking anxiously behind as we drove at crazy speeds away from the Precinct.

'What's going on?' I asked. 'What were you doing back there?'

'Waiting for you,' he said.

'But this morning,' I said trying to make it all fit. 'This morning you were with Williams and Ted and that other man.' I shuddered inwardly at the memory.

'Not tonight though,' said Gregory. He seemed manic, almost like a hunted animal as he continued to stare behind him. 'Now quick,' he said, turning round to me. 'Is that all the money and the stuff?' I knew what he was talking about by now.

'At Ben's,' I replied. 'The rest is at Sally's, I mean.' I meant the gun but didn't say more.

'Better go there then,' he said. It was addressed as much to Sally in the driving seat as to me.

'Why my car?' I said.

'It was handy,' Gregory replied. 'Mine is a bit too obvious?'

'What's going on?' I asked as Sally took yet another corner too fast, the back wheels slipping away and the brakes screeching.

'I thought you knew,' he said. 'It would never have happened if you'd kept out of it. You know this is all your fault don't you?'

'No,' I said and meant it.

'If you had told me you knew Astle, it would all have been okay. It could have been smoothed over but you couldn't do that could you? You had to mess it up.'

'But I did nothing,' I replied, more confused and indignant.

'Not half,' said Gregory ironically.

'Why were you at the shop?' I asked, on a different tack, trying to make sense of something else. 'Did Williams send you?'

'No,' said Gregory. 'I told them you would go home. You always do when there's a problem. I knew you would turn up there looking for the kids so off they went. Meanwhile, we asked a few questions off some gullible cops and found ourselves back here.'

'In the shop! Why were you waiting?'

'Because we needed you to collect that rucksack. I knew then.'

'Knew what?' I asked.

'That you were in this up to the neck. But we knew you'd be back as well. I'd almost given you up when you arrived. We showed the old ladies my warrant card and they did just what we asked. I think they liked the excitement.'

'What warrant card?'

'Just a bit of card but convincing. I borrowed it off Detective Constable Roberts. Remember him?'

'So you were with them, and then?' I said genuinely perplexed.

'But not anymore,' he said. 'We'll just collect the money then away we go.'

'Not me,' I said, 'I'm not going anywhere.'

'I know,' he replied. 'We are,' and he leaned across the front seat of my car to touch the back of Sally's neck.

'Stop it, Greg,' she said. It was the first time she had spoken. I felt the same lurch in the pit of my stomach I had experienced the previous morning.

'Sorry,' he said possibly to both of us but it did not sound heartfelt.

'What about Ben?' I said, suddenly reminded of him and of the man they called Martin and his threats.

'They've got him, at mum and dad's.'

'What's he doing there?' asked Sally.

'He took me,' I said, 'he gave me a lift there.'

'More fool him,' she said. I had never realised she could sound so cold. There was also a strange edge to her voice, unreal as if it was not her speaking.

'But they said if anything went wrong...'

'He'd get it, I suppose,' Gregory interrupted. 'Forget it. They won't bother about him. They might just rough him up a bit and then let him go.' I remembered all too clearly what roughing up meant as we arrived back at the Ellis house.

'Home again,' said Sally sardonically as she screeched the car to a halt. I was beginning to hate her seriously.

Home Is Not Where the Heart Is

'Where's the rest of the money and the stuff hidden?' said Gregory to me, before we got out of the car. 'There isn't much time.'

I thought he had been talking about the gun but I realised he thought that I had kept some of the drugs back as part of my plot, cooked up with Finn or Astle or whoever.

'I'll show you,' I said. As we walked up the drive, Gregory held my arm as he had done at the police station.

'I'm not letting go this time, either,' he said, as we went into the house. We were a strange crew when we stood in the hall. Gregory still looked scared and haunted. He had pushed me in front of him as we went into the house and, now, he and I waited there while Sally checked around.

'Come on,' he said, as she came back downstairs. 'The money. The stuff.'

'Upstairs,' I said. I was vaguely formulating a plan that I might distract Gregory away from Sally and try to make him see sense. I also wanted to know what he had planned for me. I did not like the idea of being left to explain things to 'Martin' while Gregory was gallivanting off with Sally. But Sally was quick to follow. I think that she had perceived, as much as I had, the Gregory was the weak link and that, while I could cut no ice with her, I might touch some deeply hidden chord in him. As we reached the top of the stairs, I swerved towards the bathroom.

'I need the toilet,' I said. 'I won't be a minute.' Gregory kept hold of my arm. 'Don't be daft,' I said, 'I could never get out of that window.' It was true as well. The window was about three foot in length but only about a foot wide and located horizontally close to the ceiling. 'I won't lock the door,' I added. Gregory released my arm and I went into the bathroom, closed the door and leant with my back to it trying to think. I turned on the cold tap and let the water trickle, then opened the cupboard by the side of the bath and squeezed my hand into the gap behind it. Perched at the back was the gun and it was then I remembered what Ben had said about finding a safe place for it. I still didn't have a plan but I did have a chance.

I held the gun in my hand as I flushed the toilet. 'The rest of the stuff you want is hidden in here,' I called out. 'I need a bag for it; a plastic one will be fine'.

'I'll get one,' I heard Sally say.

'I'm coming in,' said Gregory pushing the door.

He was surprised to see me standing with my back against the sink with the gun pointed straight at him. 'Get back and put your hands up,' I tried to say although it came out as something of a squeak. Gregory looked dumbfounded and froze as Sally appeared behind him.

'I said get back,' I shouted more loudly and Sally saw the gun, outstretched in my hand, and she instinctively backed away. Gregory still looking incredulous but by now registering the gun did the same. The two of them backed along the landing.

Gregory found his voice. 'That's dangerous, Ali,' he said. He had not called me Ali for a very long time. 'Put it down. Put it down, please.'

'No,' I said, 'and I'll use it if I have to.' The platitude just came to mouth as a nervous reaction. Perhaps it only made Gregory think that I wouldn't.

'No you won't,' he said. 'Give it to me.' He began to come towards me.

'I'll fire,' I said. I could feel my whole body starting to shake and the gun seemed to be bobbing up and down in my hands. He came a bit nearer. I tried to aim the pistol at his feet and just touched the trigger. There was a searing red flash on the enclosed landing, a tremendous crash of sound which welded into Sally's screams. I could not tell what had happened. Gregory was on the floor and Sally was standing screaming in the doorway of the bedroom. There was a huge gaping hole in the plasterwork on the wall at about a foot above where Gregory's head had been so I realised I'd killed neither of them. I also knew that I must've only just missed blowing my husband's brains out! I had aimed in front of his feet not expecting the trigger to be so light and my shaking hands and the kick of the recoil had done the rest. Gregory was in a state of shock, clearly deafened and his eyes were staring.

'Get a belt,' I said to Sally abruptly. 'In the wardrobe. Tie him up.' I saw her hesitate and raised the gun again. 'I can't miss at this range,' I said simply. She produced three belts of various designs and used them to shackle Gregory at the wrist and neck to the support rails of the banister on the landing. I went a few steps down the stairs and felt the bindings from behind and told Sally to tighten the arms until I was satisfied and then to make a loose gag from a silk scarf. It wasn't all that constricting and I had the feeling that it would not be able to resist a desperate effort to escape but it would do for the moment.

Gregory, however, offered no resistance and Sally only looked bleached and strained. While she finished, I returned to the top of the stairs and then gestured with the gun her to go down in front of me. 'After you,' I said. Halfway down, I turned to my husband.

'Bye then dear,' I said. 'See you later.' I was trying to be cynical but was ultimately, as usual, tragically prophetic.

'You know my old house in Fountains Hill?' I said to Sally. She nodded. 'Come on then let's get going.' We were in the car. I had stayed in the house only long enough to steal a jacket from the cupboard in the kitchen where I had been concealed only the evening before. It was a big green jacket, the sort of thing one might go fishing in and it had big pockets. The gun was stuck in one of these pointing sideways at Sally through the fabric. She still looked distraught and pale as she started my car. The other pockets of my jacket were packed with my wads of money and the plastic bags of powder from the rucksack.

'Go along the ring road,' I said. 'It'll be quieter.' It was too which was just as well because I did not really trust Sally's driving and I suppose I also feared deep down that she might have some counter plot up her

sleeve. 'Right, Sally,' I said. 'Talk. I want to know it all. I want to know about the drugs and the money and what happened to Astle and why?'

'I don't really know much,' she said, 'they didn't tell me everything,' and her eyes were brimming with tears. 'Please move the gun. I can't drive with it there. Please.'

I suddenly felt terrible. It is hopeless I know but I felt guilty for pointing it at her and sorry for how she felt as well. Although I was trying to play the heavy mobster, I was beginning to recognise that I was useless in the role. I should have just said forget it and chucked the gun out of the window. We could have stopped at the first pub we came to for a couple of gin and tonics out of the money in my pocket and it would barely be noticed. The trouble was I couldn't sustain my quite justified hatred and anger. I felt sorry for her in spite of everything and I also wanted very much to know where Ben was and that he was okay. 'Okay,' I said moving the gun in my hand to the opposite pocket. 'But don't do anything suddenly,' I warned, 'it goes off very easily.' There was a box of matches in the pocket which I moved to a smaller pocket. I had no wish to shoot myself in the leg and go up in flames!

'I'm so sorry,' she said. She was having difficulty in speaking. 'About yesterday, and about me and Greg. I wanted him to tell you before but I think he's always been too scared, or too worried about the kids.'

'He hasn't thought about them for the last couple of days has he?' I asked trying to be cool.

'Yes,' she said. 'He made sure they were all right. He took them to your Mum's.'

'But they weren't,' I went on. 'They could have been murdered at my folk's house today. I saw what that lot were like.'

'He doesn't believe it,' she said. 'I believe you though and you're right. Martin Webber is insane sometimes and Ted would do anything he told him to.'

'Ted? The one that looks like a cross between a rat and a spider?'

'Yes.'

'Would he run somebody over in a truck?'

'Yes, I think he might just do that if Webber told him to. I think they'd kill Greg as well if necessary. He doesn't understand. He thinks it's just another kind of business deal. Just like selling a few loads of cement. He just doesn't know what they're like. Ever since Martin got involved things have got worse. I think Martin despises Greg. He thinks he's weak.'

'He is,' I said. 'How long has it been going on? Sally shut me a quick sideways look as the car bowled along the deserted road.'

'Nearly five years,' she replied. 'It was Webber's idea and he got Williams into it as well.'

'Who is Williams?' I asked. A county councillor?

'Yes,' Sally answered. 'He is also on the company board.'

'And Martin Webber?'

'Overseas division mainly. He doesn't actually work for North Western but he organises cement imports from West Africa. That's where it comes from. The heroin, I mean.' I tried to take all this in and to look as if it was nothing new. 'They're all in it now, I think. The company would probably have gone bust otherwise.'

'So what does Gregory do?' I asked.

'Deals with some of the contacts in this country. That's how they do it. Nobody does too much or knows too much. Astle was working for Greg. He tried to double cross them and they think that he was doing that with your help. That's how come they blamed Greg. I felt sorry for Astle. He was only a kid really out of his league.' We drove on and as we neared Fountains Hill I had to give Sally directions.

'What you going to do?' she asked.

'Get Ben?' I said. 'I owe him a favour.'

'How?' she asked. 'What if they are all there?'

'I'll use this,' I said patting my side pocket but knowing really that it was just bluster. In fact, I had no idea what to do. As we drove into the road I tried to think of the possibilities. William's car was outside the house. I was sure they were all there with Ben.

'Listen, Sally,' I said. 'Either I take you with me when I go in there or you do something for me.'

'What is it?' she said. 'I don't want to go in there. They'll kill me.'

'Okay, drive down to the end of the road. Wait five minutes by the telephone box then call the fire brigade. To this house! Set on fire.'

'But it isn't,' she said vaguely.

'It will be,' I answered, fingering the box of matches in my pocket. I left her there then. I could only hope that she would do what I wanted. My plan for what it was worth was to set light to the woodpile by the house then go up the old fire escape to the two attics. The fire escape ended on the attic landing and I was willing to bet that Ben would be in one or the other of the rooms up there, that is if they were still holding him captive. I also thought that the arrival of the fire brigade and probably the police might scare Martin Webber and his friends into leaving.

It was dark along the side of the house away from the street and starless as I crept towards the long pile of logs. I skirted around the old cellar coal hole and the dustbins recognising each crack and depression in the side driveway. There were voices in the kitchen one of which sounded like Ted's. I squinted through the window and the curtains which had been pulled across so completely that at the edges there were gashes of light. I peered in. I could not see Ted but I recognised the man standing talking to

him. The old donkey jacket gave him away. He was the man who had tried to rob my car and followed me back. I had no certainty but I suppose he would know who had killed Nigel as well. I knew, for certain now, what had frightened Nigel. He had not seen anyone in the restaurant but something. It had been my address fob with its North Western cement insignia which made him think that he'd stumbled into some bizarre and enveloping trap. And, of course, he was right in a way because the truck outside was waiting for him and, very likely, for me as well.

I reached the log pile which was an orderly stack as my father insisted. I took the matches from my pocket and struck one but the logs merely smoked in a damp sort of way until the match was extinguished so I felt my way to the garden shed and lifted the latch. It was even darker and pitch black in there but also familiar. The metal curve of the latch gave way easily and I was inside. The mower, all polished and shiny, sat in front of me and the petrol was neatly stored under the workbench. Again, I give thanks for my father's need for regulation in his life, his obsession that the universe was a mess, always in flux and that the purpose of living largely involved subjugating it to some kind of order. He probably even conceived of God as a sort of giant filing clerk in the sky sorting out the people who were busy sorting out the chaos down below.

I took the petrol can which was well over half full and went back towards the house. I unscrewed the top, tossed most of the contents liberally over the wood, then stood well back and threw a match. It went out, nothing happened but there was a heavy smell of fuel in the air. I struck two matches and threw them together. There was a tiny arc of flame and I jumped back as an instant incandescent explosion sent a fireball streaking up and along the outside wall of the house. At the same time, down in the valley, I heard the repetitive cawing of a siren. Sally had done something right at least. I fell back into the darkness as the kitchen door flew open. Ted was there I saw him peer as if stupefied at the fire and then turn and rush shouting something incomprehensible back into the house. The initial flames had died down as the petrol burnt itself out but then returned hotly to eat the wood on which they were now taking a good hold. The kitchen door flew open then and there was Ted with a washing-up bowl full of water which he tipped onto the flames. He ran back into the kitchen for more as one end of the pile began to smoke rather than flame. The sirens were nearer now and the fire was burning up again but all too slowly. As Ted came through the door again I ran towards him and threw the last dregs of petrol into his surprised face and eyes. He was staggering around the yard like a blind man then he stumbled and turned towards the fire. I rushed him again and swung the empty can against his head driving him back towards the house. The sirens were maybe in the next street now and the log pile was well ablaze as I ran around to the fire escape. The fire escape was a late addition to the house added by some previous residents. It was an iron skeleton built in three diagonals which instantly destroyed any charm that the back view of the house might once have possessed. I had been strictly forbidden to climb it as a child but often disobeyed the instruction to feel the wind in invisible sails and to look down in disdain from above on the neighbours below. Now, it was older and rusting, two treads were missing in the centre part of the way up and you had to keep to the inside edge at that point and close to the wall. Otherwise, it was safe enough.

I turned the first angle on the level of the first floor landing. The big window at the end of the landing never opened so I knew I was safe. The fire tender was outside the house and its flashing lights were

casting brilliant blue patterns on the neighbours walls which reflected back onto me as I climbed. There were voices in the back garden now as well and shouting but I could not tell who was calling or at whom. I simply charged an upwards. At the attic level there was a single tall door with a glass panel in. It had a handle on the inside. Panting from the climb, I hammered the glass with the butt of the pistol and it instantly shattered. My hand went round the edge of the glass, the handle swivelled and I was inside.

There was a light coming from under one of the attic doors and the key was on the outside of the lock. Holding a gun in front of me, for all the world like a real television detective, I turned the key and kicked the door open. In front of me was an old iron bed and on it, trussed like a chicken was Ben. The day before I would have run straight in but I was learning. Kick the door in hard, dive through and swing back towards it. Something moved towards me. I pulled the trigger there was another immense flash and crash, plaster fell from the ceiling and with considerable grace the old mattress rolled up behind the door slumped to the floor oozing stuffing and smelling of cordite.

I couldn't help laughing as I unwrapped Ben from the adhesive tape which bound him but it was from hysteria again rather than amusement. 'Sorry about that,' I said. I think he probably thought I was mad, shooting mattresses and talking nonsense but I was sure it was better than having to lie there, listening to the sirens, unable to move. He was soon free, slightly dazed and rubbing his wrists and ankles.

'Come on,' I said, 'we've got to get out. I just set the place on fire.' He sped up at that. Out on the attic landing, I could hear a disturbance down below and then there was a clatter on the stairs. I pushed Ben through the door so that he was standing on the top of the fire escape. 'Go on,' I smiled at him. 'Keep close to the wall on the eighth and ninth steps down or you'll fall through.' The noise on the stairs was getting nearer. I could see a shadow panning up the stairs and then Webber rushed round the corner full pelt. He saw me just as I shouted.

'Stay there. Go back down or I'll shoot.' He ducked instantly back around the last corner in the tight stairway. I was becoming rather pleased with the effect my weapon had on criminals but it didn't last and all of a sudden he was there again. It was my turn to dark back into the alcove at the top of the fire escape as there was an enormous crash close by. I knew instantly what it was and the enormity of it struck me simultaneously - I was being shot at. While I was prepared to gun down the old mattress there was no way I was going to take on a full-scale gun battle. Anyway, what I knew of cowboys and gangsters strongly suggested that I had only four bullets left and I thought Webber might have guessed that too. I voted for discretion rather than valour and pelted after Ben down the flimsy metal stairs.

Webber wasn't far behind and even as I started on the second diagonal I could hear him stepping out on the top. I froze. I was terrified that if I moved he would shoot me from above like a scientist finishing off a rat, trapped in a laboratory maze. Then, suddenly, there was another crash and a row of expletives and something hurtled past my level to the ground. My first thought was that Webber had fallen but I could hear cursing and swearing above. I looked round and up and in the faint light reflected off the flames I could see legs swinging and temporarily, at least, trapped between the broken treads of the stair.

I rushed on down to the bottom. Ben was waiting clutching something in his arms. There was still a lot of flame and smoke at the back of the house around the kitchen but we went round the other side of the house and into the neighbour's garden. There were a lot of people in the street gawping at the blaze, some in pyjamas and dressing gowns. There were two fire engines now, one a large vehicle with a hydraulic platform and at least two police cars. I hoped that Councillor Williams was doing some explaining but it seemed unlikely. Once on the road Ben and I melted into the crowd. The Capri was still there just beyond the ring of onlookers. Ben reached under the back wheel arch and withdrew the ignition key from the top of the tyre.

It was nearly midnight when we found a hotel with a light on and a porter who grudgingly unlocked a big front door - after some frantic knocking. It was cheap, nasty and on the other side of town but it seemed like a good place to get lost. When we were inside, I offered to pay in advance since our entire luggage was one large leather attaché case. I think that the night porter was anyway going to insist on that but I beat him to it. I tipped him a fiver as well for staying up and he positively brightened even to the extent of offering us a cup of tea. We refused. Graham signed the register as Mr and Mrs Jones and we staggered upstairs. The bed was old and soft with heavy, slightly damp, covers. It didn't matter, nothing mattered. We made love under the covers like an old married couple and then instantly fell asleep wrapped in each other's arms.

WEDNESDAY: Deeper Waters

I wrestled with the door. The handle was slippery and unmoving and then, suddenly, with a final wrench it gave. I was out into the street running, pushing my way through crowds of shoppers. Behind me, I could hear footsteps pounding and the sound of heavy exerted breaths. I was calling to people for help but the words wouldn't come and nobody turned my way. Whole families seem to pass in mute and disinterested slow motion. I tried to grab at them but they faded into the air. Only the footsteps came closer. I could run no further. I was choking for breath. I tried to fight but there were arms holding me firmly.

'Hey, are you all right?' asked Ben. He was kneeling next to the bed on my side.

'Sorry,' I answered, dragging myself from sleep. I was still shaking and my heart pounding. 'Just a bad dream! I think I'm all right now. What time is it?' I was conscious of a slight, pinkish light filtering into the room. It looked early.

'6:30,' said Graham. I woke up, thinking too much. Everything was just going round my head so I sat down with Webber's briefcase.

'And?' I murmured sleepily.

'It's just incredible. It's full of papers. No wonder he was running up the stairs with them. He must have thought things were going wrong and lifted them from the company. He wasn't trusting anyone else!'

'Lifted what? What are they?' I asked starting to wake up and respond to his interest.

'Two sets of company accounts for a start. One obviously for publication and the other, well? They're handwritten but amazing. Did you know Gregory was paid a cool £55,000 last year?'

'No,' I said, suddenly sitting up. 'It's impossible.' But I couldn't help thinking about the private school idea and a couple of other little extravagances which surprised me at the time like the telephone in his car that he said was a customer freebie.

'That's what the unofficial book says. The official copy has him down for eighteen thousand,' went on Ben as he stood up.

'Sounds more like what I'm told,' I replied. I could tell Ben was excited if only because he was stark naked and not thinking about it. Apparently, quite unaware, he walked back over to the desk. His legs were slim and hairy, tight rounded buttocks and his back was smooth in the half light.

'There's letters as well,' he said.

'What they say?' I asked. I wasn't concentrating really.

‘And copies of telexes.’ He turned round holding a sheaf of papers. ‘They all go through some company in Rotterdam.’ He went quiet again as he read. His body at the front matched the back in terms of his fitness but there was an extra splash of hair in the niche of his chest. His stomach was just beginning to round and into middle age. As he focused on the page, a spare left hand went down to idly scratch his crotch so that his thick penis lobbed lazily from side to side.

‘There’s a payment slip here too. Made out to Williams.’ He whistled quietly. ‘100,000 guilders. How much is that?’ He paused again as if calculating his head. ‘Fantastic!’

‘It certainly is,’ I said, ‘most impressive.’

‘We’ve got them with this. Absolutely got them.’

‘By the short and curlies?’ I queried.

‘Totally,’ he said. He looked up and smiled then back to the papers but he knew what I was saying.

‘Will it stand up in court?’ I asked all innocently.

‘Who cares?’ he replied, pulling back the heavy bedspread and sheets and diving onto me. We did it like lovers this time, exploring the novelty of a different body, feeling and testing every curve and surface then breaking into passion as he pushed into me. When Gregory came, he grunted and half pulled away like one of his trucks dumping wet cement from its long metal snout but Ben just pushed deeper moaning his way back to the womb.

The morning had well and truly arrived when I woke again. Ben was still fast asleep, humped up foetus-like beside me, his curly hair protruding above the covers. I got out of the bed and searched for a bathroom in the corridor. There was no sound on the landing. Either the other residents were inclined to sleep in or there were not very many of them. On the whole, the latter hypothesis seemed much more probable. I found the bathroom and a huge cast-iron bath. The taps gurgled, initially, but once going they positively poured. After a long soak, I walked refreshed back to the room. Ben had located a shower on the floor below was awake and dressed. He waited while I dressed. It didn’t take long. I had no hairbrush, no make-up, and no clean clothes but at least I felt cleaner and the lump on my face had started to subside.

Breakfast downstairs was tinned and peaceful. The orange juice was reconstituted so was the scrambled eggs while the bacon was overcooked and taken from some indeterminate and stringy cut but everything was hot and the coffee was strong. We took our time and discussed what we should do. The first option, and the most obvious, was to go to the police again and try to wash our hands of everything but there were some problems as Ben pointed out.

‘Your credibility yesterday was pretty low,’ he said, ‘but, today, if they play their cards right you could be up for arson as well! Not to mention the suspected murder of your disappeared children and parents.’

'But we can't carry this briefcase around all day,' I said. 'It's a safety net. If that turns up anywhere official, they know that they're sunk.'

'So they'll do anything to get it back,' reminded Ben. I remembered what Sally had said about Martin Webber and the gunshots on the stairs. Anything was not a pleasant thought.

'Leave it in left luggage at the station?' I suggested. 'That's what they always do in films.'

'What do you do with the key though?' Ben asked. 'If we've got that we might as well be carrying the case.'

'The bank then,' I said triumphantly. 'We'll put the whole lot in the bank and then if anything happens to us. Hey presto, out it comes. That way they won't ever be able to touch us.'

'All right,' said Ben, suspicious as ever, but I think we should photocopy them all first.'

So it was that we ended up in the Public Library with the photocopier, a pile of loose change and an irritable crowd building up behind. We had come there via the High Street and a chain fashion store where I bought a new set of underwear, jeans and a new jumper. The shop assistant was more than a little astonished but did very well not to show it when I came out of the changing room dressed in the lot and clutching my other worldly belongs in one of their plastic bags. As I rejoined Ben in the street, he took my bag.

'I'm tired of holding these,' he said, pushing the copied documents in with my dirty clothes. We passed the Oxfam shop. It was a different place in daylight, looking green with plants, bright and inviting. I nearly went in to thank the ladies but something advised against it. I realise that there was still no guarantee to my safety even in this slightly grubby but now utterly normal little shopping precinct.

The bank was imposing with a preponderance of marble and heavy dark wood which had been stripped and stained a lighter shade to give a trendier feel. The old brass grills had been largely replaced by armoured glass but it remained a high-roofed and sombre place where whispers seemed appropriate. We had decided, solely on the principle that I was known there, on my bank. It was a joint account but it was me who normally used it. Gregory had another account at the bank across the road and I now understood why. This was also where the company account was as well. I knew this because he talked at the time of opening a second account of the advantages of having his monthly expenses cheque through a day or so earlier because it came direct. It never occurred to me that there might be other advantages for him as well! I rang a little bell by the end counter and asked to see the manager. The woman who answered me was frosty and meticulously presented. I shrank from her glance slightly and wished I had bought some blusher and eye-liner along with my new clothes.

'Do you have an appointment?' she asked haughtily. I kept my cool and said it was important but when she went away she was only gone for a moment. 'Mr Claridge will see you now.' She spoke as if this was the granting of a great request and I should be eternally grateful. Ben sat down to wait and read through his collection of library photocopies. I followed the cashier around the back of the counter and through a heavy door which clicked automatically behind me. Backstage in the bank the ceilings had been lowered

so that it all looked like a typical modern office. It made you wonder what that costly façade was really all in aid of. Some people are scared of bank managers but I'm not one of them. I am pretty scared of spiders and of criminal people with guns but not bank managers. Claridge was friendly and oily and he listened carefully as I explained what I wanted.

'And what does the bag contain, Mrs Clinton?' he asked

'Just some papers,' I said. 'And, he went on, I should ask you this. Are they yours to ask me to conceal?'

'Not exactly,' I answered, 'but they involve me a number of ways.'

'And for how long would you wish them retained, Mrs Clinton?' He said, peeping sideways at the clock on his wall. This oblique squint was enough to confirm a growing suspicion gnawing away inside me. As I said, my lack of fear of bank managers is based on the fact that although they may be supercilious and smug, in the end, they are professional and procedural in their dealings. If you go in and ask for any amount of loan you wish for, they can instantly decide whether your credit rating will stand it. The rest is cosmetic as, if the deal looks good for them, they will only waste as much time as it takes to make you think you're getting something in return for your exorbitant interest payments!

Claridge had always been like that in the past but now I could see was stalling for time. 'What's the difficulty, Mr Claridge?' I said rather shortly. 'Can you do this for me or not?'

'There are one or two formalities I'm afraid,' he said. 'This could take a little time.' I was not fooled.

'I'm sorry,' I said, 'but I can't wait. I'll have to go.' I stood up to leave and he stood also blocking my way to the door.

'Please don't be hasty, Mrs Clinton. We really do not want any trouble. If you just sit down.' I pushed past him to open the door. It was locked.

'Open this door,' I said. 'Now!' I was rigid with anger and he looked quite scared like Sally had done in the car. 'Now,' I repeated emphatically! He hesitated so I took out the gun. He went immediately to his desk and there was an almost negligible click. 'Right,' I said to him. 'You in front.' I picked up the briefcase and followed him out. Of almost all the people that I had so far pointed my gun at, excepting Webber, he was probably the one I would most like to have pulled the trigger on. I was sure that he had tipped somebody off to my presence. We walked, in file, down the corridor from his office. I stuck my pistol into the small of his back and felt him go rigid with fear.

'Tell them,' I whispered, 'that there's a bomb in the case and they had better keep well back.' He told them and they fell back before us. I noticed that the snotty cashier took me especially seriously and was lying prostrate on the floor. I sincerely hoped that her starched blouse and little black tie were getting thoroughly dirtied. I suppose that, in fact, the staff were perplexed as much as anything since people usually break into banks and I was trying to break out! Ben looked fairly amazed as well when I came through the double locked door with the manager of the bank in tow.

'Quick,' I said loudly. 'Take the bomb.' It was feeble but it worked with customers flying in all directions as I passed Ben the briefcase. He played along very well in the circumstances, bundling his bag of precious photocopies together, at the same time as he waved the 'bomb' at people who had second thoughts about lying on the floor. We reached the door and I pulled it open. I turned Claridge to face me.

'Shut the door after this. And lock it or the whole place goes up. There are five sticks of dynamite in your office and if this door opens after this they blow. The timer is in that car over there. I pointed in the direction of some innocent motorist, sitting in his car across the square then, before Claridge had time to think, I pushed him back through the door. It shut and clicked behind me. I thought it had to work. All these people are told to look after their staff so he could never call my bluff but I still wondered who he had been waiting for. Ben looked across at me for instructions. 'The car,' I said, 'quick.' We were just at the edge of the square when I saw the big limousine scream up to the bank entrance. Just in time, we rounded the corner where the Capri was parked and piled into it.

'Why!' said Ben. It was the first time he'd spoken since we left the bank.

'Who knows where it ends?' I said. 'Somebody tipped them off.' We went to the railway station then and found a sign saying Left Luggage after a good deal of difficulty and misdirection. It transpired that what left luggage meant in this neck of the world was a tall, rather imposing Sikh in a turban standing at a counter. He took the briefcase and 50p for which as far as I could understand he would keep it until eternity under his steely-eyed gaze. It seemed a reasonable bargain. He also gave us a ticket. It was number sixty-nine and I thought of Sally and Gregory but somehow it didn't seem to matter as much as before.

We found a quiet hotel bar, just opened, near the station and ordered a coffee and a tumbler of whisky each. I was shaken by the events in the bank because they underlined the never ending sense of pursuit. I began to feel that, whatever I did and wherever I went, I would never be safe. It was already halfway through the week and, on Saturday, I had to ring my brother and collect the children from somewhere. There was enough money to flee abroad but to what and to where? The alternative was the police and their derision. I was probably down as number one urban terrorist now as well as the rest. As we sipped our coffee and sipped at the drinks we formulated yet another plan. We would telephone ahead to the Manchester police. We would demand to speak to someone in the drug squad. Our photocopied papers would be enough, Ben was certain, to ensure a series of arrests.

'But if they lose us, they'll just leave the country,' I pointed out. 'It's Gregory who will get it in the neck. They'll take the money as well and you'll be sacked from school and I'll be doing day visits to Strangeways with the kids on a bus pass.'

'What's the alternative?' asked Graham.

'Maybe we could negotiate,' I suggested. 'After all we have the information - the proof.'

'But we can't trust them. You know that.'

'Well we must do something,' I said. It was somehow ridiculous to be staring into our coffee dregs in a kind of limbo with not the faintest idea of what storm was brewing around us but also with no idea of how to defuse the ticking bombs.

'Have another whisky,' said Graham in the silence.

'No thanks,' I answered, 'but you have one. I think I should ring Sally and Gregory. I need to know what's happening. Maybe Gregory would turn Queen's whatsit?'

'Evidence?' Ben interrupted.

'Yes, that's it. Then he can involve them all and name names.'

'And what if he doesn't?'

'He will. He has to because they must know that it was him who kidnapped me at the Oxfam shop by now. He'll be on Webber's list.'

'Why should that have been him?' Ben queried.

'Because only he and Sally and the police knew about it. Webber must realise that.'

Ben looked thoughtful. I realised he was thinking about Gregory in the same way as I thought about Sally. I took his hand across the table.

'It's not like that,' I said, 'not like that at all. He doesn't mean a thing.' I looked down to our linked hands. 'He hasn't for some time. It's been wrong for a long time but I just hadn't got the message.'

'So what about this?' he asked squeezing my fingers.

'I don't know,' I replied. He went to the bar and ordered another whisky and two coffees. I listened in my head to a rerun of what I had just said. It was just as if the mad side of my brain had taken over at last and usurped that ordering, classifying, sensible dictator so that my world was now being run by a revolutionary commune. So many things had happened where action did not, or could not, depend on prior thought and reflection. After all, in the end, that was all being sensible was. In my upbringing it amounted to a form of paralysis - a deferment of action - but now it was gone.

With Alan and the pottery classes there had been all that painful reflection before the event so that when it happened it was inevitably anticlimactic - at least it was for me! With Ben though it was all so different. When I said that I didn't know, I think I did but I just needed some processing time to make sense of it all. Ben came back from the bar and put down the two coffees and a whisky which he carried with some dexterity between them.

'Sorry,' he said. 'You're right. It's worth trying. And you're special as well.' He looked straight at me.

'You've made an old teacher very happy.'

'You like being shot at?' I said in my best Bogart. He laughed and I rummaged in my pockets for change for the telephone under a Perspex hood on the wall. The telephone rang only twice and I heard a woman's voice. It was Sally, her voice sounded high-pitched as if at breaking point.

'Alison,' she said. 'Thank God you've rung. They've taken Gregory. They're going to kill him. I know it.'

'Why?' I said. I couldn't properly register what she was saying. She was almost hysterical.

'He went to the factory to meet them. They called late last night. He said he'd got no choice and it would be all right. He hasn't come back. I'm scared Alison.'

'Don't worry,' I said. 'It'll be okay. He is on their side. They won't hurt him.' Even as I spoke, I knew how hollow the words sounded.

'Where did he go? Padley?'

'Yes, yes. I think so. I did what you asked,' she said, 'last night.'

'I know,' I said. 'Thanks, it worked.'

'Alison,' she said, 'be careful. I'd come with you but I just can't. Greg said he wouldn't tell them I was with him at the shop last night. Martin, Webber I mean, he thinks I'm with them. I am though. I hate him but I can't break away.' She was nearly raving I wondered if she had been drinking. What a bitter crazy world I thought as I listened to her. She sounded all eaten up inside. I didn't want to talk about it to Ben, not at that point anyway.

'We off?' he asked as I walked back to the table.

'Fraid so,' I replied.

'Where now?' he asked.

'The lion's den,' I said. 'The centre of it all.'

The Works

Padley was the headquarters of North Western Cement, situated about 5 miles out of town in a bleached landscape where, at one time, every tree and every hedge grew through a fine film of cement dust. The plant was dominated by two huge towers on the side of the larger of which North Western was vertically emblazoned in black lettering. There were associated buildings, warehouses, parking areas and offices sprawled across the open countryside at a time when conservation was something which happened in art galleries! Although Gregory had been based at Padley in all of the twelve years he had worked for the company I had never had any cause to visit the site. The sales division had an office in town from which they did most of their business and it was there that the company normally entertained at Christmas and invited wives along as well. I had first met Ben, in fact, at just such a fling while Sally was already working for Gregory. It hurt me to think of going to all those festive gatherings where everyone else must have known but me and, possibly, Ben.

Ben pulled the Capri up into the side of the road a few yards before we reached the gates. The weather had finally broken, the last traces of the Indian summer were ebbing away and the sky was white and heavy with a ceiling of low stratus and the promise of rain. In this light, the off-white shades of the buildings almost faded into sky behind.

Since it was mid-week, I would have expected the place to be bustling with trucks and men but, instead, an eerie quiet hang over the entire scene. There was a newish, shiny wire mesh fence and gates at the entrance to the plant but the buildings themselves looked dilapidated and strangely inactive at close quarters. There were no trucks buzzing and trundling up the long drive, no security man at the gate and none of the clouds of grey obscuring dust which characterised a cement plant at work.

‘Bit quiet isn't it,’ said Ben.

‘Just what I was thinking,’ I replied. ‘I expected to come out here and find everything is normal but just look at it. Not a soul in sight. It's not even like they have just gone home for the day.’

Ben restarted the engine. ‘Let's have a look around anyway,’ he said, ‘but I think the birds have flown.’ The car eased down the long drive, noisy in the silence, as Ben steered alongside the main buildings and then round to the back of the plant. He turned off the engine and let the car roll to a halt in the fine dust. He touched my arm and pointed. Next to where we had parked, a line of tracks in the dust led directly towards one of the largest warehouses. Another vehicle had been here recently. We got out of the car simultaneously and, as I climbed out, I could feel the weight of the gun against my side. I could hear rooks cawing and croaking in the fields behind the plant but otherwise it was oddly quiet. We walked together but without talking, following the car tracks in the dust.

Although from the other side this building looked empty, as we came nearer and around the end of it I could see lights. The door which appeared rusty from disuse slid open on a well oiled rail. Inside, it was suddenly bright; brighter than the dull daylight outside and virtually dust free. The door we had stepped

through was built into a larger double door of corrugated steel and on the inside of the building adjacent to this was parked Williams' car. The wheels were dusty and the bodywork was slightly filmed white on its limousine black but this dust was like an intrusion from another world in the clean hanger. All along one of the walls were heavy red trucks parked so as to range in size from the lightweight vans like the one which had followed me up to a huge double axle juggernaut of the kind which had crushed Nigel. These were brand-new and looked as if they'd never been used. I walked down the line of them, my shoes tapping on the concrete floor. I jumped suddenly as a voice spoke from one of the truck cabs I knew instantly that it was Webber.

'Here,' Mrs Clinton, he droned in that featureless way.

'No thanks,' I said nervously. 'I'm staying here.'

'Just you and Mister Ellis I see,' Webber said as he eased himself down the steps from the big truck. 'That's good, very sensible of you.'

'I want to see my husband,' I managed to say. 'He's here isn't he?'

'I told you before,' he smoothed, 'he is quite safe and that,' turning directly look straight at me, 'is more than he deserves. Come into the office. We can talk in there.'

The office and offices, as he called them, were a row of low portable cabins constructed along the wall opposite the lorry park. As he walked towards the nearest of them, he looked up and signalled to a figure crouched on the roof of one of further down. I recognised Ted. He was holding a shotgun of some kind. I felt a shiver run through me. I did not trust Ted. The office was warm, even if not very spacious. Williams was in there working through a cabinet of files and heaving extra papers onto an already large amount on the floor. He looked embarrassed to see me. That made me worry more about Gregory.

'Where is Gregory?' I asked again. 'Is he alright?' Williams looked away and began conspicuously to pull out more papers.

'He is,' said Webber. 'At the moment. Please sit down,' he added gesturing me to a chair. He offered Ben a chair also.

'I think I prefer to stand,' said Ben.

'As you wish,' answered Webber, sitting down by a desk. He turned back to me. 'Alison,' he hissed, 'may I call you that?' For a man presiding over the breakup of an empire, I had to admit that Martin Webber seemed very cool and collected at that moment, like a poker player with one last card up his sleeve when the stakes become impossibly high. He leaned across the desk towards me.

He continued without waiting for me to reply. 'I think it is time to make a deal. You could have gone to the police but, I think, there was a good reason why you did not. I think you probably knew that if you did your husband would be dead.' I nodded. He went on. 'As you can see, things are rather quiet around

here. North Western Cement has been gradually laying people off for some years but this week it is finally going into liquidation. And that, my dear lady, is largely of your doing.'

'I don't see why,' I said. 'I don't understand.'

'I joined this company just over seven years ago,' Webber continued. 'There are people I was working in conjunction with and we were looking for a dying company with strong overseas connections.'

'And North Western fitted the bill?'

'Exactly. It was a long established family firm specialising in one limited area in a competitive market. The road building boom was over, house building was in decline. The company had a life expectancy measured in months not years.'

'So you bought it?'

'No, not quite. We bought our way into it gradually, but don't forget we also paid your mortgage and gave your stupid husband a salary and a car he didn't earn on talent.'

'Why these trucks then, if the company is bankrupt?' I asked.

'Just simple taxation and accountancy. It's most important to be credible up front in my business.'

'What's that?' I asked. 'Organised crime?'

'For a lady who is being sought by the police as a criminal and deranged that is a little outspoken. I think you are as bound up in this mess as we all are. With a little skill you could be made to seem an accomplice. You could have lured Astle to his death for all the police know. You could have gone to the bank this morning intending to rob it.'

'You're wrong,' interrupted Ben, 'because we have the proof and you know it.' Williams looked up nervously from his files. Ben went on. 'It's all in your briefcase. Two sets of accounts. A payment to Williams here. We've got it all.' William's hands were shaking as he arranged his papers.

'What's he mean, Martin? What's he got?' he asked his voice trembling slightly.

'Nothing you fool, he just likes to bluff. It makes him feel better. After all, he's just found out that his wife has been screwing her boss for six years.' I noticed that Ted had just come in from outside and was behind Ben at the door of the cabin. 'Of course, what he doesn't know is that she fucked me a few times as well, all different ways. She knows who the boss is.'

Ben went for him which I think Webber had intended and, even as he moved, Ted brought the gun butt down hard on his neck and shoulders. The whole weapon arched through the air like a club so quickly there was no time to speak and Ben fell as if poleaxed, his body knocking against the edge of the desk. I made as if to get up but Ted stood between me and the prostrate body and pushed me back into the chair, a victorious sneer spreading across his face.

'Get him out of here,' hissed Webber, with all the old venom back in his voice. I realised how snakelike he was in his deviousness. His calm, hypnotic account had lulled us both, deadened our caution, and then he wound Ben up to make him lose his guard. Carefully, clinically he had wrested the initiative back to himself.

'Now you,' he said briskly. 'Get that coat off. Williams, help her out of it. Do her too Ted if she moves the wrong way.' Ted looked as if would be only too happy to do just that. Williams stood behind me. I took off the jacket and flung it down on the table with as much dignity as I could muster.

'Frisk her,' he said to Williams. He swung back to me. 'Put your hands on your head.' From behind the chair, Williams and his sweaty palms began to feel around me. Webber sat back in his chair and watched as his hands moved to my breasts.

'Just feel them well,' said Webber. 'Make sure there are no lumps. I wouldn't want Mrs Clinton to die prematurely,' he sneered while Ted ogled with his intent ferrety eyes. I closed my eyelids as Williams' hands moved on down my body and round my buttocks. 'Okay,' said Webber, 'that'll do for now.' He seemed to have lost interest and did not even look up as he spoke. Instead, he was arranging the contents of my pockets on the table. There was a pause. I sat down again. Ted was trying to drag Ben's prone body through the door. Williams had to help him. When the cramped little room was empty for a moment, Webber looked back up to me. He was holding the pistol in his hand, expertly flipping open the chambers and sighting along its stubby barrel. 'As you can tell, we only have a limited amount of time,' he said, 'but either all three of you die or we come to some arrangement.'

'Ben Ellis was telling the truth,' I said with as much conviction as I could muster and biting on my fear. I had no doubts about any of these people. Either Ted or Webber would kill for expediency or cash. Williams had come back into the room. I could tell he was listening. 'The documents are safe with a solicitor. Not someone on your books for a change, unlike Claridge.'

'Your husband rang Claridge,' commented Webber almost as an aside and as if it was slightly boring topic to be disposed of. 'He said you had had a breakdown and were coming into town with some of his vital papers. Any bank manager prefers to believe a man rather than the woman and most of them think that women are anyway mad and untrustworthy'. This was spoken as a statement of bald fact. 'He only asked Claridge to keep you there for a while but the old fool was not very good at his job.'

'Anyway,' I said. 'Unless I phone the person with the documents before 8 PM today he is to call the police at once.' Of course, it was all lies but I had to hope that Webber would not take the risk of calling my bluff.

'Well, that gives a few hours breathing space, or not as the case may be, for some of us.' He waited to let the effect set in. 'Let's get down to business then there is not much time.' He turned to Williams.

'Go and find Ted,' he ordered. 'Then both of you check their car over for anything hidden in there.' He turned to me. 'Got the keys?' he asked and I shook my head. 'Ellis has got the keys,' Williams went doing

as he was told. I realised that in spite of his status Webber's contempt even extended as far as Williams. He waited until they were gone before he spoke.

'Now, let's look at this situation realistically. This little operation is over. It was nice while it lasted and it served its purpose. Next week North Western Cement goes into liquidation with an official receiver brought in. In a few weeks, HM Customs will get called in because nothing adds up in the paperwork. Grimes, the official owner, will be dragged from the old folks home to answer questions and turn out to be gaga and the respected Councillor Williams from the board of directors will have disappeared. After a few months, Grimes will probably snuff it and everyone will come to conclusion that Williams had been robbing them blind. End of tragic story. Williams supposed to be in Brazil.'

'And you?' I asked.

'I don't exist in this company except as a consultant with another name. A bad fire is going to destroy some of the offices and precipitate the company's collapse. Quite a few important records will unfortunately be lost.' He remained calm as he spoke but I noticed a white fleck of reptilian spittle at the corner of his tight lips.

'So you think you're safe? I said 'Almost that is.'

'That is correct,' he replied formally, 'then I think the mask slipped. He was angry inside. This fire you do realise might be started by a jealous husband. Someone with good cause to be angry about his wife's affairs whose rage for revenge overcomes good sense so they come with petrol to start a fire, and matches. It gets going faster than this man ever expects, burns intensely but, sadly, as he tries to leave the door is jammed. Maybe the heat caused the mechanism to expand... The police are stupid. Anything which adds up they will believe.'

'You bastard,' I said quietly.

'That's right,' he answered. 'Now then what do I want? First of all, the briefcase just as it was stolen. Secondly, the rest of the material which Astle was carrying.' I looked a bit blank. 'These bags,' he said, 'it's not talcum powder you know. Also I want the money. There was £8000 in those rolls. I want five. I don't know what you spent but you can have what is left. That way you're part of the deal.'

'And in return?'

'You live and so does the man of your choice.' He looked me straight in the face. 'You don't need both and the few voices left the better.' He almost smiled or at least his upper lip twisted. 'Maybe you'd like a few minutes to think about it. It would be a pity to have to live with the wrong choice.' My mind careered madly. At one level this was so calmly conducted like an interview for a job. At another, Webber was asking me to make a disgusting and impossible choice.

'What about Sally? Mrs Ellis I mean.' I was trying to buy time to think.

'No problem. Listen to this.' He picked up the telephone and dialled my number. He moved the receiver across the table so that I could hear Sally's voice answer.

'Hello darling,' he said. It sounded cynical and brutal, not kind. 'Of course it's me. Get yourself up here, fast.' There was a brief pause. 'Yes, I know,' he said tiredly, 'he's quite safe'. Then his voice changed. 'What are you wearing?' he asked. 'And?' There was a pause and he went on. 'Yes, everything. Right. That's what I wanted to know.' He looked directly at me. 'Put your hand down there. Tell me how it feels. Come on. I'm waiting.' There was another pause. 'Good,' he said. 'I like that.'

I knew Sally, knew my hallway and even knew the colour of the telephone. It was easy to imagine. I felt sick. I would have liked to cover my ears. 'Now, with the telephone. Yes, I want to hear it.' He held the receiver out across the table again there was a slightly abrasive rubbing crackle from it and a low sigh or moan. I leaned quickly across the table and hit the top of the telephone base so the line went dead.

'You absolute shit,' I said. I wanted to kill him.

'Heroin,' he said as if by explanation. 'She doesn't need a lot but it has to come from me.' He got up went towards the door. I expect you'd like a moment to think about these things wouldn't you? I'll just go and see what Ted has found in your car. He went out through the door and closed it gently behind him. The key turned softly in the lock.

Making Arrangements

It was probably only about thirty minutes before I heard the key turned in the lock although it seemed an eternity. I could not credit, believe or understand what had happened with Sally. It explained, I suppose, her obvious fear of Webber but I was confused as to why should help me to escape from the Oxfam shop. Heroin addicts, I thought, were supposed to be emaciated creatures enslaved by the drug. On the outside, though, Sally seemed much the same as ever. Perhaps, she was little more tense and volatile at times but the circumstances of the last few days were enough to explain that. Why also did I let her take me back to my parents' house in Fenton's Hill? Was she deliberately sending me into a trap or was it just possible that she was using me, and Gregory for that matter, as a means of freeing herself from the dominance of Webber?

I had to hope that was the case and play to its possibilities. I had no other card left in my hand, apart from the briefcase but, at least from what Webber had said, I knew that it mattered to him. I did not believe what he said about Gregory and Ben. I did not believe he would give me any money. I felt sure, instead, that he would kill us all in order to ensure his escape. He was so confident. He had locked the pistol in a drawer in the desk but the drugs and the money sat there on its polished surface mocking my stupidity in thinking I could strike a deal with someone as single-mindedly ruthless as him.

I was chilly in there without my coat on so I stood up to retrieve it and drew it round my shoulders. I remember the indignity of William's hands and shuddered inside at the thought as Webber returned. He was holding my plastic bag with the photocopies in. For a second time, he looked a little uncertain. Williams was with him.

'We want the originals,' he said, placing the bag on the table in front of me. 'And fast.' Williams stood behind him.

'It's a fair deal,' Williams urged. 'I'm sorry about all this in a way but we've got to have them. You must understand.'

'Shut up Williams,' said Webber shortly. I thought Williams was going to speak again but he fell silent. 'There are two hours left for you to phone this solicitor,' Webber went on. 'Williams is anxious that we come to an arrangement. He thinks that some of the documents he has just seen may mean the end of his career in local government as a representative of the people. Ted would be worried as well. If that is he could read more than five words in a row!'

'I want my husband and Mr Ellis,' I said. 'Alive and well. In return, I promise you all the documents. I won't make any copies. I want this to end.'

'All right,' said Webber. 'You can have them both. Go back to town, fetch the documents and bring them here then it'll all be settled. He gave in too easily to my suggestion. He sounded too persuasive as if this was easy ending some business negotiation and that he, statesmanlike as ever, had given ground to conclude the deal. There was no way I was coming back to Padley.'

'I will meet you,' I said. 'Tomorrow. Somewhere public. You bring the two men and I will have the documents.'

'Where?' he asked. 'Outside the library?' Even when he tried to be conciliatory there was a sneering supremacy in this tone.

'Yes,' said Williams. 'That's fine.' Webber gave him a withering glance.

'On the motorway,' I said, 'at Mirewood Service Station. In the car park.'

'Early,' said Webber. '10 o'clock.'

'Yes all right,' I answered. 'I'll be there.'

'Don't try to double cross me,' said Webber. 'If you do anything funny they die. I mean that, you know.'

'I know,' I answered. Williams opened the door of the cabin and let me out back into the high roof space of the warehouse.

'The keys are in the car,' said Williams. He was almost being sociable.

'Just a minute,' Webber interrupted as he followed the two of us out of the office. 'Come with me a moment, Mrs Clinton.' He walked off, then turned. 'Come on.' I followed him to the far end of the warehouse. There was a massive silo reaching up into the roof and metal stairs and catwalks leading up to a small, glass-sided cabin. From there, it was possible to look along the whole length of the building and over the line of red trucks to William's limousine still parked at the far end.

'This silo,' said Webber, 'contains a cement store. There are thousands of tons in there. This equipment, he pointed at the array of dials and switches in front of him, controls the loading of the trucks. This one, he pointed to a red control handle like a joystick, is the load control and this dial here is the load volume. It controls how much cement is poured into the trucks. There is no truck down there now, just two men. 'If I do this,' he set the dial, 'I only have to move this lever,' his fingers caressed the end of the joystick, 'and twenty tons of wet cement will hit them. Imagine suffocating in cement when you stop holding your breath. It's not a nice thought is it? Just remember, Mrs Clinton, your hand is on this button. One thing out of line and it goes, just as if you pressed it.'

I nodded dumbly. He turned and left as abruptly as we had arrived, his shoes clattering on the steel treads as he hurried down. Williams was waiting at the bottom as jumpy as ever.

'See her out,' said Webber, striding away towards the little office again. I went towards Williams and the big doors. Ted appeared and opened the smaller one. As he did so, my mini pulled up outside. Sally was climbing out of it.

'Be seeing you,' Ted sneered, running the syllables into a single glottal noise. Williams stood by the door as I walked out to the car. I thought he might have spoken but the presence of Ted seemed to make him think better of it. I met Sally halfway.

'I'm sorry, she said. There were lines of mascara down the face where she'd been crying. Her features looked pinched and white. 'I'm so scared of him. I need him but I hate him. I wish you understood.' Williams was walking out towards us.

'I do,' I said coldly and formally then gripped her arm tight so that her face was twisted round towards me. I spoke quickly and in a whisper. 'The gun. It's locked in the drawer of the table in the office. Get it. Bring it tomorrow.' Williams was still standing there as I climbed into the car. When I sat at the wheel he was framed in the doorway. Sally had disappeared inside. Williams looked old and deflated within his big overcoat as I started the engine and swung the car round over the grey powdered yard and back towards town. He, Gregory, Sally and even the company were all the same. Sucked out by their addiction to easy money so that the company was an empty warehouse and Williams an empty coat. Behind me in the mirror as I pulled up the slight incline towards the gates I saw another cloud of dust. Webber was making sure of me.

As soon as I arrived on the outskirts of the town, I stopped by a telephone box. I lifted the receiver and had a detailed conversation with the speaking clock, carefully explaining to it that I would be picking up my documents in the morning. I went home then. There was nothing else to do. The house I had left so tidy and organised on Monday morning was now a shambles. The back door was unlocked and there was a pile of cartons, the kind you get takeaway food in, slung haphazardly by the back door. The kitchen was filthy with cupboards opened and their contents moved about. The sink was a pile of plates and there was broken glass in the drainer. There were bottles on the floor in a puddle of what I took to be beer from the sweet heavy smell which pervaded the room. A cigar was stabbed out, carefully, into the top of one the kitchen unit surfaces leaving a star-shaped burn radiating from its tip. The dining room and lounge were equally disordered as if everything had been purposefully shifted anything from a few inches to a few feet out of place. There were more dirty cups and glasses all around. I opened all the windows despite the chill in the autumn and went upstairs.

The bathroom was filthy and stale. I went into our bedroom. There was our bed, my bed, the duvet thrown back onto the floor. It was like a question mark in the centre of the room, tempting to me to imagine who had been there sweating and screwing between my sheets. Like one possessed, I dragged both covers off the bed, came downstairs stuffed the washing machine and set to work. I cleaned throughout the house over the next two hours, putting things back in place as I wiped and vacuumed everywhere. It might have been what kept me sane. When I started, I was swearing and cursing with blind rage. When I found cigarette burns on the curtains as well as the carpets, I wept ugly racking sobs and tears which dripped copiously onto the surfaces as I polished but I was determined. When I'd finished, the house was mine and I was ritually purifying and re-appropriating it. I remade all the beds, then fell into my polished spotless bath and scrubbed myself. By 10 o'clock I was finished. I was also exhausted. I had thrown out every item of food from the refrigerator but the freezer was untouched. I found a pizza, cooked it and ate every crumb. The cooking smells were reassuring and the house was finally mine again.

Afterwards, I raided Gregory's desk in the front room. It was locked but some gentle work with a screwdriver eased the drawer open quite easily. There were folders inside, old cheque books and bank

paying in books. There was also an envelope with several hundred pounds, in 20 pounds notes, neatly slipped inside it. There was another folder of letters. One was a thank you letter as a grateful child might send to a kind uncle. It was on un-headed notepaper. 'Dear Greg,' it read, 'thank you for the present which arrived safely last week. The party was a great success and now there is nothing left. I will see you next Monday in Liverpool and will have something for you then.'

I read it through, puzzled, until I reached the end. 'Yours, Nigel.' was written at the bottom of the page. I flipped through the cheque book stubs as well. There were two made out to Astle for large amounts of money one for £1000 and one for £2000. There were other names I did not know as well and a list of addresses, some in Birmingham and some in London. There was nothing at all about cement. I found another file marked current which had actually been on top initially but which I had moved out when I first opened the drawer. There were some odd bits of paper in it which look like receipts, a telex message and then a typewritten memo. In the space at the top was written, 'to GMC' and below 'from MW'. Underneath, I read the following.

'Urgent. Wilson, our friend in the Met, has said that someone is investigating our operation. He thinks it is a reporter called Daniel or David Bennett and that he is trying to infiltrate under the name of Austin. The man called Astle you found for us fits the description. I want him up here next weekend. Fix SE to meet him on Sunday night and get him to Padley on Monday morning where Ted can talk to him.'

I looked back to the beginning of the memo. It was dated precisely a week previously. So SE was Sally Ellis, but on Monday morning she was with Gregory while Nigel Astle, or maybe David Bennett, was somewhere nearby beginning to panic that they were on to him. In the end he fled, heading straight for the motorway. It made sense in one way. It was the quickest route out of town and much less likely to be watched than the rail or bus stations. Also, if he was Astle for the weekend that might explain why he didn't do the obvious thing and hire a car. If you were someone else it would be silly to carry a driving licence around with your real name on it! Poor Nigel! Maybe Sally had taken pity on him and tipped him off? Something she had said made me think that. Perhaps she did what she did to Gregory in order to give him a chance to get away or, maybe, she was just unable to maintain a cool and detached front so that he realised immediately was something up.

Nigel had not really impressed me as a mature student being almost a caricature. He rang true as a reporter and slowly events clumsily continued to interlock and mesh into a meaningful framework. It was like a jigsaw puzzle where the last few pieces seem so easy but it is never quite possible to make them fit, until you go backwards and take a few others out. I picked up Nigel's childish note and I thought of that bleak empty field and the cries of the lapwings. Poor, poor Nigel!

I went up to bed with the carving knife for company and lay in the in the dark for what seemed like a very long time before I drifted into an uneasy sleep.

THURSDAY: Murder and Mayhem

I stirred in my sleep just as it was getting light. The sky through the curtains was a solid wall of grey as the last fragment of summer had given away to a thick mist of rain. I could hear water pattering in the gutters and the wind shaking the remaining dried leaves of the chestnut trees at the foot of the garden. Then, I heard another sound and was instantly awake. It was the sound of a padding foot in the hallway downstairs. Not feet, just one soft footfall, but it was enough. There was someone downstairs. I reached out instinctively for the carving knife and eased myself out at the far side of the bed. I stuffed the spare pillow under the duvet and lifted it to trap the air so that at first sight in the semidarkness the bed would seem occupied. Then I crept in bare feet to the door and without moving it on its hinge I squeezed myself behind the open panels.

My heart was pounding and my hands were both damp with panic and shaking so much that I could hardly hold the knife. I linked my fingers around its handle with my fingers running over the top as if ready to stab rather than cut. There was another footstep on the stairs, just one so soft it could only just be distinguished even I listened against the rain and the wind. I could hear breathing now, sighing and drawn. I was sure that it was Ted, sent to watch me but come to spy or worse. I knew that I had to wait until he came into the room properly so that there was a clear view. I had to take the knife and stab hard - much harder I told myself than cutting meat and like hammering a nail into a wall. The knife had to go in.

The breathing was closer now. I lifted the blade up to shoulder level ready to strike as a figure padded into the room. I meant to lunge but I was literally paralysed. I couldn't move. The figure went over to the bed and leant over in the shadows.

'Alison,' it whispered, 'wake up, please wake up.' I dropped the knife to the floor but my arm stayed where it was. Sally swung round at the sound registering me my pose and the knife at the same time.

'Sorry,' I said. 'I thought you were Ted.' I heard pounding drums in my head and then toppled over stone cold on the bedroom carpet. It was probably only for a few seconds. I came round with Sally leaning over me.

'Please wake up,' she said. 'Are you all right?'

'I would have been,' I answered, 'if you hadn't just nearly made me kill you.' I paused to gather breath. 'Can I have a drink of water? There's a glass by the bed.' Sally obeyed and I pulled myself up off the floor onto the bed and stuck my head between my knees. Gradually, as I sipped water and bent double alternately a little blood began to permeate my skull. Sally stood by me anxiously and solicitously.

'Can I get you anything?' she asked. You look so pale.

'Just peace and normality,' I replied. 'It's all right. I feel a bit better now. Sally, what on earth are you doing here?'

'I had to come and see you. Someone had to warn you,' she replied. 'He's planning to trick you. He's going to kill them. I heard him arguing with Roy Williams about it.'

'Thanks,' I said. I was still feeling a little confused and groggy but I knew who she meant.

'I hate him,' she said firmly. 'I hate him. He's fooled me, Alison, for years. I was happy before but now it's hopeless. I hate him. I hate myself. I want you to kill him Alison.'

'What you think I should do?' I asked. 'Strangle him with my bare hands?' For a moment she looked confused, then almost triumphant.

'I've got it,' she said, 'like you wanted. It's here.' She reached into her coat pocket and produced a pistol, looked down on it briefly, then passed it to me. 'Use it, Alison. Please use it.'

I took the pistol. Its cold metal felt almost familiar in my palm now. I preferred its comfort to the knife anyway.

'What do I do with it though?' I said reflectively. 'What's Webber planning?'

'I don't know exactly,' she said. 'You're meeting him somewhere, aren't you?'

'Yes. Mirewood Services. On the motorway.'

'That's right. He was telling Williams that Ted is going to do something and that's what Williams was angry about. You know what Ted is like.'

'How did you get the gun?' I asked. I was just a little suspicious of Sally as I woke more completely. I was also learning to trust no one.

'They were all asleep. Ted was watching you in the house but he came back late last night. It's okay. I can get in and out easily. I've got a key.'

'And the gun?'

'I've got a key to the desk as well. And the filing cabinet.'

'I suppose you've got a key to this house as well?' I asked.

'I have actually, she replied, 'I'm sorry. Greg had it made for me.' She paused. 'I'm really sorry,' she said again. 'I shouldn't have told you that.'

'Let's have some coffee,' I said pushing myself to my feet. 'I squeezed her arm to say it was all right but she winced with pain. I let go quickly.'

'It's nothing,' she said, 'just a bit sore.' I didn't say anything else. It was too complicated. I wish that I had now. She followed me downstairs and I made two cups of black coffee - I had thrown away all the milk in the house. Even if Sally was my husband's mistress, even if she had nearly been the cause of my early death, she was still company. We talked, or rather she talked. She spoke intensely in short bursts,

fingers cupped around the mug of coffee and her eyes staring down at the carpet. Then suddenly, in mid-sentence, she would lift her eyes and look into my face, appealing for support. I could see, when she was like this, how her natural puppyish helplessness had once attracted Ben who would want to look after her and keep her safe. In contrast, Gregory wanted her as a decorative gangster's moll, a pretty plaything to lean on his arm and sustain his new role in life, and, finally, there was Webber who wanted to force that sense of helplessness to the edge, to the frontiers of total dependence and degradation. But, of course, they all of them wanted to see that look, the lost face of a little girl and the platinum blonde, cosmetic exterior. It was just they had different ways of going about it.

She talked on and told me about when she first worked for the company, straight from her upmarket secretarial course at college. She had first worked for his predecessor and then been passed on to Gregory on his departure. She skated over the episode with Gregory and I didn't pry. I wasn't sure that I wanted to know any more but it was also as if Gregory was no longer part of me or even of this house. I knew that, deep down, all that cleaning and washing yesterday evening was flushing out Gregory as well as so many other unpleasant things.

She told me about Webber. He had found out about her and Gregory and, from what she said, I had the impression that it was pretty well common knowledge within the cement plant and he threatened her with dismissal. She was weak, she pleaded and he took his chance. He threatened them to tell Gregory she was trapped both ways. She said nothing about the heroin habit and I didn't ask. She finished the coffee, her hands, at first crossed, went around her body and she rocked on the edge of the chair as she told me about Webber and his brutalising blackmail. I thought about my hallway and the telephone and the cruelty and degradation of it all.

'What about Ben?' I asked as she finished.

'I don't know,' she replied. 'Part of me still wants him but it's hopeless really. He will go and take Henry. I know he will. I don't blame him. Go back to that school and his adoring pupils and a miserable salary. Do you know I earn more than him?' she suddenly asked. 'He's been a teacher for sixteen years and I earn more than him. It's crazy!' She didn't ask the same questions about Gregory and there was a great deal left unsaid. We spoke around events, rather than excavating the truth of them.

'The Oxfam Shop,' I said. 'What made you help me get away then?'

It was Greg's idea. He knew things were going wrong and he thought you were after the money. At first, he thought that you and Nigel were, if that was his real name, working together trying to take his money off him. Later, I think he began to believe that you really knew nothing but Martin was certain you were hiding something.

'I suppose I was,' I said. 'The money.'

'So Greg wanted us to get the money and leave. He said that if you had nothing then Martin would leave you alone and we, that's him and me, could get away. I knew it was just a dream really. Greg was deep down far too scared to take on Martin. He was trying to escape.'

'When I made you drive me back to the house. You remember? In Fountains Hill?'

'Yes, I thought you might kill me. Not because of the money but to get Greg back. I was afraid you were planning to kill me and go back to him. I was in a bad way that night anyway. It was very confused.'

I could guess why, I thought. The panic and confusion was engendered less by the gun than by her habit, I suspected.

'I rang the fire people like you asked. Afterwards, I waited for Martin. He was very angry and came back here. Then the others arrived. I didn't think they knew that me and Greg had helped you at the shop but they pretended they did and tricked it out of him. They let Ted beat him up afterwards. Then Martin made me do things in front of him. I had to do it. I needed a fix so badly. He promised me that, if I did it, it would all be all right.' She was rocking hard on the chair and there were tears, noiseless tears, running down her flat almost sunken cheeks. It was like the eyes were playing their final game - giving up and running out like the rest of her. I made some more coffee.

'I know about that,' I said. 'Webber told me. You need help.'

'It's too late,' she said but she sipped a coffee and accepted a tea towel to dry her eyes. It was getting late; it was already 7:30. 'You'd better go Sally,' I said gently. 'They'll be wondering where you are.'

'I'll pick up some breakfast on the way,' she replied, blowing her nose vigorously on the cotton towel and wiping her dark eye sockets.

'It'll be all right,' I said as much to myself as to her as she left. It'll be all right! I was kidding myself and now it seemed like a mistake to go to Mirewood. The place was too far away and had too many bad memories for me. But, there again, it was all a mistake. I should have been making family breakfast really unless, of course, it was all the years of doing that which were the real mistake. I couldn't think straight. I went upstairs to get washed and dressed instead.

Back at the Services

Thankfully, the Sikh gentleman at the railway station was there when I arrived. I dragged out my grubby raffle ticket and he produced the briefcase with perfect efficiency. I didn't think that I was being followed this morning. Webber knew he held the cards. I was wrong of course. I should have realised that he was bound to play them carefully.

It was a North Western Cement van and I saw it come to a halt as I was trying to park the car as close to the station entrance as possible in order to keep out the driving rain. In a way, I was pleased to see the van. It was obvious, a way of letting me know they were taking no chances, without the permanent sense of threat posed by Ted. As I came out and climbed back into the Capri I knew I would be escorted to the motorway and from there to Mirewood Services. I picked up some petrol, making a racing turn into a garage at the last moment. I paid cash then drove out in the opposite direction. I thought I would make my pursuer work for his money. The driver was the same man in the donkey jacket. I drove almost directly past him but he ignored my eyes.

We played a continuing cat and mouse game across town and then I was out onto the bypass. I let the car go. It was fast, a good deal faster than the mini, and I knew the van would have difficulty keeping up. In fact, within a few minutes I left him far behind. I was soon at the motorway turn, the point where it all began just a few days before. Part of me would not have been surprised if Nigel, or was it David or Daniel, had bombed out of the corrugated crash fencing to flag me down!

The car drove well on the motorway. It was big and stable as I boxed with the heavy trucks in the spray and the wipers swept monotonously back and forth. Trucks were no threat any more, I realised. I passed the turning which had pointed to the lay-by in Monday's hazy sunshine. I knew where it was by the sign which indicated that the services were further on - at the next turn past there. I reached the service station early and it was just past nine thirty as I pulled into the car park. I stopped the engine in the middle of the tarmac and waited. There was a smattering of cars there, breakfasting late I suppose. I looked round towards the lorry park. There were several heavy trucks but none with the Northwestern emblem as far as I could see.

I expected to have to wait for some time but it was only a few minutes later when William's limousine cruised into the car park. It paused, like some preying creature sniffing the air, then moved in my direction. I sat in the car gripping the steering wheel determined to be calm as it eased to a halt and moved off again. I could see Webber driving, then indicating and beckoning me to follow.

Cautiously, I started the engine. The limousine drove away from the buildings to the far outskirts of the perimeter. The tarmac petered out first into gravel then grass and there was an open gate leading onto a lane and little more than a track really beyond. It was some kind of staff access for the service station but was also obviously a handy and rapid exit. I was anxious. This was too far away from the buildings and the people. I had spent too much time on the boundaries of normality this week.

Webber stopped, climbed out and waited in the rain. After a moment had passed I got out of the Capri and leant defensively against the door.

'Just you and me again,' he said.

'Where are the others?' I asked. They were meant to be here.

'They are,' he said. 'Look over there, beyond the twelve wheeler. I didn't know a twelve wheeler from a ten wheeler but I looked in the general direction. Behind a lorry, I could just see a van which might have been red.

'Behind that truck?'

'Yes,' he replied, 'the yellow one. Now let's not hang about this time. You give me the briefcase and collect your men.'

'I want to see them,' I insisted, 'before you get the briefcase.'

'Come on then,' he said. I could see his hands, playing the seam around his pockets. He was obviously as anxious for this to be over as I was. I worried momentarily about what the pocket contained but his hand only pulled out a small radio. He whispered into it and the van drew out and began to move in our direction. It was one of those vans with windows used for shifting workers around. I watched as it drew closer. Behind the wipers, I could see the driver. He was the same man who had followed me earlier this morning but now there were three other figures in the van. There was Sally, pale face looking directly ahead in the front, and two figures under some blankets or sacking in the back. The van drew nearer and pulled to a stop sideways across the front of the Capri.

'Take a look,' said Webber. I looked through the rain drenched windows. One of the men was head down staring at the floor and the other, Ben, was looking past me, over my head to the car. There was a look of tired horror on his face. Instinctively, I swung round. Ted was sitting in my car holding up the briefcase in triumph. In his other hand, resting in the crook of his arm was a rifle of some kind. I looked at Webber. It was raining harder.

'Your turn now then,' I said. 'Let them out of the van.' It wasn't very convincing but I did my best. Webber smiled, a smile I'd seen before as he dangled Sally at the end of the telephone wire. I reached for the pistol in my pocket.

'Keep still,' slurred Ted loudly. He was out of the car holding a shotgun. I thought I knew it was a shotgun because it had two barrels and they were pointing directly at me. Clumsily, or maybe as he was concentrating on me, he dropped the briefcase to the floor and it fell open.

'The papers,' said Webber angrily. 'Close the briefcase.' Ted turned to look at the floor. As he did so, there was a tremendous bang and a flash and Ted fell half sideways still on his face in the wet gravel.

'You fool,' said Webber through gritted teeth. I thought he was talking to Ted. 'You stupid little fool.' but he wasn't. He was looking directly at Sally and there was a gun in his hand now. Sally was standing by

the passenger door of the van her arm down by her side holding another pistol. She was muttering something. The van driver, donkey jacket and all, was out of the van and running with a lumbering gait darting clumsily from side to side away from us towards the shelter of the larger trucks. There were papers from the briefcase, picked up in the wind, billowing towards the service buildings.

This was all happening almost simultaneously but it unfolded like cinema stills. My hand went to my pocket. Webber fired and so did I. My hands didn't shake. I aimed at his midriff and the shot caught him directly in the chest. He looked at me in surprise, and then swung the barrel of his gun towards me, before toppling face first at my feet. I turned to Sally. She was still standing, head down resting on the bonnet, an arm underneath her forehead for support and her tousled yellow hair resting on the shiny metal a sharp contrast to the red of the van. I touched her hair as I came round the van towards her.

'Sally,' I remember saying but, even as I touched her, her head rolled upwards and her body slipped past me to the ground. The front of her dress was ripped and shredded and covered in blood but the same little girl eyes were fixed me as I laid her down. There were tears of rain running off her cheeks. I heard Ben shout from the back seat of the van. I ran round and pulled open the door. He was tied up and there was tape across his mouth which I pulled away but there was no sign of Gregory. Under the blanket was a window dummy which had toppled over as I climbed into the van.

'Where is he?' I said.

'Padley,' answered Ben. 'With Williams. They're going to set it on fire. They're both inside.'

I pulled the back door shut and climbed into the driver's seat. The engine was still running. I had to get to Padley. I pressed the heavy clutch, slammed the gearlever forward and put my foot hard down on the accelerator. Swinging away from where Sally was lying I found the wheel took more turning than I'd expected. There was an awful sickening crunch and a lurch from underneath the front wheels. I had run over Webber. As I swung the van around to go through the gate I could see a few people but the noise of the shot had finally cleared the car park and I guessed that the police would soon arrive. Across the wet, desolate tarmac nothing moved except for Webber's precious papers bobbing and rolling in the wind and the rain.

At least the lane led north. It wasn't far to another road, heading west, which I knew must cross the motorway and it soon did.

'Stay on this road,' said Ben. It was the first time either of us had spoken. It skirts around town you can go through Corley Village and up to Padley that way.' I did as he said, driving the van with my foot flat on the floor concentrating on the wet slippery road ahead. I didn't speak.

'Sally?' he asked after a while. 'She's dead isn't she?'

'Yes,' I paused. 'It was Webber. I shot him.'

'Good,' he said. Although I had removed the gag, his arms were still firmly fastened to the frame of the bench seats in the rear seat of the van. I could hear him crying, arms outstretched, almost crucified as I

drove. I went through Corley on market day at over seventy scattering livestock, vehicles and pensioners in front of me and as I came up the hill out of the village I could see Padley ahead - or rather I could see the smoke.

Against the dark grey rainy sky and the light grey of the landscape there was a plume of dark grey smoke, almost black, billowing into the sky. I could hear fire sirens in the air. I swerved down onto the main road and swung left towards the plant but I knew it was too late. The entire place was engulfed in flames and the large warehouse was already gutted. There were three or maybe four fire tenders. Despite the drizzling rain, the flames were spreading quickly fanned by the blustery wind. I knew that if Gregory and Williams were in there they stood no chance, no chance at all. I stopped the van, got out of the driver's seat and, in silence, I carefully undid the knots which bound Ben. We sat in the van together and watched Padley burn. As the flames began to recede and the fire crews did their work, I started the ignition and turned the van tightly on the road to drive towards town. I drove directly to the police station and pulled up hard on the double yellow lines outside.

'Shall I come with you?' asked Ben.

'There's no need,' I replied. 'Go to my place. Get a taxi. It's quiet and clean now.' I handed him the key. I had said to 'my' house. It wasn't much but it was a start.

I went up the steps and pushed open the doors fiercely. The same acne-scarred avuncular desk sergeant was on duty. He looked at me curiously but said nothing although there was blood on my jumper and jeans. 'Mirewood this morning,' I said. 'and Padley. I've come to tell you about it. I want to make a statement - to a policewoman.' He was about to say something. I took the gun out of my pocket and placed it firmly on the counter between us. 'It's serious.' I said. 'Look after this and I don't want to be fucking patronised.'

The ruddy colour drained from his face. He changed his tone. 'Yes, Madam. Right, I'll get someone at once,' he replied. I think that for once I had made my point.

FRIDAY: Picking Up the Pieces

I couldn't pretend that I slept well but I was glad to wake up in my own house with the reassurance of Ben gently snoring beside me. After my dramatic arrival at the police station yesterday things had happened quickly. It's possible that a lot of people were covering their backs but the policeman I met were a different kind from the local gang I had encountered earlier in the week. Taking the lead was a quietly spoken Liverpudlian who seemed to have some regional clout and I got the impression he already knew some of the story and I was just the final link to pull it all together. The briefcase also did much of the talking for me which was helpful.

The links between Gregory, Webber, Williams and the rest were fairly evident from the documentation. I knew that Webber and Sally were already dead but then one of the policewomen came in to tell me that they had found two bodies in the wreckage of the cement factory. They suspected that one was my husband on the other was a prominent local councillor and director of the company. I knew that they were almost certainly right.

I didn't collapse when I was told about Gregory. I think that by then I was in some kind of post-traumatic state and unable to really handle any more emotion. It sounds awful but somehow everything was a blank so I simply stared into my tea but when I lifted it to my mouth my hands were shaking so much I couldn't drink and when I put the cup back on the saucer the teaspoon rattled.

Later, a police doctor arrived. He wanted to examine me but I said I was fine although I suspected that I looked bruised and shaken. He offered me a couple of happy pills and I took one. They also brought me sandwiches. They asked about Ben's part in the story and I told them the minimum I said that he had helped me. I don't know if they entirely believed that part of the story but they didn't probe any further. I didn't tell them about the incident in the lay-by either. I asked for a phone and called Ben. He said he would be waiting and that he had talked to his mother and to Henry but he hadn't told them any of the story or about Sally.

The detectives were keen to know if I had any previous connection to Daniel Bennett, that was the actual name of the reporter pretending to be called Nigel Astle. I tried to explain the circumstances of our meeting as best as I could, emphasising that it was short lived and innocent. They told me that Ted had been picked up on the motorway heading for London. The Liverpudlian policeman chuckled as he told me that he was driving a company van so it wasn't hard to find. He implied he was in custody and likely to remain at Her Majesty's Pleasure for some considerable while while other offences were taken into consideration.

By about 10 o'clock that night, I think they knew that they would get no more sense from me so a policewoman drove me home. They wanted to contact my parents but I insisted I would be okay. I also had the feeling it would have been quite difficult given my dad's capacity for subterfuge once he knew the rules of the game.

At my house, Ben opened the door as he heard the car arrive. The policewoman clocked him but was appropriately circumspect. I could tell she knew who he was!

We talked over coffee and more coffee desperately retelling the story to one another trying to make sense of our previous lives which now seemed to be a bundle of lies and in tatters. Some minor events now made more sense. Gregory taking the children and myself for a holiday in Madrid where he had some work to do and disappeared for a large part of the week with important meetings. That was what he said anyway.

Ben talked about Sally, working erratic hours and sometimes away. He talked about her moodiness and then other times of near hysterical excitement. We were both trying to make some sense of what happened and I suspect, looking back, without much success.

Finally, we crawled into bed. Although I was tired my mind was beset with flashbacks. The firing of Webber's gun when I thought he was shooting me, Sally's face slumped over the bonnet of the car and the thought of Gregory locked in that burning factory. I think I cried at last and then cried myself to sleep. I'm not sure but I think I swallowed the other happy pill along the way.

So waking up on Friday wasn't normal in any way. I showered blasting myself with water and foam trying to wash away the events of the last few days. I found some clean clothes and felt a little more human. I think Ben was the same. Neither of us could talk or eat breakfast. These days I think it would be described as post traumatic stress but it was like being a spectator from another world watching us sip coffee in silence.

At around 10 o'clock, the Liverpudlian policeman arrived at the door. He was solicitous asking how I was but also shrewd. He said that what I had told them added up and complemented other things they knew in outline. He said that there would have to be inquests but that a criminal trial was unlikely given that only Ted was available to charge. He gave me all the normal stuff about keeping the police informed of my whereabouts and said they would want to do more interviews in the following week. He implied that the briefcase provided other leads and that the tentacles of this case were spread wider than I knew. For that reason, the news stories would be kept as quiet as possible. There had been a desperate fire and a shooting incident, probably gang-related at a motorway service station. Four people were dead, nothing to see, now move on.

Then he left. A little while later dad rang. He made me laugh for the first time calling from an unmarked phone box and not saying who he was until I had answered. I got to talk to the children but I saved the difficult conversations for the next day. They were still going to be very difficult.

Ben went to see his mother to tell her what had happened. She was shocked but also had had her suspicions with that elderly intuition that parents always have.

At about lunchtime, I suddenly realised it was Friday and that I had an appointment at the Well Woman Clinic at two o'clock. At one level, it seemed quite ridiculous to think of going to the appointment beaten up and just bereaved, my body aching from being thrown about and still a small but noticeable

bump on my forehead. So, I was going to ring up the clinic and postpone. But, then again, if I did that it would be something else to worry about so perhaps I should go. I called a taxi and then thought I'd cancel but then the taxi arrived and I found myself in it on the way to the hospital. It was my same old problem!

The clinic was nothing like any of my dreams. It was open, airy and friendly with light pouring in. The nurse on the desk looked me up and down suspiciously as a potential domestic abuse victim but said nothing and within about twenty minutes I was being checked over with a new machine which was clearly the clinic's pride and joy and used ultrasound waves to check my breasts. The technician was an enthusiast and explained how bouncing sound waves would show abnormalities separate from normal breast tissue. It was a lengthy and careful process which probably today would take about five minutes but there were constant reassurances and support.

Afterwards the nurses gave me a cup of tea and then I saw the doctor. He looked very young but seemed to know his stuff and he examined both my breasts carefully, especially the area where I had felt the lump, showed me the pictures of my breasts and explained that there was nothing there to worry about. The pictures and his follow-up indicated that it was simply a fatty lump of tissue which I was able to feel. To be on the safe side I was advised to come back for another screening in three months and that was it. I was going to live!

Often, with something like that you don't realise how worried you were until you're not worried so I left the clinic almost with a spring in my step but there was still a lot to do. The next few days were a chaotic whirl of meetings with the police to finalise detailed statements made by me and Ben. I also had to start to tell everyone around me what had happened as well as my parents, Gregory's father and, of course, the children. Ben decided that he should be out of the way and moved back into his and Sally's old house. I also think that rather like me he wanted to reclaim the space. Mum and dad's house was quite severely damaged by the fire which I started although I didn't tell them that I was the arsonist. They moved into my house and I have to say they came up trumps again.

Once he got the gist of the story, my dad said nothing about my earlier fabrications. I rather think that he had a quiet chat with the detective from Liverpool as well. Then, he got on with rebuilding his family and thinking about rebuilding his house. Looking back now, I think it all gave him a sense of purpose at a time when he was drifting into retirement.

The children were shocked and desperately upset. I kept the story as sanitised as possible but I think Sarah picked up more than James about their father's role. Gregory's funeral was a quiet occasion for close family only. The tame crematorium vicar who managed what passed for a service managed to create a eulogy which presented Gregory as a father devoted to providing for his children. He did it well.

I also went to Sally's funeral. This was rather more lavish simply because Ben suggested she would like a colourful send-off to reflect how she had been rather what she became. There were some cheerful hymns and optimistic readings but my heart ached for Ben lonely at the front with only his mother and Henry. We thought it was better that way. There was an impressive turnout of his school colleagues and it was good to see how popular he was. His unofficial absence from school was clearly glossed over

given the tragic death of his wife. In the next few weeks, we spoke every day on the phone. I think we both needed the mutual support and there is a kind of unspoken understanding that we were there for one another but in a way we hadn't quite yet worked out.

Somewhere along the line, autumn gave way to winter and Christmas approached. Although I knew that would be difficult I also hoped for some sort of closure. My mum cooked a Christmas lunch and Ben and Henry and his grandmother came over. It was a crush around the table but a friendly one and I saw the children smiling while Sarah helped Henry with a new toy letter board with look and say words. My dad and James were talking about what he would like to do in London because my parents' present to both children was a trip to London on the train for New Year and a couple of days seeing the sites. They asked me in advance whether I thought it was a good idea and if I wanted to come but I thought it was better if they planned it and took them.

'You know that there's a Safari Park near London. In Windsor I think,' I said to my mum.

She smiled. 'I think we might give that a miss,' she said.

After we cleared up and were sitting in that lazy post dinner haze, the kids were playing a new card game with my dad and Ben's mum. My mum was still pottering around in the kitchen. Across the room I caught Ben's eye and he smiled. I held his gaze and we shared that moment and the sense that things were getting better.

LATER

I was back in the surgery, in the waiting room with the old leather chairs with sunken seats and the outdated magazines all spread around. There was an operation in progress and the smell of formaldehyde, or perhaps it was ether, was heavy in the air. There were many metal surgical instruments: scalpels, large tweezers, shiny spatula shaped objects and other strangely shaped bits of medical apparatus arranged around the walls of the room. It seemed odd to keep them there.

A door flung open and the doctor came in, his long white coat flapping but this time it was stained and soaked with fresh blood. He beckoned me. I was there behind him in the doorway. There was a nurse leaning over a body on a makeshift operating table the kind you see in old films. She looked up and I saw the body beneath. It was Sally, her eyes glazed and staring. The doctor turned towards me menacingly and I saw Webber's thin little mouth and his vicious smile. I pushed him as he came towards me and he bounced away as if shot rather than shoved and staggered towards the fireplace. Flames lapped at his white coat and he tried to beat them down. I turned to run. I was in the corridor. There was smoke in my lungs and I could feel the heat of the flames. I pulled the door. It stuck. I pulled again but it didn't move. I could hear his steps behind me as I stood up tall and kicked the door with all my might. Instantly it flew open. There was space, wide-open space; hedgerows and birds flew by as I found myself soaring above them in the blue sky so that everything grew smaller and tinier beneath. I woke up suddenly, hot but also calm.

'You all right?' murmured Ben sleepily. 'You just kicked me in the leg.'

'Fine,' I replied, 'it was just a dream.' I climbed out of bed and went to get a drink of water and cool down. On the landing, I paused and peeped into the bedroom. Henry was snug under the duvet and Sarah and James were, from all accounts, having a wonderful time in London. I stood and listened to the silence and peeped through the curtains at the whiteness beyond.

I climbed back into bed and ran my hand along the line of Ben's chest. He rolled over towards me. I felt for him.

'It's snowing,' I said.

He replied half asleep as I pulled him closer. 'Happy New Year, Alison!'

'It is,' was all I had to say.