

**'A triumph'**  
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*Daily Express*

# Susan Hill

## The Vows of Silence

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A SIMON SERRAILLER CASE

## SUSAN HILL

Susan Hill has been a professional writer for over sixty years. Her books have won awards and prizes including the Whitbread, the John Llewellyn Rhys and the Somerset Maugham, and have been shortlisted for the Booker. Her novels include *Strange Meeting*, *I'm the King of the Castle*, *In the Springtime of the Year* and *The Mist in the Mirror*. She has also published autobiographical works and collections of short stories, as well as the Simon Serrailler series of crime novels. The play of her ghost story *The Woman in Black* is one of the longest-running in the history of London's West End. In 2020 she was awarded a damehood (DBE) for services to literature. She has two adult daughters and lives in north Norfolk.

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ALSO BY SUSAN HILL

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SUSAN HILL

# The Vows of Silence

A Simon Serrailer Case

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To  
The Wedding Guests

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# One

They had climbed for two hours. Then they had come into the low-hanging curtains of cloud. It had started to drizzle.

He opened his mouth to make some sour remark about the promise of a fine day, but, at the same moment, Iain turned his head a fraction to the left. Motioned with his forefinger.

Iain knew the hills and the weather of the hills, the subtle shifts of wind direction. Knew them better than anyone.

They stood, still, not speaking. There was a tension now. It hadn't been there minutes before.

Something.

The sun broke apart the cloud curtain, leaving it in tatters. The sun shone at first with a watery cast but then, like a man leaping out into view, full and strong. The corners of Iain's mouth twitched in a smile.

But still they stood. Motionless and silent. Waiting.

Iain lifted his binoculars to his eyes and looked from left to right, slowly, slowly.

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And he waited, watching the set of Iain's head, waiting for the moment.

Their clothes began to steam in the sun.

Iain lowered the glasses and nodded.

They were above the deer, and for another half-mile he saw nothing. But they were there of course. Iain knew. They went carefully, keeping upwind. The ground was stony here, easy to slip.

He felt the old excitement. These were the best moments. When you knew. You were this close to it, this close to having it in your sights, this close to the whole point and purpose and culmination of it all.

This close.

There was the faintest outbreath from Iain's pursed lips.

He followed the line of sight.

The stag was alone, halfway up the lower slope immediately west of where they were standing. It had sensed nothing – that much was clear for the moment. Keep it that way.

They dropped down and began to crawl, the soaking ground against their bellies, the sun on their backs. The midges came on with a vengeance, to find their way unerringly through chinks in clothing, brushing aside the barrier of citronella, but he was so keyed up now he barely noticed them. Later he would be driven mad.

They crawled for another ten minutes, dropping down slightly until they were level with the stag and a couple of hundred yards away.

Iain stopped. Lifted the glasses. They waited. Watched. Still as the stones.

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The sun was hot now. The wind had dropped altogether.

They began to inch maybe thirty yards further and the thirty yards took ten minutes; they barely moved. Just enough.

The stag lifted its head.

'The Old Man,' Iain whispered, so softly he could barely hear.

The oldest stag. Not as huge as those living on the lower ground, and without the vast antlers. But mighty enough. Old. Too old for another winter. He had too much respect for the beast to let that happen.

They were downwind and perhaps a hundred and fifty yards off. But then the stag shook its head, turned sideways, ambled a little way, though never turning its back. They waited.

Waited. The sun blazed. He boiled inside his wax jacket.

Then, casually, it turned and, in a breathtaking second, lifted its head and faced him full on. As if it knew. As if it had been expecting him. It positioned itself perfectly.

He unslipped his rifle. Loaded. Iain was watching intently through the glasses.

He balanced himself with care and then looked down the sights.

The old stag had not moved. Its head was raised higher now and it was looking straight at him.

It knew.

Iain waited, frozen to the glasses.

The world stopped turning.

He aimed for the heart.

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# *Two*

Dark blue jacket. Blue-and-white print skirt. Medium heels.

Scarf? Or the beads?

Beads.

Helen Creedy went into the bathroom and fiddled with her hair. Came out and caught sight of herself again in the full-length mirror. God, she looked – frumpish. That was the only word. As if she were going to a job interview.

She took off the skirt, blouse and jacket and started again.

It was very warm. Late September, an Indian summer.

Right. Pale grey linen trousers. Long linen jacket. The fuchsia shirt she hadn't yet worn.

Better? Yes. Earrings? Just plain studs.

There was a roar outside as Tom gave his motor-bike its usual final rev turning into the drive. The roar died. She heard the clunk of the metal rest going down onto the concrete.

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Just after six o'clock. She had hours – got dressed far too early.

She sat down on the end of her bed. She had been excited. Keyed up. Nervous, but with something like pleasure, anticipation. Now, it was as if the temperature had dropped. She felt sick. Anxious. Afraid. How absurd. Then she felt nothing but a draining tiredness so that she could not imagine ever having the energy to stand on her feet again.

The kitchen door slammed. She heard Tom drop his helmet and heavy leather gloves onto the floor.

Pale grey linen. New fuchsia shirt. She had even had her hair done. She wanted to lie down on her bed and sleep and sleep.

After another couple of minutes she went downstairs.

'Oh, good choice, Ma.' Elizabeth looked up from her French textbook.

Tom, as always when he got in, was at the toaster. Tom. He had said he was 'OK' about it. 'Fine' about it. But Helen still wondered.

She had nothing to worry about with Elizabeth, though – it was her daughter who had pushed her into this in the first place. 'It's six years since Dad. You won't have us here for much longer. You've got to get a life, Ma.'

But now she caught a look on Tom's face which was at odds with what he said. That he was 'OK' about it. 'Fine.'

'I thought you weren't meeting this guy till eight.'  
'Half seven.'

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‘All the same.’

Tom scraped what looked like half a pound of butter and a dollop of Marmite across four slices of toast.

The kitchen got the evening sun. It was warm. Elizabeth’s French books. Pens. Markers. Tom’s Marmite pot, lidless on the table. The smell of warm toast. And bike oil.

‘I can’t go,’ Helen said. ‘I can’t do this. What am I thinking?’

‘Oh God, not again, we’ve been through all this. Tom, tell her, back me up, will you?’

Tom shrugged.

His sister snorted impatiently. Put her pen down on *Eugénie Grandet*. ‘Right, let’s start again. Is it just first-night nerves or what?’

First-night nerves? How did that even begin to convey what she was feeling, sitting at the kitchen table in pale grey linen and a fuchsia shirt she had never worn and at least an hour too early?

It was a couple of months ago that Elizabeth had said, as they were walking Mutley, on the Hill, ‘I don’t think you’re meeting people.’

Helen had not understood. In her job as a pharmacist she met people every day.

‘I don’t mean that.’ Elizabeth had sat down and leaned her back against the Wern Stone. It was July. Mutley lay panting.

Helen had hesitated, standing, looking at the view over Lafferton so as not to look at her daughter. She sensed that something was important, or that things

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were about to change but she did not know what or how. It alarmed her.

‘Mum, don’t you think you might . . . well, meet someone – I mean, someone else. After Dad. Sit down, I’m getting a crick in my neck here.’

Helen sat on the dry grass. Elizabeth was looking straight at her. She had always been like this. Helen remembered the night she had been born: Lizzie had looked straight at her in this same, uncompromising way, even though newborn babies were not supposed to focus. She had done it as a small girl when asking a question. That straight, blue-eyed gaze that held you and did not let you off. Here it was now.

‘Before you know it I’ll be at Cambridge, fingers crossed. Tom will be off with his weirdos.’

‘And I’ll be on my own and I won’t be able to function is what you mean.’

‘Not exactly.’

‘What then?’

‘I worry that you’re missing out. You should have someone.’

‘I don’t want to be married again.’

‘How do you know? You may not want to in theory . . . but if you met someone.’

‘Well who’s to say I won’t?’

‘Not stuck in a windowless cubbyhole full of pill packets you won’t.’

‘I like my job.’

‘That’s not the point. Look, I think you should take a more proactive approach to this thing.’

‘There is no “thing”. Come on, Mutley’s too hot. So am I.’

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She stood. But when Lizzie also stood, there it was, the direct gaze. Not letting her off. Helen had turned and started back down the Hill so fast she almost slipped on the stony track.

She had not wanted to think about it. She wouldn't think about it. She was perfectly contented. She had met Terry when she was twenty-three, married him a year later, had the children, been happy. When Tom was six she had gone back to work, part-time. Life had been good.

When Terry had been diagnosed with malignant melanoma she was told he would have a couple of years, maybe more. He had had four months. Any sort of relationship with any other man had been – was – unthinkable. She realised as she reached the last few yards of the track that she was angry, angry and in some sort of panic.

'I think –' Elizabeth said, catching up with her.

'Well, I don't. Leave it. It is not a conversation I am prepared to have.' She had spoken harshly but Elizabeth had simply gazed at her for a long moment without replying.

Two days later, a brochure came through the post.

*'My name is Laura Brooke. I run the Laura Brooke agency for men and women wishing to meet a partner hand-picked for them. I do not believe people can be matched by computers. I act as a friend. I only take on clients with whom I feel I can succeed and I only introduce clients to one another after extensive interviews and my own personal and careful consideration. I give*

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*clients my time and expertise to find them . . .'*

She had stuffed the brochure in the bin.

The following day in the hairdresser's, she was startled to find herself wondering if people really did meet successfully through agencies or via the Internet, if the whole thing was possibly not the con she had always assumed it to be. Sad people went to dating agencies, sad or sinister people. She could understand why you might join something or other if you were, say, new to a town and had no way of making friends – a club, a sports group, a night class. But friendship was one thing, this was another. She had friends. What she didn't have was enough time to spend with them.

She was forty-six. By the time she was fifty Tom and Elizabeth would have left home. She would have her job and also more time for her friends. She would have the St Michael's Singers and she might rejoin the Lafferton Players. She would volunteer for something.

Terry was irreplaceable. His death had devastated her and she still felt like someone who had lost a limb. Nothing would ever change that. Nothing and no one.

'I'm not going,' she said now. 'I can't do this.'

'You are and you can, if I have to push you there.'

'Elizabeth . . .'

'Once, you said, just once when someone seemed really worth meeting. And he does. We agreed. Tom, didn't we agree?'

Tom put his hands up. 'Leave me out of this, OK?' he said, banging out of the room.

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'He doesn't like it,' Helen said.

'He doesn't like anything that isn't about his own peculiar world. Ignore him.'

'Why are you pushing me into something I don't want?'

'You *do* want it. You want to get out of here, you want to open yourself up to something new. You want a fresh start.'

'It's only one date.'

'Exactly!'

A part of her knew that Elizabeth was right. Helen had thought about it a good deal, once she had allowed the idea house room. She was fearful of being too much alone when her children had left home, she was too young to be in a rut, she needed to open herself to something new. All the same, to her, meeting someone through an agency or a dating website, or by answering an advert, was an admission of failure. And she wasn't sure she even wanted to succeed. Besides, there was a stigma, when someone of her age did this.

'Rubbish,' Lizzie had said.

Of course it was a stigma. If she did – by remote chance – meet someone through a dating agency, and that someone came to be important, she would never be able to tell anyone how they had got together. She would cut out her tongue rather than admit it.

'I don't get it.' But that was Elizabeth and she was her daughter.

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'I'll send a text message and say I'm not well.'

'That is absolutely pathetic. For God's sake, Ma, this is a drink in a pub –'

'A bar.'

'A drink. A chat. You can leave it there. Oh God, we've been through all this – if you get the feeling he's a mass murderer, you send Tom a text and he'll be there in five.'

'I won't think he's a mass murderer. He sounds . . .'

'Like a nice bloke.'

'Yes.'

'Yes.'

'You must have wanted to go through with it earlier, you got ready hours ago.'

'Is this too dressed up?'

'No, it's great. That wasn't my point.'

There was a long silence.

'I do want to go. I want to. But I don't want to. I just haven't done anything like it before and it's so many years since I even had an evening out with a man . . .'

Elizabeth got up, came round the table and gave her a hug, bending over her as if she were the mother, Helen the child.

'You look great and it's going to be fine. And if it isn't – so what? What have you lost? One evening.'

*'EastEnders.'*

'Well, that's crap at the moment so there you are.'

Elizabeth settled down to *Eugénie Grandet* again. The room went quiet.

'Lizzie . . .'

'Mother – go away!'

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She had retrieved the agency brochure from the waste-paper bin. But she felt uncertain about being interviewed by someone with the firm intention of matching her with a man on their books, particularly when she didn't even know if she wanted to meet anyone at all.

Which was how she had come upon the website *peoplemeetingpeople.com*. Because she would admit to that. Yes. She would agree that she was a person wanting to meet people.

It was quite straightforward. You joined the site for a fee which was not too expensive, not too cheap. She had done that finally one evening when she was on her own. You went step by step. You didn't have to commit yourself to too much too soon. She felt happy with that.

She put in her name – first name only – and age. The next stage was to narrow down the kind of 'people' she wanted to meet. *Age group*. That was surprisingly easy. Between forty-five and sixty. *Marital status*. She ticked *Widowed*. Then *Divorced*. Not sure about divorced but so many people were now, and the reasons were less – what? Sinister? Worrying? She did not tick *Single*. Few really eligible men were still single after forty-five.

She entered her geographical area. Narrowed it down a bit.

*Occupation*. *Professional*. *Media-related*. *Public services*. *Administrative*. *Business*. *Farming and countryside*. Almost any of those. She could probably find something to chat about even to a farmer. She ticked each box.

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She had expected there to be more stages, more questions, but she was asked if she would now like to see photographs and brief details of anyone matching her outline.

She went to make a coffee. Somehow, photographs of people, real people, took it one big step away from being a game, made it serious, committed her.

No. It did not commit her. It was just photographs. And oddly enough, she was excited. Who would she see? What kind of men? They would probably all be bald. Or with huge bushy beards. Or small eyes. ('Never trust a man with small eyes.' Her mother.) Or bad teeth. Or . . .

She took her coffee to the table, set it down and decisively clicked on the 'Yes' button.

It was the first one. How do you tell that you like someone from a photograph? How do you know that you want to meet them?

He was fifty-two. He had brown hair. He had a warm expression. Slightly diffident smile. Nothing especially distinctive. But a good face. Good-looking? Yes, but not overwhelmingly handsome. It was his expression. Warm. Trustworthy. Yes.

She glanced at the others. One was out at once – the bushy beard. Another was too old. Perfectly OK but she couldn't believe he was sixty or under. The last one was fine. Nothing against him. But when she looked back at the first there was no contest.

*'Click beside any photograph if you would like to know more about this person.'*

She clicked.

*'Phil is Head of History at a boys' school. He has been*

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*widowed for five years and has two grown-up sons. His interests include cooking, cricket, books and ornithology. He loves his job and has many friends but since his sons left home he has felt the lack of a special companion in his life.*

*If you want to send your profile and photograph to Phil, click [HERE](#).*

*If you would like to leave a voicemail for Phil, click [HERE](#).'*

She clicked twice.

# Three

'There is not any such word as plam.'

'There is *so* such a word as plam.'

'You're making it up. Uncle Si, isn't he making it up?'

'Mummy . . .'

'Don't ask me,' Cat Deerbon said, dropping a handful of walnuts into the salad bowl, 'you know I can't do Scrabble.'

'You don't "do" Scrabble, duh. You play it.'

'Sam, how many times have I told you, "duh" – and especially "duh" with that face – is incredibly insulting and you do not do or say it.'

Sam sighed and turned back to the board. 'Plam,' he said, 'is a word.'

'What does it mean then?'

'It's . . . the sort of way Australian emu birds land. They go "plam".'

Simon Serrailer stood up with a shout of laughter. 'Brilliant, Sam. I give you ten for Creative Cheating.' He wandered over to the other side of the kitchen and

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dipped his finger into the salad dressing. 'Needs more lemon.'

'I doubt it.'

'And a pinch of sugar.'

'Why not make it yourself?'

'Can't be arsed.'

'Mummy, Uncle Simon said –'

'I know, and it is a most unattractive expression. Don't say it again, please.' Cat glared at her brother.

'You've got bossier. That's Australia for you. Loud, bossy women.'

Cat threw a piece of lettuce at him. Simon ducked. The lettuce landed wetly on the floor.

'God, I love it. Love it, love it, love it.' Simon threw himself onto the old kitchen sofa. 'I wish you knew what it was like when you weren't here and those people were and I couldn't come and –'

'You told us,' Sam said, tipping the Scrabble letters into their green drawstring bag, 'how awful it was.'

'Yes, about a million zillion times.'

'So you missed us. That figures.'

'Si, will you open that bottle? Sam, please put the mats on the table. Hannah –'

'I have to go to the loo, I absolutely-scootly have to.'

'Mum, you have to stop her doing that, she's always doing it, she does it to get out of things, she doesn't need to go to the loo at all.'

'Stop whingeing.'

Simon rummaged in the drawer for the corkscrew. 'You know,' he said to Cat, 'it is "absolutely-scootly" typical of Dad. It really is.'

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'He can see us when he gets back. Don't make a thing of it.'

Richard Serrailier, Cat and Simon's father, had announced that he was taking a holiday just when the Deerbon family returned from Australia.

'But he doesn't go on holidays. He hates holidays. And what's he going to do in Madeira for two weeks, for God's sake?'

'Soak up the sun?'

'He hates sun.'

'He just didn't want to make a song and dance about us coming home after nine months – he wants to pretend we haven't been away at all, and by the time he gets back it'll feel as if we haven't. Actually,' Cat put the salad bowl on the table, 'it feels like that already.'

'God, sis, am I glad you're home.'

She gave him a brief smile, before bending to take the fish out of the oven. 'Give Chris a shout, will you? He's probably fallen asleep with Felix. Chris does jet lag like nobody else.'

But Chris Deerbon walked into the kitchen as she spoke, rubbing his hand through his hair. 'I think I must have gone to sleep.' He looked puzzled.

'So long as Felix has too.'

'Half an hour ago.' He poured the wine into glasses and handed one to Simon.

'Here's to home.'

'In Australia, we had supper outside nearly all the time. We had barbecues on the beach. We had a barbecue in the garden, it went with the house. Everyone there has barbecues – they call them barbies, like Hannah's puke dolls.'

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'Wish you were still there, Sam?'

'Sort of.'

'I don't,' Hannah said. 'I missed my friends and my pony and my bed and I missed Uncle Simon most of everything.'

Sam made a loud sucking noise.

Simon looked round the table at them all. He felt a burst of pure and extraordinary happiness.

'Do you get a lot more money being a Detective Chief Superintendent?' Sam asked.

'I get a bit more.'

'Do you get to do more interesting things? More important cases?'

'Some. My really important cases are likely to be with SIFT though.'

'Why?'

'We get called in precisely because they're important –'

'Serious Incident Flying Taskforce. I thought everything a policeman did was serious.'

'It is.'

'Then I don't see –'

'Eat your fish, Sam.'

'Is it because they've had no luck solving them, so you're their last resort?'

'Not usually. They might need more minds focused on something, if it's very difficult. They might need a detached point of view and a fresh eye, they might need us because their own resources are becoming overstretched – all sorts of reasons. The best thing for me about SIFT is that we're out there *doing*, not sitting behind a desk. The higher you get in rank, the easier

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it is to get trapped in an office all day.'

'In Australia, the police wear fleeces and baseball caps.'

'Ever seen your uncle in a baseball cap, Sam?'

'He'd be cool.'

'This,' Hannah said, 'is blah-blah boring talk.'

'Go to bed, then. You shouldn't be at grown-up supper if you get bored with grown-up conversation, you should be playing puke pink Barbies.'

Cat sighed. The bickering between her son and daughter had got worse in Australia.

Wondering now if it was to be a permanent and tiresome feature of their relationship, she turned to her own brother. 'Did we wind each other up like this?'

'No. Ivo wound me up. I wound Ivo up. Not you.'

Cat had spent two separate periods with their triplet brother, who worked as a flying doctor in Australia, and had come away each time feeling that they might well not be related at all. Ivo seemed to be from a different planet. He was brash, stubborn, opinionated, tough. She had left him both times with relief and some bewilderment.

'Dad,' she said now, her fork to her mouth. 'I suppose that's the answer. It was staring at me. Ivo is like Dad.'

'Could have told you that,' Chris said.

After the children had gone to bed, they opened another bottle and Mephisto the cat bumped in through the flap and settled on Simon's stomach.

'Did this boy take to strangers living in his house?'

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‘Apparently he was absolutely fine.’

‘Traitor,’ Simon said, stroking him. Mephisto half closed his eyes. ‘How have they settled back to school?’

‘Hannah strolled in as if she’d never been away. Sam a bit less easily. His class has split into different groups so he’s lost some of his old friends and there are new boys . . . but he’ll be fine. It’s sport, sport, sport now anyway – he was rarely within four walls all the time we were in Sydney.’

‘You?’

‘Oh, I was within four walls. Chris and I were working, you know.’

‘I mean coming back.’

‘Good. Great in fact.’

‘OKish,’ Chris said. He had been the one to press for them to take the sabbatical in Australia, the one who had extended it from the original six months. The one who had been loath to return. ‘But at least we’ve come back to find that, at last, the role of the GP is getting more recognition.’

‘You mean double the money for half the work. No nights, no weekends, no bank holidays. Jolly nice – I take your point.’

Cat groaned. ‘Si, this is an area where angels fear to tread. We’ve had so many arguments about it we’ve made a pact: Chris and I don’t discuss the new GP contract.’

Cat had always been bitterly opposed to agencies covering nights and weekends for the practice, other than on a locum basis to give her and Chris an occasional rest. She had come back ready to do battle

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to retain her right to visit her own patients out of hours, only to discover that not only was Chris against their taking that work back in-house, but so was every other GP in the area. It was impossible for her to do out-of-hours by herself and so, resentfully, she had had to concede defeat.

‘For now,’ she had muttered. ‘But I’ll find a way. I hate leaving my patients to the mercy of some doctor flown in from abroad at huge cost to cover a few nights here or even worse, someone on call from fifty miles away. It isn’t safe, it isn’t right, it is also overstretching the ambulance service and overloading hospital A & E and it is not conducive to patient welfare and peace of mind.’

But the arguments over it had become too angry.

She and Chris had agreed to go back to work and accept the status quo, focusing on catching up with changes and reacquainting themselves with patients, staff and all the routine of a busy surgery.

‘Seen a lot of Dad?’ Cat asked now.

Simon made a face. ‘Took him out to a pub lunch a couple of times. Dropped by, but he was often out. I hate going to Hallam House now.’

‘I know you do, but with us away and no Mum he needed you a lot more.’

‘Not so’s you’d notice. I took flowers up to Martha’s grave on her anniversary. I rang Dad – thought we could meet up. He wasn’t in. He never mentioned it. I don’t think he’s thought about Martha since she died. Or about Mother come to that.’

‘That’s unfair, Simon.’

‘Is it?’

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Simon had been close to Martha, their handicapped sister, close to Meriel, their mother. Their deaths had been two blows from which he knew he had not recovered and probably never would.

It was easier for Cat. She had Chris, she had three children and she had escaped to Australia.

Escaped? He looked at his sister now, curled in the sagging kitchen armchair with her legs under her, holding a glass of wine. She looked well. But to call it an escape – for her – was wrong. He knew that if Chris had not pushed, she would never have left Lafferton. Cat was like him, a home bird. She seemed entirely settled and content to be back in the farmhouse.

Simon closed his eyes, stroking Mephisto until the cat's purr was like the throbbing of an engine. He realised exactly how miserable his months without the sanctuary of this house and this family had been.

He let out a deep sigh of contentment.

## Four

She didn't have time to look around and take anything in – the people sitting at tables or standing near the bar – because as she went inside he was there, saying, 'Helen? Yes, of course you're Helen. Let's get out of here, it's packed, this was a thoroughly bad idea.'

And he took her elbow and guided her through the door. Outside it was a warm September evening. Dark. The *Old Ship* was strung with fairy lights.

It had taken ten days. She had sent him her details, received his, sent a voicemail message, got one back. It felt right. She was comfortable.

Phil had suggested they meet at this pub in the centre of Lafferton. She hadn't known it, but both Elizabeth and Tom had said, 'Oh, that place is OK. You'll be fine there.' So here she was.

'Let's get right out of Lafferton. Do you know the *Croxley Oak*? The food is good so it won't be empty but we should be able to hear ourselves think.'

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‘Shall I follow you then?’

‘What? No, no, I’ll drive us back here, you can pick up your car later.’

It wasn’t the plan but she was swept along by him, across the car park, into a dark-coloured Peugeot, clicking the seat belt and then off, out of town, on the road, heading somewhere else. It had happened before she could disagree. The country road was dark. Once, a car overtook them too fast. Dark road again.

‘Helen, I’m sorry . . . rushing you off like that. What must you think? I just can’t bear overcrowded bars, but more to the point, some of my students were there. I wasn’t going to meet you for the first time in full view of them.’

‘No, it’s fine. Fine.’

The car seemed new. Smelled new. She clutched her bag. Her mobile was safely inside it. After a few minutes she glanced at him sideways, very quickly. The photo had been pretty good. He was not as tall as she’d imagined, but he was not a small man either. She had a phobia about small men.

‘What have you been doing today?’ he asked. ‘Tell me from the beginning.’

To her surprise, she did. They sped through the darkness, away from town, away from Tom and Elizabeth, away from everything familiar, away from the place she had told them she would be for the evening, and so, to quell the anxiety she felt riding at night in a fast car with a stranger, she talked through every detail of her day.

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The *Croxley Oak* had the tawny atmosphere only some good country pubs acquire, mellow, with the pleasant hum of conversation. Helen drank lime and soda, then a glass of white wine; Phil had a single half of bitter and then went on to ginger beer. And they talked. After almost an hour, they ordered home-baked ham with chips and salad, and the chips came thick and hand-cut, the ham in chunky slices, sweet and lean.

He was talking about some difficulties with one of his school's department heads, how everyone had to handle her tactfully, how she upset students. It had arisen because Helen had told him about a colleague who had always been exceptionally conscientious and had recently become slack and careless, worrying everyone because it was so out of character. She told Phil she couldn't take an interest in cricket, though she had tried hard for Tom's sake when he had been in the school team; he expressed total ignorance of choral music when he learned she was a member of the St Michael's Singers.

Now, as he shook his head over a remark the department head had made that day to a pupil, Helen looked across the table at Philip Russell and felt an extraordinary sense of having known him all her life. It was as though he had been there, familiar, trusted, even while she had been married to Terry and bringing up their children, somehow living a parallel life which was interwoven with hers. The feeling startled her and in a second it had gone, to be replaced by the knowledge that she was simply enjoying her evening and his company.

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‘Would you like a pudding? Coffee?’

‘I’d like some tea.’

‘Good, so would I. Isn’t it great that you can actually get tea in pubs now and no one thinks it odd?’ He made to get up, then said, ‘Helen, do your family know where you are?’

‘They know I’m meeting you.’

She felt embarrassed. How could she say, Yes, and my son is sitting at home waiting for a call to tell him to come and rescue me? ‘Why do you ask?’

He laughed, looking embarrassed himself, and went off to order their tea.

The pub was emptying before they paused in talk about their families – how her Tom was one of those teenagers struggling to find a meaning and a spiritual dimension in his life, and how she worried that most of his friends seemed to be so odd; how his elder son Hugh was spending a year teaching in Africa and the younger, also Tom, was at drama school – against his father’s better judgement. ‘But I’ll support him all the same. I have to. You have to make up for a lot, don’t you find? Make up for that huge gap in their lives.’ His wife had been killed in an appalling electrical accident in the house. He had stated the fact in a way that forbade further enquiry.

‘It’s rather late,’ Helen said.

‘I know, but we’re grown-ups. Nobody’s going to tell us off.’

‘Oh yes they are!’

He held open his car door. I am enjoying myself, she thought again. I haven’t enjoyed myself like this for too long.

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At her car, in the now deserted yard of the *Old Ship*, he said, 'Thank you, Helen. I'll phone you if I may?'

Turning out into the street and on her route home, glancing in her rear-view mirror as she drove away, she saw that he waited and watched.

## Five

Melanie Drew was so happy. It was very quiet, very peaceful, and the early autumn sun was coming in through the window onto the table at which she sat with a packet of thank-you notes. She had written two and had worked out that she still had forty-two to go.

The previous day, a delivery van had arrived from the company, *everythingwedding.com*, with which they had had their list and it had taken two men the best part of forty minutes to bring all the parcels and boxes out and up the two flights of stairs to the flat. They had been perfectly cheerful about it, though, and after it was all done Melanie had made tea and given them each a piece of wedding cake and they had toasted her in the new blue mugs with white stars.

Now, she took an envelope and wrote on it – but not the address of the aunt who had sent them a hundred pounds.

She wrote:

Melanie Drew.

Melanie Drew.

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Melanie Drew.  
Mr and Mrs Craig Drew.  
Mrs Craig Drew.  
Craig and Melanie Drew.  
Craig and . . .

What a waste of an envelope! But she sat in the sun looking at her writing and she couldn't stop smiling. She hadn't been able to stop smiling since the wedding two weeks ago.

Now, though, the honeymoon was over, Craig had gone back to work at the estate agent's yesterday, she had another couple of days off but then she would be heading for the reception desk at Price and Fairbrother. Tonight, they had more wedding presents to open. The flat suddenly seemed very small. The spare room was where Craig wanted to keep stuff like his Wellington boots and waterproof jackets and mittens. Now, it was so full of boxes they could barely open the door. And then there was a mountain of wrapping paper, tissue paper and cardboard to dispose of. Craig was keen on recycling and determined to find out the greenest way of binning it; Melanie had muttered about a bonfire.

'Do you know what you're saying there, Mel? Bonfire? You can't have a bonfire. It adds to the carbon levels in the atmosphere.'

'Oh. Right.'

'You should be more concerned.'

'I'm concerned about getting my spare room back, that's all.'

It had not been a row though. They never rowed. They agreed to differ.

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She smiled now and wrote *Mrs Melanie Anita Drew* three times on the envelope.

The sun was warm as well as bright. The flat faced west so it would be like this when they got in from work and for a lot of the evening, right through the spring and summer. They had been lucky to get it, and for the price, though they had worked like slaves for the previous six months replacing the kitchen, taking up ancient lino and rotten floorboards, pulling down sixties wood-effect panelling, ripping out old gas fires, and redecorating. It had paid off. It looked fresh and bright and new and Melanie was delighted with it all. Married life, she thought now. Married life. She and Craig had known one another for three years but never actually lived together, so everything was new, everything was fun, as well as, occasionally, slightly scary.

She looked around the room. Then back to the envelopes. Thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you. Midnight-blue Le Creuset cookware, pale blue Nigella Lawson kitchenware, china with hearts and stars, soft white fluffy bathrobes and towels, desk lamps, cutlery, mirrors, clocks, and a massive chandelier made out of tooled wire and hanging crystal beads that she had put down on the wedding list because it looked fun but which was so expensive she had not really thought anyone would ever buy it. Her godmother, who was an actress and liked what she called 'a bit of OTT', had. The box it came in could have housed a new fridge. The moment it arrived Melanie had had misgivings. Craig hated it.

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But it didn't matter. It was a laugh. It was daft and she was happy. Happy, happy, happy.

She put aside the thank-you notes and opened her laptop. The wedding pictures had gone up on the photographer's website and she had looked through them several times since they had got home, revelling in every detail. She was still surprised at how much she had missed on the day itself, and also, of course, how much happened that she had never got to see at all – Craig and his brother and ushers arriving at the church, the bridesmaids getting out of the car and her sister Gaynor almost measuring her length and her posy having to be reassembled. They had made a beautiful collage of the reception which by some clever trick moved and changed as you watched – so that every time Mel opened up the website she saw something she hadn't previously noticed. This time, it was the expression on Adrian's face, as he was waiting to make his best man speech: he looked as if he were headed for the gallows.

She also had two disks of pictures taken by friends, and she planned to post the best of these on the wedding-day-and-honeymoon website she had set up. That way some of the family on her father's side, who hadn't been able to join them, could share the day.

She had taken a lot of persuading to have a September wedding. May or June had been her choice, but she'd been shocked at how booked up everywhere got so far ahead and September was the earliest they could organise. Which had turned out well because most of May and June had been cold and

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wet and September, including their wedding day, gloriously sunny.

She sat back and closed her eyes and let the sun warm her face, remembering. It was odd. Time did strange things. The day had passed so quickly, in a flash really, and yet ever since it seemed to have expanded and grown so that she could relive it in slow motion, going over every little detail again and again. She thought that Craig probably didn't. Not that he hadn't enjoyed it, because she knew he had. But his attitude was: Right, that's that, it was great, so what's next?

If she was honest, it not only puzzled her, she was mildly upset.

'Well, he's a man, isn't he?' Gaynor had said. 'Get over it.'

If she didn't have to go back to work, she could imagine spending a great many more afternoons like this, looking at the photographs, unpacking and sorting the wedding presents, writing thank-you cards and then starting to get supper ready with all the new kitchen things. She enjoyed her job. They were a nice firm to work for, she liked everyone there and she knew perfectly well that once the novelty of all this had faded she would have gone off her head with boredom alone in the flat all day. All the same, just another couple of weeks would have been nice.

Meanwhile, there was tonight. She was making a Thai chicken recipe with three fresh vegetables and a citrus and walnut salad. Bread. Cheese from the new *Just Cheese* in the Old Market Square – Lafferton's

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latest mall of small shops which were very tempting and very expensive. She got up to check on the recipe to see how much longer the chicken had to marinate and discovered that she had forgotten to buy walnuts. That was the sort of thing you could do when you had the day at home to yourself – shop in a leisurely fashion and pop out again if you found you had forgotten something. The flat was less than ten minutes by car from the supermarket on the Bevham Road. She could get walnuts and a bottle of wine. Wandering round the supermarket at half past three in the afternoon was part of the fun of these last days off. Part of being happy.

Melanie laughed at herself as she picked up her handbag and keys. Being happy because you're going to the supermarket in the middle of the day – 'How sad is that?' as her teenage stepsister Chloë would say.

Chloë. Who would have thought that Chloë would have looked like that as a bridesmaid – her hair up, skin glowing and a smile like half a melon. Chloë, who had sworn she would die rather than wear sugar-almond pink and who had behaved like an angel and seemed to have grown up to become a stunning young woman – for the day, at least.

Melanie laughed again as she went out.

The street was quiet. The sun had made the inside of her car too hot and as she didn't have anything so fancy as air conditioning, she opened the windows and door and waited for it to cool down. It was while she waited that she saw him, loitering along the

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opposite pavement, in the shade. He stopped to light a cigarette, his head turned away from her.

It struck her that she might have forgotten to double-lock their front door. There had been burglaries in the area, a spate of them, though mostly of the detached houses and ground-floor flats. Had she double-locked it?

God, was she going to turn into one of those women who had to go back nine times to make sure they'd turned the gas off and another three to double-check that the light wasn't on in the bathroom?

No, she was not.

She started up the engine and when she looked again the man had gone.

In the supermarket she picked up a copy of the local paper to read over tea in the café. And there it was. She hadn't even remembered they had sent in the details.

The photograph was quite large on the page because there were only two other weddings. It was the one of her looking adoringly at Craig, the one which Gaynor had pronounced 'Yuck'. But Mel liked it. Her dress looked its best, the silver beading shining and the silver quills in her hair looking as original as she had hoped. She had never seen anyone else wearing them. Pity about the lilies which the florist had foisted on her. They looked huge and stiff, the stalks too long, and she hadn't known how to hold them, up or down or what. They weren't like flowers, they were like something man-made. In the newspaper photograph they jumped out at you.

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Otherwise, though, it was nice. It was very, very nice.

*Melanie Calthorpe and Craig Drew*

*The marriage took place, conducted by Senior Registrar Carol Latter, between Melanie, elder daughter of Neil Calthorpe of Lafferton, and Mrs Bev Smith of Lancaster, and Craig, youngest son of Alan and Jennifer Drew of Foxbury. The bride wore a strapless dress in white jersey crêpe with a bodice encrusted with crystals and silver beading and silver quills in her hair, and carried a bouquet of calla lilies. She was attended by Gaynor Calthorpe, bride's sister, Chloë Calthorpe, bride's stepsister, and Andrea Stannard, bride's friend, who wore burgundy off-the-shoulder dresses and carried posies of ivory roses with silver-ribbon accents. Lily Mars, bride's god-daughter, was the flower girl in a silver satin and tulle dress and carrying a basket of burgundy rosebuds. Mr Adrian Drew, bridegroom's brother, was best man, Carl Forbes and Peter Shoemaker, bridegroom's old school friends, were ushers and the reception was held at the Maltdown Hotel. The couple honeymooned in Gran Canaria and have made their home in Lafferton, where the bridegroom works as an estate agent with Biddle Francis and the bride as a receptionist for Price and Fairbrother, Solicitors.*

She read it twice, read it again, and on the way out bought six more copies of the paper. In the car, she sent a text message to Craig and then drove home feeling as she had felt when her father had pushed her

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on the park swings so high she had thought that if she let go of the chains on either side she would simply fly up and up to heaven.

She came out of the brightly sunlit street into the dark hall of the flats and could barely see. The light on the first-floor landing had gone again. Individual flat owners were responsible for keeping the lights working on their own floor, changing the bulbs when necessary. Mel was annoyed. The people on this floor always seemed to be leaving their landing in darkness and it was dangerous. She would have to ask Craig to tackle them about it again.

It was only as she reached her own floor that she realised she had left the newspapers on the back seat of the car. She paused. Go on in, put the shopping away and get them later? Go back now? No, go on in, dump the shopping and then run back down again.

She unlocked their own door. The hall was bright from the late-afternoon sun streaming in through the window of the kitchen opposite. She set the bags down. She would cut out two of the newspaper articles and post them straight off to Nan and to little Lily's family. Cut one out for her wedding book. She'd have time to do that later while she was waiting for things to cook.

She went out of the flat and down the stairs at a run, almost tripping on the top step of the landing without a light. She had found a parking space a few yards up the street. Fished out keys. Newspapers. Yes, on the back seat. Waved to the elderly lady who sat in her chair at the window of the bungalow opposite for most of the day. Locked the car. She was

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out of breath. Unfit. The swimsuit had better come out again. There had been so much to do in the run-up to the wedding she had let her daily swim go – and she felt the difference.

Back to the house. She reached up to the keypad. But the front door was ajar. The people in the bottom flat often forgot to make sure it was properly shut and it made her mad. What was the point of having a front-door security lock to which everyone had the pass number if half the time it was not properly shut?

She trudged up the stairs. Along the unlit landing again. On up to their own floor.

She wished she hadn't had those calla lilies, they just overpowered the photographs, great stiff waxen things. It wasn't like her to be bullied, but she had been at the end of her tether, trying to find the right shoes all day, and somehow the florist had found a chink. Maybe she got a special deal on calla lilies. There certainly seemed to be an awful lot of them about. She had hated them on sight, but it was too late then and of course they didn't spoil the day. They did spoil the photographs though.

'Oh get over it,' she said aloud.

Had she left the door of their flat on the latch?

It was odd.

When she pushed it open.

In that split second, Melanie Drew registered that it was odd. Minutes ago, when she had dropped the bags there, the sunlight had been flooding from the kitchen directly into the hall. Now it was blocked by something. There was a darkness. A shadow. There was no sunlight. Odd.

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