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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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The Various Haunts of Men

A Simon Serrailler Case

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For
My dearly loved Ghost

The various haunts of men
Require the pencil, they defy the pen.

George Crabbe, *The Borough*

The Tape

Last week I found a letter from you. I didn't think I had kept any of them. I thought I had destroyed everything from you. But this one had somehow been overlooked. I found it among some tax returns which were more than seven years old and so could be thrown away. I wasn't going to read it. As soon as I saw your handwriting, I felt revulsion. I threw it in the bin. But later I retrieved it and read it. You complained several times that I never told you anything. 'You haven't told me anything at all since you were a little boy,' you wrote.

If only you knew how little I had told you even then. You never knew one quarter of it.

Once I had read your letter, I began to think and to realise that now I can tell you things. I need to tell you. It will be good to make some confessions at last. I have held on to some secrets for far too long.

After all, you cannot do anything about them now.

Since I found your letter, I have spent a good deal

of time sitting quietly, remembering, and making notes. It feels as if I am about to tell a story.

So let me begin.

The first thing I must tell you is that very early on I learned how to lie. There may have been other things I lied about but the first I remember is that I lied about the pier. I went there, when I told you that I had not, and not just once. I went often. I saved money, or else I found it in the gutter. I was always looking in gutters, just in case. A few times, if there was no other way, I stole the money; a pocket, a purse, a handbag – they were generally lying about. I am still ashamed of having done that. There are few things more despicable than stealing money.

But, you see, I had to keep going back to watch the Execution. I couldn't keep away for long. When I had watched it, I was satisfied for a few days, but then the need to see it began again, like an itch.

You remember that peep show, don't you? The coin went into the slot and rolled down until it hit the hidden shutter that made the whole thing start. First, the light went on. Then, the three little figures came jerking into the execution chamber: the parson with his surplice and book, the hangman and, between them, the condemned man. They stopped. The parson's book jerked up and his head nodded up and down, and, after that, the noose dropped down and the executioner jerked forward; his arms went up and took the noose and put it round the man's neck. Then the trapdoor opened beneath his feet and he dropped and swung there for a few seconds, before the light snapped off and it was over.

I have no idea how many times I went to watch it, but if I did know, I would tell you, because I mean to tell you everything now.

It only stopped when they took the machine away. One day I went down to the pier and it just wasn't there. I want to explain how I felt. Angry – yes, I was certainly angry. But I also felt a sort of desperate frustration, which went on boiling inside me for a long time. I didn't know how to get rid of it.

It has taken me all these years to find out.

Does it seem strange to you that I have never seen the point of money, since then, never had much use for it beyond what is merely necessary? I earn quite a lot but I don't care for it. I give much of it away. Perhaps you knew all along that I disobeyed and went down to the pier, because you once said, 'I know everything.' I hated that. I needed secrets, things that were mine only and never yours.

But now, I like talking to you. I want you to know things and if I still have secrets – and I do – I want to share them, just with you. And now, I can choose to tell you and how much I tell you and when. Now, I am the one who decides.

One

A Thursday morning in December. Six thirty. Still dark. Foggy. It had been that sort of autumn, mild, damp, lowering to the spirit.

Angela Randall was not afraid of the dark, but driving home at this dreich hour and at the end of a difficult shift, she found the ectoplasmic fog unnerving. In the town centre people were already about but what lights there were seemed distant, small furred islands of amber whose glow gave neither illumination nor comfort.

She drove slowly. It was the cyclists she feared most, appearing suddenly in front of her, out of the darkness and fog, usually without any reflective strips or clothing, quite often even without lights. She was a competent but not a confident driver. The dread, not of crashing into another car, but of running over a cyclist or a pedestrian, was always with her. She had had to steel herself to learn to drive at all. Sometimes, she thought it was the bravest thing she would ever be called upon to do. She knew what horror and shock and grief death in a road accident brought to those still living. She could still hear the sound

of the knock on the front door, still see the outline of police helmets through the frosted pane of glass.

She had been fifteen. Now, she was fifty-three. She found it hard to remember her mother alive, well and happy, because those images had been blotted out for ever by that other – of the so loved face, bruised and stitched, and the small, flat body beneath the sheet, in the cold blue-white mortuary light. There had been no one else to identify Elsa Randall. Angela was the next of kin. They had been a close unit and everything to each other. Her father had died before she was a year old. She had no photographs of him. No memories.

At fifteen, she had been left entirely, devastatingly alone, but through the following forty years, she had come to make the best of it. No parents, siblings, aunts or cousins. The idea of an extended family was unimaginable to her.

Until the last couple of years, she thought she had not only made a pretty good fist of living alone, but that she would never, now, want to do anything else. It was her natural state. She had a few friends, she enjoyed her job, she had taken one Open University degree and had just embarked on a second. Above all, she blessed the day, twelve years ago, that she had at last been able to move out of Bevham, having saved enough to add to the sale of her flat there and buy the small house some twenty miles away in Lafferton.

Lafferton suited her perfectly. It was small, but not too small, had wide, leafy avenues and some pretty Victorian terraces and, in Cathedral Close, fine Georgian houses. The cathedral itself was magnificent – she attended services there from time to time – and there were quality shops, pleasant cafés. Her mother would

also have said, with that funny, prim little smile, that Lafferton had 'a nice class of resident'.

Angela Randall felt comfortable in Lafferton, settled, at home. Safe. When she had fallen in love earlier in the year, she had at first been bewildered, a stranger to this forceful, all-consuming emotion, but quickly come to believe that her move to Lafferton had been part of a plan leading up to this culmination. Angela Randall loved with an absorption and a dedication that had taken over her life. Before long, she knew, it would also take over the life of the other. When he accepted her feelings for him, when she was ready to disclose them, when the moment was right.

Until meeting him, her life had begun to seem slightly hollow. Anxiety about future illness, infirmity, old age, had crept up to the edges of her consciousness, grinned at her. It had shocked her when she had arrived at an age her mother had never been. She felt that she had no right to it. But since that meeting in April, the hollowness had been replaced by an intense and passionate certainty, a conviction of destiny. She no longer gave loneliness, old age and illness a thought. She had been rescued. And after all, fifty-three was not sixty-three or seventy-three, it was the prime of life. At fifty, her mother had been on the edge of old age. Everyone was younger now.

As she left the protecting walls of the town centre, the fog and darkness closed in around the car. She turned down the road oddly called simply Domesday, and left into Devonshire Drive. A few lights were on in the bedroom windows of the large detached houses, but she could only just make them out through the fog. She slowed to twenty and then down to fifteen miles an hour.

Impossible to see in such weather that this was one

of the most attractive and sought-after parts of Lafferton. She knew how lucky she had been to find the small house in Barn Close, one of only five houses there, at a price she could just afford. It had been empty for over a year, following the death of the elderly couple who had lived in it for over sixty years. It had not been a close then, and very few of the imposing houses on Devonshire Drive had existed either.

The house had been completely unmodernised and in a state of some disrepair, but as soon as she had stepped inside it for the first time, behind the young estate agent, Angela Randall had wanted to live there.

'I'm afraid it needs an awful lot doing to it.'

But none of that had mattered at all, because the house had embraced her at once, in a very particular way.

'People have been happy here,' she had said.

The girl had given her an odd look.

'I want to make an offer for it.'

She had walked into the chilly little eau-de-nil-painted kitchen, with its cream gas cooker and brown varnished cupboards, and seen past them, out of the window to the field over the hedge and, rising behind it, the Hill. The clouds had been chasing the sun across it, teasing, making the green slopes now bright, now dark, like children playing.

For the first time since the knock on the door had come all those years ago, Angela Randall had felt what she recognised after a moment as happiness.

Her eyes were sore, with tiredness and the strain of peering through the windscreen into the streaming fog. It had been a difficult night. Sometimes the old people were quite settled and peaceful and there was rarely a

call. They just checked round every couple of hours, and did any linen sorting and other routine jobs that were left for them by the day staff. She had been able to do a lot of her degree coursework in the staffroom of the care home, on nights like that. But on this last her books had scarcely been opened. Five of the residents, including some of the frailest and most vulnerable, had gone down with an acute sickness virus, and at two o'clock they had had to call out Dr Deerbon, who had sent one old lady straight into hospital. Mr Gantley's tablets had had to be changed, and the new prescription gave him nightmares, wild, terrifying, screaming nightmares which woke those in the rooms on either side of him in fright. Miss Parkinson had walked in her sleep again and managed to reach the front door, unlock and unbolt it and get halfway down the path before any of them, frantic with sickness everywhere else, had realised. Dementia was not pretty. The best anyone could do was damage limitation and safe confinement, as well, of course, as provide clean, bright surroundings, decent food and friendly care. She wondered how she would have coped if her mother had lived to suffer with an illness that robbed people of their very selves – personality, memory, spirit, dignity, the ability to relate to others – everything that made life worth living, rich and valuable. 'You'll take me in here, won't you,' she had more than once joked to Carol Ashton, who ran the Four Ways Home, 'if I ever get that way?' They had laughed it off and talked of something else, but Angela's questioning had been like that of a child seeking reassurance and protection. Well, she had no need to worry about any of that now. She would not grow old alone, whatever her condition. She knew that.

As she reached the end of Devonshire Drive, the fog thinned and changed from a dense bank to thinner skeins and veils which wound themselves about in front of the car. There were now patches of darkness through which house and street lights shone out clear orange and gold. Turning into Barn Close, Angela Randall could make out her own white-painted gate at the far end. She let out a long sigh, releasing the tension in her neck and shoulders. Her hands were damp on the steering wheel. But she was home. She had a long sleep and a four-day break ahead.

Outside the car she could taste the fog like damp cobwebs across her skin but from the Hill a slight breeze was blowing towards her. Perhaps by the time it broke light and she was ready to go out again, it would have dispersed the last of the fog. She was tireder than usual, after the bad night and such an unpleasant drive, but it would not have occurred to her to change her routine. Angela Randall was an orderly woman, of regular habit. Only one thing had happened recently to break into the safe cocoon she had built around herself and threaten disorder and chaos, but the potential disorder and the chaos were sweet and, to her own surprise, she had welcomed them.

Nevertheless, for the present she kept to her routine, and in any case, if she missed her run even for a day she noticed the difference the next time she went out, felt just a little less supple, breathed slightly less easily. The doctor had told her that she should take up a sport, and she trusted him completely. If he had told her to hang upside down from the branch of a tree for a week, she would have done so. But no sport appealed to her, so she had started running – walking at first, followed by

jogging, working up in speed and distance to a daily three-mile run.

'A balanced life,' he had said when she had told him that she was also starting her next Open University degree. 'Take care of both mind and body. Old-fashioned advice but none the worse for that.'

She went into her tidy, spotless house. The carpets, an indulgence for which she had saved carefully, were thick and close-fitted. When she shut the front door, there was the silence she so enjoyed, a soft, deep silence, padded, comforting.

Nothing was out of place. In a sense, this house had been her life and more to her, until recently, than any family, any human being or pet could ever have been. It was reassuringly as she had left it the previous evening. There was no one to rearrange anything. Angela Randall relied on 4 Barn Close and it had never failed her.

During the next hour, she ate a banana chopped into a small bowl of muesli and drank a single cup of tea. An egg on toast, with a rasher of lean bacon, tomatoes and more tea would come later, after her run. Now, she set out the food under a cover, the pan, loaf and butter, refilled the kettle, and emptied and rinsed the teapot. Everything was set ready for later, after the run and her shower.

She listened to the news on the radio and read the front page of the newspaper the boy had just delivered, then went upstairs to her pale blue bedroom, changed out of her uniform and dropped it into the laundry basket and put on a clean, freshly ironed white T-shirt and pale grey tracksuit, white socks and running shoes. Her hair was brushed and pulled off her face in a white elastic headband. She put three wrapped glucose sweets into

her pocket and the spare front-door key on a ribbon round her neck underneath her tracksuit top.

As she closed the front door behind her, more lights were coming on in the houses and a thin, sour, bleak dawn was breaking over the Hill. The fog still hung about, wreathing among the trees and bushes on the slopes, swirling, thickening, then shifting and clearing again.

But curtains were not yet drawn. No one looked out, keen to begin the day, to see what was going on or who was about. It was not that sort of morning. At the corner of Barn Close, a few yards from her own house, and at the beginning of the path leading to the field, Angela Randall broke into a light jog. A few minutes later, she was running, steadily, purposefully and quite unobserved, across the open green and on to the Hill and, after only a few yards, into a sudden bolster of muffling, dense, clammy fog.

Two

Sunday morning at a quarter past five and a gale blowing. Cat Deerbon lifted the phone on the second ring.

'Dr Deerbon here.'

'Oh dear . . .' an elderly woman's voice faltered. 'I'm sorry, I don't like disturbing you in the middle of the night, Doctor, I am sorry . . .'

'It's what I'm here for. Who is it?'

'Iris Chater, Doctor. It's Harry – I heard him. I came down and he was making such a funny noise with his breathing. And he looks . . . you know . . . he isn't right, Doctor.'

'I'll come.'

The call was not unexpected. Harry Chater was eighty. He had had two severe strokes, was diabetic with a poor heart, and recently Cat had diagnosed a slow-growing carcinoma in the bowel. He should probably have been in hospital but he and his wife had insisted that he would be better at home. Which, she thought, letting herself quietly out of the house, he almost certainly was. He was

also happier in the bed they had arranged for him downstairs in the front room with his two budgerigars for company.

She reversed the car out into the lane. The trees around the paddock were tossing wildly, caught for a moment in her headlamps, but the horses were safely stabled, her family sound asleep.

Not many people kept budgerigars now, apart from the competitive bird-fanciers. Caged birds were out of fashion, like poodles. She tried to remember, swerving slightly to avoid a fallen branch, when she had last seen anyone with a poodle, clipped to look like the woolly pompons Sam and Hannah had made in their playgroup days. What other handmade things had they brought so proudly home? She began to make a mental list. It was eight miles from the village of Atch Sedby into Lafferton, it was pitch dark and raining and there was no one else on the road; for years, to exercise her brain and keep herself awake on these night calls, Cat had forced herself to recite poems aloud – the ones she had learned by heart at school . . . 'The Owl and the Pussy-Cat', 'This is the weather the cuckoo likes', 'I had a silver penny and an apricot tree', and, from the exam years, choruses from *Henry V* and soliloquies from *Hamlet*, the set plays. Listening to the car radio seemed to make her more sleepy, but poetry, or chemical formulae, or mental arithmetic kept her going. Or lists. Woolly pompons, she thought, and pasta pictures, and binoculars made out of the insides of toilet rolls; Mother's Day cards with yellow-tissue daffodils, crooked coil pots, papier mâché animals, mosaics from little slivers of coloured sticky paper.

The moon came out from behind the fast-scudding

clouds just as she turned into Lafferton and saw the cathedral rising up ahead, the great tower silvered, the windows mysteriously gleaming.

'Slowly, silently now the moon
Walks the night in her silver shoon . . .'

She struggled to remember what came next.

Nelson Street was one of a grid of twelve terraces known as The Apostles. At 37, two-thirds of the way down, the lights were on.

Harry Chater was going to die, probably within the next hour. Cat knew that as she walked into the stuffy, crowded little front room, where the gas fire was turned to high and the smell was the half-antiseptic, half-fetid one of illness. He was a man who had been heavy but who was now shrunken and slipped down pathetically into himself, all his strength and much of his life force gone.

Iris Chater went back to the chair beside his bed and took his hand, chafing it gently between her own, her eyes flicking from his crumpled, grey face to Cat's, full of fear.

'Come on now, perk up, Harry, here's Dr Deerbon to see you, Dr Cat . . . you'll be pleased it's her.'

Cat knelt beside the low bed and felt the heat from the gas fire burning into her back. The budgerigar cage was covered in a gold velour cloth with a fringe and the little birds were silent.

There was not a great deal she could do for Harry Chater, but what she would not do was call an ambulance and send him off to die, probably on a hard trolley

in a corridor at Bevham General. She could make him as comfortable as possible, bringing in the oxygen cylinder from her car to ease his breathing, and she could stay with them both, unless she was called elsewhere.

Cat Deerbon was thirty-four, a young GP, but one who, from a family of doctors going back four generations, had inherited the conviction that some old ways were still the best, when it came to individual patient care.

'Come on, Harry love.' When Cat came back with the oxygen, Iris Chater was stroking her husband's hollow cheek and talking softly to him. His pulse was weak, his breathing uneven, his hands very cold. 'You can do something for him, can't you, Doctor?'

'I can make him more comfortable. Just help me lift him up on the pillows, Mrs Chater.'

Outside, the gale was hurling itself at the windows. The gas fire sputtered. If Harry lasted longer than the next hour or so, Cat would call in the district nurses.

'He isn't suffering, is he?' Iris Chater still held her husband's hand. 'It isn't very nice, is it, that mask over his poor face?'

'It's the best way of easing things for him. I think he's quite comfortable, you know.'

The woman looked at Cat. Her own face was grey too and creased with strain, her eyes deep-set, the skin beneath them pouched and bruise-coloured with tiredness. She was nine years her husband's junior, a neat, energetic woman, but now she looked as old and ill as he did.

'It's been no life for him, not since the spring.'

'I know.'

'He's hated this . . . being dependent, being weak. He hasn't been eating. I've had a job to get a spoonful of anything down him.'

Cat adjusted the oxygen mask on Harry's face. His nose was beaked and jutted out, as the flesh had fallen away on either side of it. The skull showed clear beneath the almost-transparent skin. Even with the help of the oxygen, his breathing was difficult.

'Harry love . . .' his wife stroked his brow.

How many are there like this now, Cat thought, married over fifty years and still contentedly together? How many of her own generation would stick it out, taking everything as it came because that was what you did, what you had promised to do?

She got up. 'I think we could both do with some tea. Do you mind me rooting about in your kitchen?'

Iris Chater started from the chair. 'Goodness, I can't have you doing that, Doctor, I'll get it.'

'No,' Cat said gently, 'you stay with Harry. He knows you're there, you know. He'll want you to stay beside him.'

She went out to the small kitchen. Every shelf, every flat surface was crowded not only with the usual china and utensils but with decorative objects, ornaments, calendars, figurines, pictures, framed words of wisdom, honey pots shaped like beehives, eggcups with smiley faces, thermometers set in brass holders and clocks like floral plates. On the window ledge a plastic bird bobbed down to drink from a glass of water when Cat touched its head. She could imagine how much Hannah would adore that – almost as much as she would covet the pink crochet doll whose skirt covered the sugar basin.

She lit the gas and filled the kettle. Outside, the wind

slammed a gate. This house fitted its occupants and they the house – like hands fitted gloves. How could others sneer at sets of royal family mugs and tea towels printed with 'Home Sweet Home' and 'Desiderata'?

She prayed that her phone would not ring. Spending some time now with a dying patient – doing something so ordinary as making tea in this kitchen, helping an ordinary couple through the most momentous and distressing parting of all – put the hassle and increasing administrative burden of general practice in its place. Medicine was changing, or being changed, by the grey men who managed but did not understand it. A lot of Cat and Chris Deerbon's colleagues were becoming cynical, burned out and demoralised. It would be easy to give in, to process people through the surgery like cans on a conveyor belt and palm the out-of-hours stuff on to locums. That way you got a good night's sleep – and precious little job satisfaction. Cat was having none of it. What she was doing now was not cost-effective and no one could put a price on it. Helping Harry Chater through his dying, and looking after his wife as well as she could, were the jobs that mattered and as important to her as to them.

She filled the teapot and picked up the tray.

Half an hour later, his wife holding one hand and his doctor the other, Harry took a last, uncertain breath, and died.

The silence in the stifling room was immense, a silence which had the particular quality Cat always noticed at a death, as though the earth had momentarily stopped turning and the world was drained of triviality and urgency about anything at all.

'Thank you for staying, Doctor. I'm glad you were here.'

'So am I.'

'There's everything to do now, isn't there? I don't know where I should start.'

Cat took the woman's hand. 'There is no hurry at all. Sit with him for as long as you need to. Talk to him. Say goodbye in your own way. That's the important thing now. The rest can wait.'

When she left, the gale had died down. It was just beginning to break light. Cat stood by the car cooling her face after the heat of the Chaters' sitting room. The undertaker was on his way now and Iris Chater's neighbour was with her. The peace had been broken into and all the dreary, necessary business that attends on death was under way.

Her own job was done.

From Nelson Street at this hour on a Sunday morning it was a two-minute drive to Cathedral Close. There was a seven o'clock service of Communion which Cat decided to slip into, after checking home.

'Hi. You're awake.'

'Ha ha.' Chris Deerbon held the receiver away from him so that Cat could hear the familiar sound of her children fighting.

'You?'

'OK. Harry Chater died. I stayed with them. If it's all right with you, I'll go to the seven o'clock, and then take a coffee off my brother.'

'Simon's back?'

'He should have flown in last night.'

'You go. I'll take these two out on the ponies. You need to catch up with Si.'

'Yes, there's the subject of Dad's seventieth birthday . . .'

'You'll need some spiritual top-up first then.' Chris was an unbeliever, generally respectful of Cat's beliefs but not above the occasional sharp remark. 'I'm sorry about old Harry Chater. Salt of the earth, those two.'

'Yes, but he'd had enough. I'm just glad I was there.'

'You're a good doctor, did you know that?

Cat smiled. Chris was her husband but he was also her medical partner and, she thought, a better clinician than she would ever be. Professional praise from him meant something.

The side door of the Cathedral Church of St Michael and All Angels closed almost soundlessly. Much of the great building was in shadow, but the lights were on, and candles lit, in the side chapel. Cat paused and looked up into the space that seemed to billow out up to the fan-vaulted roof. Being inside the body of the cathedral in this semi-dark was like being Jonah inside the belly of the whale. How different from the last time she had been here, when it had been packed full of civic dignitaries and a congregation dressed in its finery for a royal service. Then, it had echoed with music and been bright with banners and ceremonial vestments. This quiet, private time early in the morning suited her better.

She took her place among the couple of dozen people already kneeling as the verger led the priest up to the altar.

She would have found it impossible to function as a doctor without the strength she derived from her belief. Most of the others she knew and worked with seemed

to manage perfectly well and she was the odd one out in her family – though Simon, she thought, came close to sharing her conviction.

As she went up to the Communion rail, there came vividly into her mind the last time she and her brother had been here side by side. It had been at the funeral of three young brothers murdered by their uncle. Simon had been in the cathedral officially, as the officer in charge of the police investigation, Cat as the family GP. It had been a heart-breaking service. On her other side had been Paula Osgood, forensic pathologist at the murder scene and at the post-mortem, and who had later confided to Cat that she was pregnant with her second child. How had she coped, Cat still wondered, with professional detachment and calm when examining those three small bodies, killed with an axe and a butcher's knife? People like that, policemen like Simon – they were the ones who needed all the strength and support they could get. Beside their jobs, that of a GP in a pleasant town like Lafferton was a doddle.

The short service ended and the ribbon of smoke from the snuffed-out candles drifted down to her . . . She stood. A woman already making her way down the aisle caught Cat's eye, and immediately after her so did another. Both smiled.

Cat stayed back for a few seconds, letting them get ahead, before slipping out and making quickly for the door on the other side of the centre aisle. From here, she could make a getaway across Cathedral Green and down the path that led into the close before anyone managed to waylay her for an apologetic, unofficial consultation.

Apart from some cathedral clergy, few people now lived in the fine Georgian houses of the small close, most of which had long ago become offices.

Simon Serrailler's building was at the far end, with windows both on to the close and, at the back, overlooking the River Gleen, a quiet stretch of which flowed through this part of Lafferton. The entrance to 6 St Michael's was here beside a curved iron bridge leading to the opposite towpath. A posse of mallards was swirling about beneath it. Higher up, a swan trod water. In the spring it was possible to sit at Simon's window and watch kingfishers flash between the banks.

Case and Chaundy. Solicitors
Diocesan Outreach
Parker, Phipps, Burns. Chartered Accountants
Davies, Davies, Coop. Solicitors.

Cat pressed the bell at the top of the stepping stones of brass plates, beside a narrow wood strip elegantly lettered. *Serrailler*.

Knowing her brother as she did – as well as anyone could be said to know Simon – she had never been surprised at his choosing to live alone at the top of a building surrounded by offices which were empty for most of the time he was at home and with only the ducks, the dark water slipping below the windows and the cathedral bells for company.

Si was different – different from either of his triplet siblings, Cat and Ivo, even more different from their parents and the extended Serrailler family. He had been the odd one out from as early in their childhood as Cat could remember, never fitting easily into a family of

loudly argumentative, practical-joking medics. How such a quiet, self-contained man fitted, and fitted extremely well, into the police force was another mystery.

The building was dim and silent. Cat's footsteps echoed on the wooden stairs, up and up, four narrow flights. At each landing she pushed the timed light switch, which always clicked off just before she made it to the next. *Serrailler*. The same lettering on the plate beside the bell.

'Cat, Hi!' Her brother bent from his six feet four to envelop her in a bear hug.

'I had an early call and then went to the seven o'clock service.'

'So you're here for breakfast.'

'Coffee anyway. I shouldn't think you've got any food in. How was Italy?'

Simon went into the kitchen but Cat did not follow, not yet, she wanted to luxuriate in this room. It ran the length of the house and had long windows. From the kitchen there was a glimpse of the Hill.

The white-painted wooden shutters were folded back. The polished old elm floorboards had two large good rugs. Light poured in, on to Simon's pictures and his few carefully chosen pieces of furniture which mixed antiques and contemporary classics with confident success. Beyond this one huge room, he had a small bedroom and bathroom tucked out of the way, and then the galley kitchen. Everything centred here, in this one calm room, where Cat came, she thought, for almost the same reasons she went to church – peace, quiet, beauty and spiritual and visual recharging of her batteries. Nothing about her brother's flat bore any relation to her own hugger-mugger farmhouse, always noisy and untidy,

spilling over with children, dogs, wellington boots, bridles and medical journals. She loved it, that was where her heart was, where she had deep roots. But a small, vital nugget of herself belonged here, in this sanctuary of light and tranquillity. She thought it was probably what kept Simon sane and able to do his often stressful and distressing job as well as he did.

He brought in a tray with the cafetière of coffee and took it over to the beechwood table in the window that overlooked the close and the back of the cathedral. Cat sat cupping her hands round the warm pottery mug, listening to her brother describe Siena, Verona and Florence, in each of which he had just spent four days.

'Was it still warmish?'

'Golden days, chilly nights. Perfect for working outside every day.'

'Can I see anything?'

'Still packed.'

'OK.'

She knew better than to push Simon into showing her any of his drawings before he had selected what he considered the best and fit to be looked at by anyone else.

When he had finished school, Simon had gone to art college, against the wishes, advice and above all the ambitions of their parents. He had never shown the slightest interest in medicine, unlike every other Serrailler for generations, and no amount of pressure had persuaded him even to continue sciences beyond O level. He had drawn. He had always drawn. He had gone to art school to draw – not to take photographs, design clothes or do computer graphics, and certainly not to study installation or conceptual art. He drew beautifully, people, animals, plants, buildings and odd corners of

everyday life, in streets, markets, all manner of public places. Cat loved his inspired line and cross-hatching, his rapid sketches, the wonderfully observed and executed detail. Twice a year and for some snatched weekends in between, he went to Italy, Spain, France, Greece or further afield to draw. He had spent weeks in Russia, a month in Latin America.

But he had not completed his art school course. He had been disappointed and disillusioned. No one, he said, wanted him to draw or was in the slightest bit interested in teaching or promoting drawing. He had gone instead to King's College, London, and read law, got a first and immediately joined the police force, his other passion since childhood. He had been fast-tracked into the CID and up the ranks to become a DCI, aged thirty-two.

In the force, the artist who signed his work Simon Osler – Osler was his middle name – was unknown, as was DCI Simon Serrailler to those who went to his sell-out exhibitions in places far from Bevham and Lafferton.

Cat refilled her mug. They had caught up with Simon's holiday, her family and oddments of local gossip. The next bit would be more difficult.

'Si – there is one thing.'

He glanced up, catching her tone, his face wary. How strange it is, Cat thought, that he and Ivo are two men of triplets and yet so unlike they might not even be brothers. Simon was the only one for generations to have fair hair, though his eyes were the Serrailler eyes, and dark as sloes. She herself was recognisably Ivo's sister, though none of them saw much of him now. Ivo had worked as a flying doctor in the Australian outback, happy as Larry, for the past six years. Cat doubted if he would ever come back home.

'It's Dad's birthday next Sunday.'

Simon looked out at the shifting cloudscape above the cathedral. He said nothing.

'Mum's doing lunch. You will come, won't you?'

'Yes.' His voice gave away nothing.

'It'll mean a lot to him.'

'I doubt it.'

'Don't be childish. Let it go. You know you can get lost in the throng – God knows there'll be enough of us.'

She went to rinse her coffee mug in the steel sink. Simon's kitchen, in which little more than coffee and toast were ever made, had cost a lot of trouble and a small fortune. Cat often wondered why.

'I must get back and relieve Chris from pony duty. Work tomorrow then?'

Simon's face relaxed. They were on safe ground again. Fifteen days abroad, completely cut off from home and his job, was more than enough for him, Cat knew. Her brother lived for his work and his drawing, and then for his life here in the flat. She accepted everything about him completely, and only occasionally wished that there was more. She knew of one thing, but it was a subject they only discussed if he raised it. He rarely did.

She gave him another hug and left quickly. 'See you next Sunday.'

'You will.'

When his sister had gone Simon Serrailler showered, dressed and made a second pot of coffee. In a moment, he would unpack and go through the work he had done in Italy, but first, he put in a call to Bevham CID. Work might not begin again officially until the following day but he could not wait until then to catch up, check which

cases, if any, had been closed in his absence and more importantly find out what was new.

Two and a half weeks was a long time.

The Tape

I wonder if you ever realised how much I hated the dog? We had never had a pet of any kind. Then, when I came home from school one afternoon, it was there. I can see you, sitting in your chair with the brown leather pouffe under your feet and your spectacles and library book on the table beside you. For a second, I didn't notice it. I went over to kiss you as usual, and then I saw it – the dog. It was a very small dog, but not a puppy.

'What is that?'

'My pet.'

'Why has it come?'

'I've always wanted a pet.'

The dog's eyes, bright as beads, gleamed out at me from between long strands of silky hair. I hated it.

'Don't you love her?' you said.

I can tell you now how much I hated the dog, hated it because it was your pet and you loved it but also hated it just for itself. The dog sat on your lap. The dog licked your face with a lilac pink tongue. The dog

took titbits from your hand. The dog slept on your bed. The dog hated me as much as I hated it. I knew that.

But strangely enough, if it had not been for the dog, I might never have discovered what I wanted to become, what my destiny was.

I know you remember the day. I was lying on the hearthrug teasing the dog by waving my fingers under its nose until it snapped, then whipping them away. I became very good at timing it to the split second and I know I would never have been caught if I had just continued in the same way, doing the same thing over and over again. But I made one mistake. Afterwards I was angry with myself for my own stupidity. It taught me to make a plan and then stick to it. I learned a lot that day, didn't I, from a single mistake? Instead of waving my fingers under the dog's nose I leaned over it and made a growling noise, thinking I would confuse it and that it would be frightened of me. I wanted it to be frightened of me. Instead, it sprang up and bit my face, tearing a piece of flesh out of my upper lip.

I was sure you would have to take the dog to be destroyed, for doing that to me, but you told me that it was my own fault.

'Perhaps that will teach you not to tease her,' you said. Can you understand how hurt I was by that? Can you?

I had never been to a hospital. You took me there on the bus, with a clean handkerchief pressed to my lip. I did not know what a hospital would be like. I had no idea that it would be an exciting place, and

beautiful, and dangerous, and yet also a place of the greatest comfort and safety. I wanted to stay for ever among the white beds and shining trolleys and powerful people.

What they did to me hurt. They bathed my lip in antiseptic. I loved its smell. Then they stitched my upper lip. The pain was indescribable yet I loved the doctor who did it, and the nurse in the shining white cap who held my hand. You had stayed outside.

So, you see, the fact that you loved the dog more than you loved me and that you betrayed me with it, did not matter in the end because I had found my way. I can even forgive you for the betrayal because yours was not the worst. That came later. I got over your betrayal but the other never, because I was betrayed by what I had to love. I did not love you.

I have never told you that. But now I am telling you everything. We are agreed on that, aren't we?

Three

Thursday morning and the dawn just coming up through a dove-grey mist. Mild air.

On the Hill, a velvet green island emerging out of a vaporous sea, the trees are all but bare, but the patches of scrub and bramble which lie like body hair in the hollows and folds are still berried and have the last of their leaves. Halfway up the Hill are the Wern Stones, ancient standing stones like three witches squatting round an invisible cauldron. In daylight, children run in and out of them, daring one another to touch the pock-marked surfaces and at midsummer, robed figures gather to dance and chant. But they are laughed at and known to be harmless.

At this hour in the morning a few runners are making their way up and down and round the Hill, pounding intently, always alone, noticing nothing. Two are out this morning, men running seriously in silent shoes. No woman. After a time, as the light strengthens and the quilt of mist rolls back upon itself, three young men on mountain bikes race up the sandy track to the summit, straining, panting, aching, but never dismounting.

An old man walks a Yorkshire terrier and a woman two Dobermanns, around the Wern Stones and briskly back down to the path.

At night there may be people on the Hill, though not the runners and cyclists.

Later the sun rises, blood red over the scrubby bushes and brambles and mossy grass, touching the Wern Stones, picking out scraps of blown paper, the white scut of a fleeing rabbit, a dead crow.

No one sees anything unusual out on the Hill. People walk, run, ride there but find nothing, report nothing to alarm them. It is just the same as always, with its standing stones and crown of trees, yielding no secrets. Vehicles keep to the paved paths, and in any case it has rained; any tyre marks have been washed away.

Four

Debbie Parker lay in bed, curled tight, knees drawn up. Outside her window the sun shone, bright for a December morning, but her curtains were dark blue and closed.

She heard Sandy's alarm, Sandy's shower water, Sandy's Radio BEV, but none of what she heard meant anything to her. When Sandy had gone to work Debbie could sleep again, sleep her way through a silent morning, shutting out the sun, the day, life.

There was always a split second when she woke and felt OK, felt normal, 'Hey, it's day, here we go,' before the crushing, blackening misery crawled across her brain like a stain seeping across absorbent paper. Mornings were bad and since she had lost her job were getting worse. She woke to headaches that fogged her mind and dragged her down, lasting half the day. If she made a mighty effort, went out and walked around the town – did anything – the pain got slowly better. Mid-afternoon and she felt she could cope. Evenings were often quite good. Nights were not, even if she had had a few drinks

and fallen into bed if not cheerful then at least not caring. She woke around three with a start, heart beating too hard, sweating with fear.

'Debbie . . .'

Go away. Don't come in here.

'Ten to eight.'

The door opened, shooting light across the wall.

'Cup of tea?'

Debbie did not move, did not speak. Go away.

'Come on . . .'

The curtains were rasped open. The noise was like having her teeth pulled. Sandy Marsh, bouncy, bubbly, bright – and concerned. She sat on Debbie's bed.

'I said I've brought you some tea.'

'I'm OK.'

'You're not OK.'

'Am.'

'Tell me I'm right out of order here, but I think you need to go and see the doctor.'

'I'm not ill,' Debbie mumbled into the yeasty hollow of bedclothes.

'You're not well either. Look at you. Maybe you've got that thing called SAD . . . it is December. It's a fact that more people top themselves in December and February than the rest of the year.'

Debbie sat up, throwing off the duvet in one fierce thrust. 'Oh great. Thanks.'

Sandy's bright, cheerfully made-up face was creased with concern. 'I'm sorry. Kick me. Sorry. Oh God.'

Debbie was crying leaning forward on her arms. Sandy reached out to hug her.

'You'll be late,' Debbie said.

'Stuff late. You're more important. Come on.'

In the end, Debbie got up and trailed to the shower. But before the shower came the mirror.

The acne was worse. Her whole face was scarred and blemished by the angry, infected rash. It spread down her neck and on to her shoulders. She had been to the doctor about it once, months ago. He had given her foul-smelling yellow ointment to spread on twice a day. It had greased her clothes and made the bedclothes stink and done her spots no good at all. She hadn't bothered to finish the pot and hadn't been back to the surgery. 'I hate doctors,' she said to Sandy, sitting in their kitchen, full of cheap DIY units whose doors kept falling off. Sandy had made toast and two more mugs of tea.

They had known each other since primary school, grown up in the same street, and rented the flat together eight months ago when Sandy's mother had remarried and living at home had become difficult. But what should have been good fun somehow never had been. Debbie had lost her job when the building society closed its Lafferton branch and then the blackness had started to creep up on her.

'All the doctor will give me is a load of pills that'll space me out.'

Sandy dipped her teaspoon into her mug of tea and tipped the liquid back, dipped and tipped again.

'OK. Well, maybe there's someone else you could see.'

'Like who?'

'Those sort of people who advertise in the health shop.'

'What? Like that creepy acupuncturist? Healers and herbal people? Bit cranky.'

'Well, a lot of people swear by all that. Just take down some names.'

Doing something made her feel better. There was a flicker of cheerfulness as she went into the newsagent and bought a notebook and biro, walked down the Perrott to the health shop, looked up at the Hill beyond the rooftops, its crown touched by lemon-coloured sunlight.

The health shop was in Alms Street, near to the cathedral. I might be OK, Debbie thought. I could get fit, lose two stone, find something to clear my skin. A new life.

The cards were pinned on top of one another, crammed together anyhow on the cork board; she had to lift and unpin several to start getting at the names and numbers. Alexander technique, reflexology, Brandon healing, acupuncture, chiropractic. It took ages to work her way through. In the end she took down the details of four – aromatherapist, reflexologist, acupuncturist and herbalist – and, after dithering a moment, one other . . . the address and phone number of someone called Dava. She felt drawn to the card, a deep, intense blue dusted with a swirl of tiny stars. DAVA. SPIRITUAL HEALING. CRYSTALS. INNER HARMONY. LIGHT. WHOLE-PERSON THERAPY.

She stared at it, felt herself being pulled into the depths of the blue card. It did something to her, there was no doubt. When she came out of the health shop, she felt – different. Better. The blue card stayed in her mind and now and then, when she thought of it during the day, she seemed to be able to draw something from it. At any rate, the blackness shrank back like a cowering creature right to the far edges of her mind, and stayed there.

Five

'I would like to see someone in higher authority, please. A CID officer.'

Running a care home for fifteen elderly people in all stages of dementia had trained Carol Ashton to be patient and firm, in the way of a teacher of small children – the two jobs, she often thought, had much in common. She was also skilled in getting even the most recalcitrant to do as she asked eventually. All of which the desk sergeant recognised.

'You mustn't think we take reports of missing persons lightly.'

'I'm sure. But I also know that a name goes down, together with a very brief description, on a list which is circulated to various agencies after which – unless the missing person is a child or in some other way especially vulnerable – that is that.'

She was not wrong.

'The real problem is, Mrs Ashton, that a surprisingly large number of people go missing.'

'I know. I also know that a good many of them turn

up safe and well. I am also more than familiar with the word "resources". All the same, I would still like to see someone who will take the matter further. And as I said, I am not trying to belittle the uniformed police when I say that I would like to talk to a detective.'

She turned away from the desk and went to sit down on the bench seat against the wall. There were small tears and splits in the upholstery here and there, through which grey stuffing was escaping.

Knowing that she might have to wait for some time, Carol Ashton had brought a book, but in fact she had barely time to read one paragraph. The desk sergeant had recognised a woman who would get out of his hair when and only when she had what she came for.

'Mrs Ashton? I'm DS Graffham. Will you come through?'

Daft, Carol thought, to be surprised that it was a woman, but somehow in her mind, though there were plenty of WPCs, detectives were always men. Just as nurses were women.

The room she was ushered into was no surprise of course – a dingy little featureless box with a metal table and two chairs, beige paint. You'd confess to anything just to be let out of it.

'I understand you are very concerned about an employee who has not been into work for a few days?'

She was pretty – elfin haircut, sharp features, big eyes.

'Angela – Angela Randall. Only that sounds wrong – *employee*.'

DS Graffham glanced down at the sheet of paper in front of her. 'I'm sorry, I've only just seen the information . . .'

'Oh yes, she *is* an employee. She works for me, it just

sounded a bit bleak. I have a good relationship with all my staff.'

'I understand – official forms. OK, let's start again. Tell me everything about Angela Randall . . . but before you do, can I get you a hot drink? I'm afraid it will have to come out of the dreaded machine.'

She will go far, Carol Ashton thought, stirring the tea round with the plastic stick that bore no resemblance to a spoon. At least I hope she will. I hope someone doesn't see her as too concerned and too relaxed . . . too – yes, too interested. DS Graffham leaned back in her chair, arms folded, looking straight at her, waiting. She did indeed seem genuinely interested.

'I run a care home for the elderly demented.'

'Alzheimer's disease?'

'That pretty much covers it.'

'I hope you know how needed you are. My grandmother died with it last year. The care she received was disgraceful. Where is the home?'

'Fountain Avenue. The Four Ways.'

'And Mrs Randall works there with you?'

'Miss Randall. Angela. Yes. She's been with us for nearly six years and on permanent night duty for the last four. She's the sort of person you only dream of, frankly – hard-working, caring, reliable, almost never been off sick or for any other reason, and being single without any dependants she's been quite happy to do nights all the time. That's rare.'

'When did you last see her?'

'Well, I don't always of course . . . different shifts and days off for everyone, we could easily go a week without seeing each other. But of course I'd always know she'd been on duty. There's the report book and another

member of staff on with her. But actually, I did see her the last time she was at work. She'd rung me in the middle of the night and I came in. I only live four doors down. Some of the patients got a nasty sickness bug and I was needed. Angela was there then.'

'How did she seem?'

'Rushed off her feet of course, we all were that night . . . we didn't have much time to chat. But she was much the same as ever . . . very calm and dependable.'

'So you noticed nothing unusual about her?'

'Oh no. And I would have noticed.'

'And she didn't come in the next night?'

'No, she wasn't due. She had a weekend and then four days off. It goes like that, so every member of staff gets a good long break occasionally. They need it. So Angela wasn't due in for a week and then I was off for a couple of days. When I got back there was a report that she hadn't been into work for four nights and hadn't rung in sick either. That was just completely out of character. I've had staff who would just not turn up and not let me know and I've got rid of them. We simply can't function like that. Our residents don't deserve it. But Angela Randall would never behave like that.'

'So what did you do?'

'Rang her – several times. I kept on ringing. There was never a reply and she hasn't an answering machine.'

'Did you go round to her house?'

'No. No, I didn't.'

'Why ever not?' DS Graffham looked at her sharply.

Carol Ashton felt uneasy – guilty in fact, though she was sure she was not. But the young woman had such a clear, steady look, searching her out, getting to her. She wondered how long a criminal would hold out against it.

'Mrs Ashton – I can't help you – and I want to – if you don't help me.'

Carol stirred and stirred the tea dregs. 'I don't want to . . . to make it sound wrong.'

The detective waited.

'Angela is very private . . . a self-contained sort of person. She is unmarried but I have no idea if she is widowed or divorced – or just single. It may sound strange that I've never discovered that in six years but she simply isn't the sort of person you could ask and she never talks about herself. She's perfectly friendly but she doesn't give anything away and you can easily overstep the mark with her. You might ask a question or make a remark anyone else would respond to without a thought, but she can just – close up, you know? You can see it in her eyes . . . a warning. Don't go there. A sort of portcullis seems to come down. So I've never been to her house and as far as I know nor have any of the other staff. And – well, I just wouldn't call on her. Telephoning was as far as I liked to go really. That sounds ridiculous.'

'It doesn't actually. There are people like that. In my experience they make life very lonely for themselves. They also give the impression that they're hiding something – maybe some dark secret, but they very rarely are, it's all a smokescreen. Do you know of any family she may have?'

'No. She's never mentioned any at all.'

'Had she a history of illness . . . of depression?'

'No. She'd certainly never been ill – maybe a bad cold a couple of times. I encourage staff to stay at home then. Our residents are very vulnerable.'

'Nothing that would cause her to be taken ill suddenly – diabetes or a heart condition?'

'No. I'd know that because of her work. There's nothing.'

'How old is she?'

'Fifty-three.'

'You'll already have gone over this in your mind, but is there anything you can think of that was different or strange about Miss Randall in the last few weeks . . . couple of months, say?'

Carol hesitated. There was something. Or was there? Something and nothing. The room was very quiet. DS Graffham did not fidget or write anything, she simply sat, looking steadily, unnervingly at Carol.

'It's really hard to explain . . .'

'Go on.'

'Nothing was ever said . . . you have to know that . . . This is just . . . just a hunch. An impression I got.'

'Those are often very important.'

'I don't want to make too much of it . . . it's so vague. But once or twice I've thought she just seemed a little bit . . . distant? Distracted? I don't know . . . as if she was miles away. I'd never noticed it about her in the past. She's always very on the ball. Look, please don't make too much of this . . . it was just once or twice, I'm not implying she was behaving strangely, of course not.'

'You think something was worrying her?'

'No. It wasn't that, or I don't think it was . . . Oh, I don't know. Forget I said it. It doesn't make sense.'

'I think it does.'

'I should have gone to her house, shouldn't I? What if she's been taken ill?'

'Well, presumably she has neighbours. You're not to blame.'

'What will happen now?'

'We'll get someone round there to check.' She stood up. 'But don't worry . . . missing people have usually gone somewhere of their own free will for all sorts of personal reasons. They either turn up again as if nothing had happened, or they get in touch. There are very, very few who have come to any sort of harm. Especially not sensible middle-aged ladies.'

'Thank you for that.'

'It's the truth.' The young woman touched her arm. 'And . . .' she smiled suddenly, so that Carol Ashton saw that she was not merely pretty, she was striking – and beautiful. 'You came here. You did exactly the right thing.'

'You have sixty seconds to explain why we should take this one beyond the routine, Freya.'

DI Billy Cameron splayed himself back in his chair, hands held behind his head, and swivelled round and round, a hairy, overweight, sweating bear of a man. Impress me, his stance said, convince me.

Freya Graffham was not intimidated. She had been at Lafferton CID for only a few weeks, but recognised the DI for the sort of policeman the Met had had an abundance of when she had first joined – large and tough-talking with soft centres. By the time she left, most of them had retired and had not been replaced by their like. The new ones were a very different breed. She knew she would not find it easy to twist DI Cameron round her little finger but there would be ways of getting round him.

For his part Cameron saw a young woman who was tougher than she looked. But Freya Graffham had left the Met voluntarily after twelve years, for a cathedral town, and he wondered why she had lost her nerve.

For now, though, she was setting out to prove herself.

'Angela Randall, aged fifty-three, a woman who lives as predictable, orderly and methodical a life as you could imagine, no family, no close friends . . . has never let her employer down once. She's not ill and as far as we know has never been depressed. Uniform found the house neat as a pin, car in the garage, table laid for breakfast, eggs in the saucepan, bread in the toaster. She had made a pot of tea and drunk a cup and there was a banana skin in the otherwise empty pedal bin. The laundry basket had her uniform in it.'

'But no Miss Randall, ill, well or otherwise.'

'No.'

'Neighbours?'

'Don't know much. Hardly saw her. Always passed the time of day but kept herself to herself. No visitors. There's something odd though, guv. Uniform said the house felt . . . peculiar.'

Cameron raised an eyebrow. 'Not like them to go spooky on us.'

'I'd like to go round there.'

Cameron looked at her. She had it – the extra instinct, flair, the nose for something . . . whatever you called it, Freya Graffham had it and it set her apart, as it always did. She would go to the top if she managed to retain that, along with the attention to detail and a capacity for hard work which would keep her pinned to the ground. The combination was rare enough for him to know he had to hang on to it when it came his way.

'You know as well as I do that if you don't come up with anything straight away and there are no further developments, we have to drop it into the missing persons file.'

'Low priority . . . no danger to the public at large or,

so far as we can judge, to the missing person . . . whose right to go missing at all we have to respect. Yeah, yeah.'

'There'll be a secret lover somewhere, and they've gone off on holiday . . . or she's topped herself.'

'OK, but neither of those suggestions cuts any ice with her employer.'

Cameron looked at his watch. 'More like three minutes,' he said.

'I take it that's a yes?'

'One thing, Freya . . . ninety-nine out of a hundred missing persons are a waste of police time . . . bear that in mind before you go getting carried away.'

'Thanks, guv. I'll keep it simple.'

Freya drove straight to Barn Close, taking young DC Nathan Coates with her, and, when they arrived, sending him first to check the garage and garden shed, and then to go round the neighbours. Freya wanted Angela Randall's house to herself.

'Weird,' one of the uniform patrol who had first been there had said, and as Freya closed the door softly behind her and stood in the small front hall she sensed at once what they meant. But there was nothing sinister here, she was sure immediately, it was just extraordinarily silent, with a quality and a depth to the silence she had rarely known in a house before, almost like a heavy, dense textile surrounding her, impenetrable and tightly packed.

What kind of woman was it who lived – or perhaps had lived – here? She went from room to room slowly, trying to build up a picture of her. Clearly she was tidy, clean, careful and organised. This was a bleak little house, and almost anonymous, like an out-of-date show home

in which no one had ever lived. The furnishings were not ugly but they were unmemorable and might have been chosen by anyone. There was no sense of a personal taste behind the selection or the arrangement. The style was neither antique nor very contemporary, the colour scheme was pale bland. Freya opened drawers and cupboards; crockery, cutlery, linen, a charity catalogue; the small bureau contained some papers, clipped together in an orderly manner – bank statements, payslips, a building society book in which £1,236.98 was deposited, utility bills, all paid and ticked off. On the shelves in the front room were a few unrevealing books – an atlas, a dictionary, a Delia Smith complete cookery course, a wildflower guide and a couple of Dick Francis thrillers.

'Come on, come on,' Freya muttered, 'give.'

It was what was not here that seemed significant, there was nothing personal – no photographs, letters, holiday postcards from friends. Her handbag which uniform had found on a chair in the kitchen had yielded nothing beyond a purse with some change, a wallet with two credit cards and twenty pounds, spectacles, aspirin, tissues and a stamped letter containing a cheque to a catalogue company. The address book beside the telephone listed plumber, electrician, doctor, dentist, a hairdresser, an acupuncturist, the Four Ways Nursing Home, with Carol Ashton's private line listed separately and 'C. Gabb – mowing man'. Angela Randall had apparently no relative, friend or godchild. How could anyone live such a barren life?

Freya went upstairs.

The bathroom yielded plain, basic toiletries from Boots. She picked up the utilitarian shampoo, the simple white soap. No pampering went on here. The spare bedroom

was clearly never used – the bed was stripped bare and the wardrobe contained a few blankets and pillows, plus two empty suitcases. So Angela Randall had not taken off on holiday. The room was bitterly cold. The whole house was cold.

In the main bedroom, the clothes hanging in the wardrobe were scarcely more personal than everything else – beige coat, brown skirt, navy jumper, black suit, camel suit, floral-print cotton dress, white and lemon, blue and grey cotton shirts. But there were two track-suits of good quality from a sports shop, and a pair of brand new running shoes, still boxed – expensive.

So far, DS Graffham's mental picture of Angela Randall had been blank, like a jigsaw to which she had not been given any pieces. Now, they had found a couple, the first to be fitted in. A single woman in her fifties of average height and size, who wore neutral colours and clothes that would never draw anyone's attention to her, had become a serious runner who spent £150 on one pair of shoes. She wondered how the DI would react if she took the fact back as her sole piece of information.

She was about to close the doors of the wardrobe and go downstairs to meet DC Coates, when something caught her eye, a faint gleam at the very back of the cupboard. She reached in.

It was a small box wrapped in gold paper, with a gold ribbon tied on top in an elaborate bow. Attached to that was a small gold envelope. Freya opened it.

To You, with all possible love from your devoted, Me.

Freya weighed the package in her hand. It was not heavy, did not smell or rattle.

Was Angela Randall the 'You' or the 'Me'?

She went downstairs and let herself out of the front door as the DC was coming up the path.

'Any joy?'

'Not much. Neighbours that were in said she was always pleasant, kept herself to herself, no visitors they could think of . . . only thing was, the lady on the corner, Mrs Savage, said in the last six months or so, Angela Randall had taken up running.'

'Yes, there are tracksuits in the wardrobe and a pair of brand new very expensive running shoes . . . proper gear.'

'She went out of the house every morning at the same time, regardless of whether she had just come in from night duty or just got up.'

'Where did she go?'

'Up on the Hill usually, except when it was very wet, and then she went down the road.'

'And when did Mrs Savage last see her?'

'She is pretty sure on the morning after Mrs Ashton reported her as last having been to work . . . Mrs Savage hasn't seen her, or any sign of anyone at the house, since then. She thought she'd gone away.'

'Did she see her come back from her run that morning?'

'Doesn't remember, but says she didn't always . . . Mrs Savage goes out three mornings a week to catch an early bus to her daughter's or to go to the Tuesday market . . . so Randall may have come back without being noticed.'

'Or not. Anything else?'

'Nope.'

'OK, let's get back. I've got a present to open.'

An hour later, the golden gift stood on Freya Graffham's desk, shining like a prop for one of the three kings in a nativity play.

She had come in and checked the latest reports. Angela Randall's details were logged on to the missing persons database and her description had been circulated to hospitals.

One of the things Freya had been looking for at the house had been any relatively recent photograph, which could eventually be put up on the County Police Force's official website. There had been none and neither was there any news.

'And no body,' the DI said, stopping by her workstation.

'There will be.'

'You've got a feeling?'

'She seems to have had a lonely enough life . . . if I lived in a sterile box like that and apparently hadn't a friend or a loved one in the world, I'd jump in the cut.'

'From which she'd have been dragged days ago.'

Freya pulled the parcel towards her again.

To You, with all possible love from your devoted, Me.

'I'll leave you to open it then.'

Freya hesitated. Going into Angela Randall's house, even searching through her drawers and cupboards, had seemed a job; she had not felt like an intruder simply because there had been nothing private or personal to make her feel that she was prying. Searching for a contact name and address, or some clue as to where the missing woman might have gone, was routine. But opening this ostentatiously wrapped parcel felt like an invasion of privacy, and something Randall would have minded very much.

Freya still hesitated, smoothing her thumb over the mirrored paper, and then took a paper knife to the neatly taped edges. The gold paper sprang open, revealing a