From the bestselling author of the hit BBC drama
MOONFLOWER MURDERS

ANTHONY HOROWITZ

'Glorious fun'
DAILY TELEGRAPH



Marble Hall Murders

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Marble Hall Murders

'Anthony Horowitz is one of my all-time favourite authors. *Marble Hall Murders* is a beautiful read and we are all in for a real treat'
Ryan Tubridy

'A masterclass in mystery writing'
Ragnar Jónasson

'Glorious fun'
Daily Telegraph

'Horowitz is at the top of his game here, linking past and present in a virtuoso finale worthy of Agatha Christie'
Publishers Weekly, Starred Review

'Outstanding'
Booklist, Starred Review

'Diabolically clever . . . *Marble Hall Murders* is as cunning a mystery as you'll read all year'
New York Times

'A deliciously witty, clever, and hefty mystery'
Library Journal, Starred Review

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Kirkus Reviews

'Horowitz delivers not just a masterfully constructed whodunit, but a novel that lingers, quietly and powerfully, in the mind'
Business Standard

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Marble Hall Murders



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Penguin
Random House
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First published by Century 2025
Published in Penguin Books 2025
001

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Typeset in 12.29/15.01pt Fournier MT Std by Six Red Marbles UK, Thetford, Norfolk
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorised representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978–1–804–94300–7

Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future
for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made
from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.

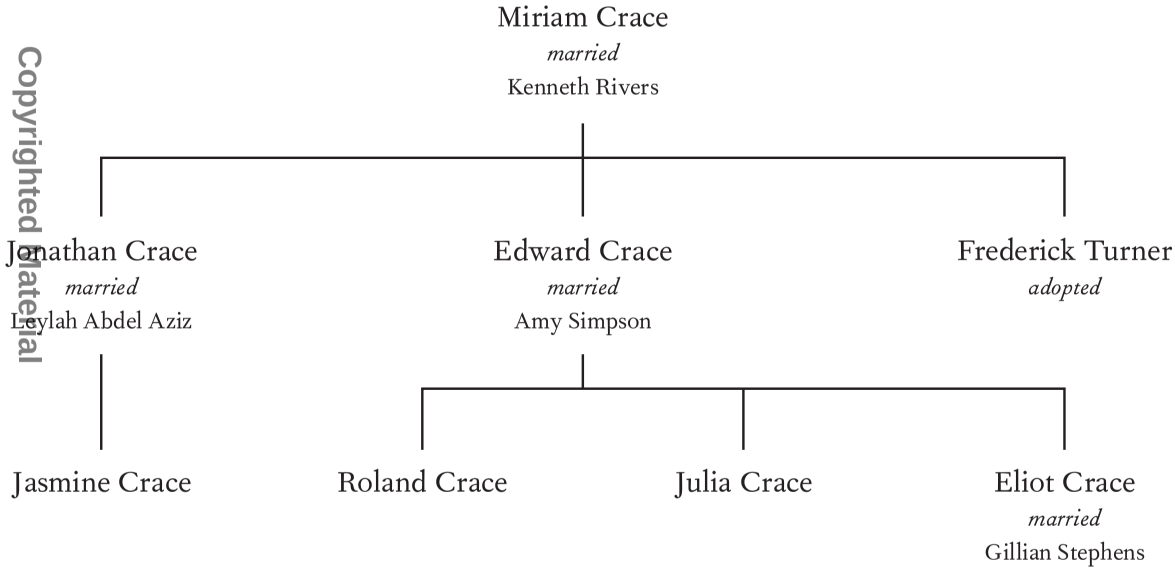


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Marble Hall Murders is a stand-alone novel – but it is also the third book in a series that began with *Magpie Murders*. Readers should be aware that the solution to *Magpie Murders* is revealed in this book.

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THE CRACE FAMILY TREE



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To Leander and Cosima.
I hope you'll read this one day.

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A New Start

Is there really such a thing as a happy ending?

When I think about the books I've loved throughout my life, it's always the final chapter that has left me with a sense of completeness, that has made the whole story worthwhile. I can still remember the relief I felt as a very young girl when Black Beauty found comfort and safety at Birtwick Park, or when Mary and Colin were discovered playing together in their perfect secret garden. Later on, I was feverishly turning the pages when Emma finally realised she was in love with Mr Knightley, and again when Jane Eyre gave birth to her first son with Mr Rochester.

Happy ever after? Of course they were! How could there be any question that they would be otherwise? It was a certainty that nurtured my love of literature and it never occurred to me that Mary and Colin would grow up, bicker and go their separate ways, or that Black Beauty would inevitably share the same fate – at the knacker's yard – as Boxer in *Animal Farm*, another book I devoured in my teens. How long would it be before Emma went back to her

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old ways or Mr Rochester came to resent being an invalid, in Jane's care?

The great joy of fiction is that no matter how problematic the journey, the resolution is somehow inevitable. Even when the main character dies – think of Sydney Carton's sacrifice in *A Tale of Two Cities* or Michael Henchard's pitiful departure at the end of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* – you realise it's exactly how it was meant to be and in that you find comfort. 'But there's no altering – so it must be,' as Hardy said.

Real life, with all its nuances and complexities, isn't the same, and this is especially true in the twenty-first century. Bad people prosper. Good people go bust. Read the newspapers or social media and it's easy to believe that there is no justice in the world and nobody is happy at all.

I had thought that Andreas and I were going to be together for ever. I loved him and although there were occasions when we wanted to strangle each other, I really believed I'd come to terms with Crete and had surrendered myself to the Aegean Sea, olive groves, the hollow tinkle of goats' bells, perfect sunsets and dinners with friends on long trestle tables beneath the bougainvillea. It was my own happy ending – or it would have been if my life had been a book.

But Crete never worked for me. I could have stayed there for a week, a month, even a year . . . but my whole life? I saw the very old ladies sitting outside their houses dressed head to toe in black and I thought, is that what I'm going to become? The Wednesday market, the olive harvest at the end of October, name days with cakes and biscuits, weddings and baptisms, always with the same box of fireworks. It just wasn't me. There were times when I almost resented the beauty of

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the landscape for keeping me its prisoner, and I found myself wondering just how much life I was missing on the other side of the mountains. I was, after all, on an island. Every morning, I went swimming in the dazzling blue water and came back with a vague sense that I hadn't swum far enough.

Against all the odds, the Hotel Polydorus, which Andreas had bought and I had helped to get running, was doing extremely well. We were booked out the entire season, the seafront terrace was jammed day and night and Andreas was even considering the purchase of a second property on the other side of Agios Nikolaos, near Ammoudi beach. This had brought his cousin and business partner, Yannis, back into the fold and the two of them never seemed to be out of each other's company . . . which only left me feeling more and more like an outsider. I was now working as an associate editor (freelance) with a new publisher, Causton Books, finishing the third in a series of very good Nordic noir mysteries. Did it really make sense to be doing the work on my bedroom's balcony, sending my notes via email and meeting on Zoom? What was I doing? My head was in London while my heart was no longer in Crete.

Oh dear. This all sounds like a long moan, which is not what I intend it to be. I'm just trying to explain why it was I'd decided that enough was enough and it was time to go home. Andreas drove me to Heraklion airport and although we had a last, fond embrace outside the departures lounge, we both knew it was the right decision and that although we would always be friends, we were no longer in love. At least, not with each other. Even as the plane climbed to thirty thousand feet, I thought about all the wonderful times we'd had

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together and there was an almost physical pain as the memories were swept away in the airstream behind me. But I knew I was doing the right thing. I was fifty-five years old and I was starting all over again.

I went back to Crouch End, in the north of London. That was where I'd been living when Andreas and I first met and I felt comfortable there. I knew lots of people in the area and it was convenient for Suffolk if I wanted to drive up and see my sister, Katie. I'd sold my old flat to buy the hotel, but I hadn't done too badly out of it. Andreas paid back my initial investment with interest and once I'd thrown in my savings and persuaded the bank to provide me with a mortgage I could just about handle, I had enough to buy a flat a few streets further down the hill from where I had been before. My basement flat was spread over a single floor with two bedrooms (one of which I would use as an office), a decent-sized kitchen/living room and a small bathroom tucked under the staircase that led to the two flats above me. The joy of the place was the patio garden on the other side of a pair of French windows, with flagstones, an ivy-covered wall and enough greenery to give the illusion that I was living in a tiny part of the countryside. A rickety door closed it off from the street, making it my own secret garden. There was even a murky pond with two goldfish. I named them Hero and Leander.

The next three months whizzed past. I'd arrived in time for the spring sales and threw myself into a shopping spree that included furniture and furnishings, kitchen equipment – pots, pans, glasses . . . everything including the sink. I found a team of local builders to put in a new bathroom and repaint some of the rooms. As for myself, I had to buy a completely

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new wardrobe as nothing I'd been wearing in Crete was any good in London, and then I went out and bought a completely unnecessary antique wardrobe to put it all in. I tussled with plumbers and electricians and spent hours on the phone waiting to speak to internet providers and insurance brokers. Best of all, I rescued my old MGB Roadster, which I'd never got round to selling, perhaps because I knew I would need it one day. It was only as I drove it out of its absurdly expensive home in King's Cross, cheerfully overtaking a police car on Highgate Hill, that I realised how sensible I'd been to hang on to it and how much it had become a part of my life.

I revisited friends and went to a couple of book launches, announcing to the world that I was back for good. I drove up to Suffolk and stayed with Katie, who was now divorced and, like me, living in a new home. She was going out with someone from the garden centre where she worked and I had never seen her happier or more self-confident. She persuaded me to adopt an adult cat I didn't want and which I only took when the rescue centre promised me it wouldn't eat the goldfish. I started reading James Joyce, something I had been trying to do since I left university. And I finished the edit I was working on, rearranging a few pieces of information in what was otherwise a perfect triumph for Politisjefinspectør Heidi Gundersen of the Norwegian Police Service.

I woke up on a Monday morning in June with the sun blazing in and Hugo (the cat) watching me from the small armchair that he had made his permanent home. I read twenty pages of *Dubliners*, glanced at the newspaper on my iPad, then showered and ate some breakfast. That was the time when I always missed Andreas. It was strange but for

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some reason getting out of bed alone was always more dispiriting than getting into it. I put the kettle on and was just reaching for the coffee beans when my mobile rang.

It was Michael Flynn, the publisher of Causton Books and effectively my boss. I knew him only from Zoom and could easily visualise his round face, thinning hair and glasses hanging on a cord because, he told me, he was always losing them. He usually wore a jacket and tie, but for all I knew he could have been naked below the waist when we spoke online. I didn't even know if he had legs.

'How are things going?' he asked. I'd told him I was back in London, but we'd only spoken a couple of times since I'd arrived.

'I'm fine, thank you,' I said.

'And the new house?'

'Well, it's a flat. But I'm very happy here. It suits me perfectly.'

'I'm glad to hear it. Look – I know this is a bit sudden, but could you come in today?'

'You've got the Gundersen book I sent you?'

'Yes. It's fine. But something else has come up and I have to say, you're perfect for it.'

'Can you send it to me?'

There was a pause at the other end of the line. 'It's not as easy as that. I think we should have a talk. If you come in at midday, we could have lunch.'

'I'm intrigued, Michael. I can be with you at twelve. But aren't you going to give me an idea what it's about?'

Another pause.

'Atticus Pünd,' he said, and rang off.

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To Be Continued

Causton Books had offices on the edge of Victoria, not an area known for its literary associations. It occupied a modern office block, spread over four floors with an airport-style entrance, a cafeteria on the ground floor and lifts that demanded an electronic pass. As I walked into the reception area with book covers flashing up on television screens but no actual books in sight, I was reminded how much of my career was behind me. Gone were the days of the independent publisher tucked away in a quiet mews with a solid front door and bay windows. I'd spent eleven years at Cloverleaf and had grown used to the narrow corridors with bad lighting and offices that seemed to have been built deliberately so the more senior you were, the more difficult you were to find. On the other hand, when I'd been lying half-conscious with the flames leaping up and devouring everything in sight, it had dawned on me that the wooden panelling, dusty carpets and curtains that had been so much the character of the place, and which I had always liked, were now going to be, quite literally, the death of me and if I survived, it might be time

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to have another think. Open-plan areas with line after line of desks separated by glass dividers, identikit furniture and lighting designed to enhance employee well-being may not be quite in the spirit of T. S. Eliot or Somerset Maugham, but at least they won't kill you.

Anyway, it's not the architecture or the furnishings that separate one publisher from another. It's the people. And as I walked into Causton Books just before midday, it was Jeanette, the receptionist who had never met me but knew I was coming and greeted me like an old friend, who made me feel at home. She provided me with the inevitable lanyard, opened the airport-style security gates and even managed to programme the lift to take me where I needed to go.

Michael Flynn was waiting for me on the fourth floor, minus the tie but, happily, with trousers and legs. Although we'd never actually met, we weren't exactly strangers and there was a brief hesitation as we hovered between a handshake and a more modern embrace, finally falling into the latter. With this ritual over, he led me along a passageway with shelves of books on one side and, on the other, a crowd of people in jeans and T-shirts hunched over computer screens, little white earbuds plugged into their heads, all of them at least twenty years younger than me.

He had booked a conference room and we sat on opposite sides of a table that was far too big for two people, surrounded by empty chairs. I noticed at once that as well as a coffee flask, milk and biscuits, he had a typescript waiting for me with a notepad resting on top, obscuring the title and the author's name . . . deliberately, I assumed. This was the reason he had wanted to see me.

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'It's good of you to come in, Susan,' he began. 'Will you have some coffee?'

'Thank you.'

The coffee might have been sitting there for an hour, but it came out steaming. I already liked the real Michael Flynn more than his screen image. There was a steely quality to him. After all, he was high up the ladder in a company employing over a hundred people. But at the same time, he was quieter and perhaps more humane than he had seemed in our conversations. That's the worst part of Zoom. It provides pictures and sound but sucks out pretty much everything else.

'How does it feel to be back in London?' he asked. He had the clipped tones of a BBC newscaster sometime around the Second World War.

'Strange.'

'Is it a permanent arrangement?'

'I think so.'

'Well, that's good news for us. You've been doing a terrific job for us out in Crete, but I think there will be much better opportunities for you, having you closer at hand.'

'Does that mean I can start working for you full-time?' I asked. As a freelancer, I was being paid by the hour – or perhaps by the word – and I had no benefits or security.

Michael's eyes narrowed and I wondered if I'd annoyed him, being so upfront. 'I'm afraid that's not possible right now,' he said. 'But, as I mentioned on the phone, we do have a project for you – and if it goes well, we could be open to negotiation.'

'Atticus Pünd,' I said.

'Exactly.' He had made it clear that he was the one calling

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the shots – which was how he wanted the relationship to work. 'As you know, Orion Books picked up the nine novels Alan Conway wrote and republished them. They did surprisingly well, considering it was public knowledge that Alan had no respect for the character he had created – or for his readers.'

'That's putting it mildly.'

'Well . . . yes.' He gave me a sympathetic look. 'I know you didn't have much fun working with him.'

'I didn't have any fun working with him. But I'm still glad the books were a success.'

It was strange to think how a chance meeting almost thirty years ago should have led to what had become, by any standards, a publishing phenomenon. Alan had started life as an English teacher in the private school where my nephew and niece happened to be students. He was unpopular even then, which should have warned me. Ten-year-olds have a way of knowing which way the wind is blowing. I sometimes think that Katie only introduced him to me in the hope that I would persuade him to leave the school.

That was exactly what happened. I read his manuscript and although it needed work, *Atticus Pünd Investigates* was an instant bestseller and launched a series that would sell eighteen million copies worldwide, making Alan a fortune in the process. He was translated into about thirty languages and, along with several literary awards, had been presented with a silver medal and the freedom of the city of Heidelberg. He had left Woodbridge School and bought himself a mansion outside Framlingham, changing its name to Abbey Grange, which happens to be the title of a Sherlock Holmes short story and tells you something about his self-image. The BBC had

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been on the brink of filming an eight-part series they were going to call *The Atticus Adventures*, and apparently Mads Mikkelsen had been signed up to play the lead – but that had all gone south when Alan had died, pushed off the tower of his expensive home.

Alan had never invited me to Abbey Grange, but then the two of us hadn't got on. I've met writers who mistrust their editors, but I've never come across one so resolutely opposed to them. Every suggestion I ever made, every cut, every question had invariably led to an argument, but it was only later that I realised it wasn't me he disliked. It was the books he felt he was being forced to write. Put bluntly, he wanted to be Salman Rushdie, not Agatha Christie – but that was never going to happen. He was stuck with himself.

'Anyway, we've stolen a march on Orion,' Michael went on. 'Someone here at Causton Books had the bright idea of commissioning a new Atticus Pünd novel.'

'Without Alan,' I said.

'Exactly. A continuation novel.' He went on quickly before I could interrupt him: 'It worked out very well for James Bond and Sebastian Faulks. I'm sure you know that *Devil May Care* was the fastest-selling work of fiction after Harry Potter . . . at least until Richard Osman came along. Then there are the new Hercule Poirot novels, Sherlock Holmes, Jeeves and Wooster, *Hitchhiker's Guide* . . .' He smiled. 'The simple truth is that nobody gives a damn about Alan Conway and Atticus Pünd can get along fine without him.'

He may have put it a little coldly, but he was right. It's strange how characters can become bigger than their authors, but popular fiction is absolutely crowded with them. It was

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one of the reasons Conan Doyle threw Sherlock Holmes off the Reichenbach Falls: a sense that his real talents were being overshadowed by his popular hero. Both A. A. Milne and his son Christopher Robin came to hate Winnie-the-Pooh, and Peter Pan left a trail of dead bodies in his wake. What do Mary Poppins, Tarzan, the Wizard of Oz and Dracula all have in common? Half the world knows them but would quite probably be unable to name the authors who created them.

'We got in touch with James Taylor six months ago,' Michael told me. 'I think you know him. He was Alan's live-in partner and he inherited the house, the money and the literary estate. We made an offer for an option for three new books. I'm amazed the idea hadn't occurred to Orion, but we persuaded James that we'd do a better job anyway. Have you seen the new covers they put on their reissue? Utterly drab and boring, I must say. Not that James gives a damn about such minor issues as style and presentation. All he's interested in is the bottom line. We made him a very generous offer and he's also come on board as a consultant. He couldn't be happier.'

None of this surprised me. I'd known James well, first when I'd arrived in Suffolk searching for the last chapter of *Magpie Murders* and later when I'd returned to England, trying to find the clue to an eight-year-old murder that had been concealed in *Atticus Pünd Takes the Case*, the third book in the series. In his twenties, James had been working as a male escort in London. He had been introduced to Alan, who had been married and very much in the closet at the time, and to be fair, James had helped him come to terms with his sexuality and had probably brought out the best in him. He

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had certainly been well rewarded. He had moved into Abbey Grange with Alan and, just as Michael said, had ended up inheriting everything. James was rude, brazen, unfaithful, self-absorbed and licentious – and I couldn't help liking him. The last time I'd seen him, we'd had lunch at Le Caprice and, as well as picking up the bill, he'd provided me with some of the clues I'd needed to solve the murder of Frank Parris and the disappearance of Cecily Treherne. I'd be happy to meet up with him.

'We certainly don't need Alan Conway,' Michael concluded.

'That may be true,' I agreed. 'I couldn't have worked with him again anyway. But even so, he'll be a hard act to follow. His plots were clever. He had a good ear for dialogue and I liked his characters. As much as I hate to admit it, he was a terrific writer . . . at least, when he wasn't trying to create the next Penguin Modern Classic.' I glanced at the typescript. The title and the author's name were still concealed. 'I take it that's the new book,' I said.

'It's the first thirty thousand words. Very much a work in progress.'

'I see you've printed it up for me.'

It was something of a joke between us. I suppose I'm old-fashioned, but Michael knew that I preferred working on paper. These days, everything is done via the computer screen, but I've always felt that a manuscript has a closer affinity to the finished book and I enjoy the physical contact when I'm making my changes. Even when I was in Crete, I'd bought a rickety printer that seemed to take half the morning to grind out a hard copy before I felt able to start work.

Michael smiled. 'Yes. It's all ready for your red pen.'

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'So are you going to tell me who's writing it?'

'Of course, although I'm going to ask you to keep it confidential for the time being. As a matter of fact, you know him.' He paused for effect. 'Eliot Crace.'

For a moment, I was lost for words . . . all thirty thousand of them. It was the last name I would have expected.

'You published him when you were at Cloverleaf,' Michael reminded me.

'That's not entirely true,' I said. 'I saw him twice, but I didn't deal with him myself. It was Charles who recommended him. Charles worked with him, not me.'

'Did you like him?'

'The first time I met him, he was drunk. The second time, he was covered in blood. He said he'd fallen off a bus.'

'Yes. I have had reason to ask myself if it was a good idea commissioning him, but of course we were buying into the name, and part of your job will be to keep hold of the reins. The book is important to us for a great many reasons and we don't want him going off-piste. That said, hopefully his bad boy days are behind him. He was only – what? – in his early twenties when you met him. He's married now. I think you'll find he's settled down.'

'What's his writing like?'

'Well, that's for you to tell me.' He poured himself more coffee. 'You know a great deal more about murder mysteries than I do. But from what I've read, I'd say Eliot has done a very good job. It certainly feels like the originals.'

'When is it set?' There was a reason why I asked this. In the last book, Atticus Pünd had been diagnosed with a brain

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tumour. This was his Reichenbach Falls. Alan had only given him months to live.

'It follows on from *Magpie Murders*.'

'It would have to follow on very quickly.'

'It does. Atticus Pünd is not at all well. He runs into an elderly lady he happens to know and she invites him to her home in the South of France. Her name is Lady Chalfont . . .'

I recognised the name. She was a character in *Gin & Cyanide*, the sixth book in the series.

'She tells him she's overheard something and makes it sound as if she's afraid for her life, and sure enough she's killed. She has a rather ghastly family, but it's her husband – her second husband – who's the main suspect. I was hoping you'd have a read of it and then help Eliot finish the rest of the manuscript. We want to publish early next year.'

It's one of the strange rules of publishing that deadlines are always too close and there never seems to be enough time to get everything done. I made the necessary calculations. 'That's tight,' I said.

'Eliot was slow getting started.' Michael must have seen my face fall because he moved straight on. 'It wasn't his fault. We wanted to get the story right and he spent ages structuring.' He smiled at me a second time. I felt he was turning it on and off like an electric light. 'The moment I heard you were coming back to the UK, I thought it was a match made in heaven, Susan. After all, you discovered Alan Conway. You were intimate with his prose style, the various tricks he used. I'm not saying this is perfect, but with your input it could be very commercial. Everyone loves Atticus Pünd and Eliot's

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name is well known to the public . . . his surname, anyway. I really think we could have a bestseller on our hands.'

'The two books Eliot wrote for us at Cloverleaf didn't do too well,' I remarked. I wouldn't normally have been so negative, but I had plenty of reasons to keep away from this project. And what I said was true. It was the reason why there hadn't been a third book in his series.

'I've read them,' Michael said. 'I enjoyed them. It may be that they weren't properly marketed.'

'We did the best we could.' His criticism irritated me, but I tried not to show it. 'All right,' I went on. 'I'll read it and get back to you. Where is Eliot living now?'

'West London . . . Notting Hill Gate. For what it's worth, I mentioned I was seeing you and he was very excited. He remembers you from Cloverleaf and he's very aware of what you did for Alan Conway.'

'That's very nice of him.' I glanced at the typescript. 'So do I get to see the title?' I asked.

'Of course.' He swung it round and lifted off the notepad. And there it was in black and white.

PÜND'S LAST CASE
Written by Eliot Crace

The tenth book in a nine-book series.

'An anagramp,' I said.

'I'm sorry?'

It was a private joke. I didn't explain.

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Thoughts

Alan Conway didn't enjoy writing murder mysteries, so he amused himself by playing games with his readers. He hid things in his books: puzzles within puzzles. The mention of Lady Chalfont had reminded me that, for no good reason, all the characters in *Gin & Cyanide* were named after London Underground stations. Lady Chalfont herself had come from Chalfont and Latimer on the Metropolitan line, and there had also been a butler called Hillingdon, Adam and Artemis Perivale – two socialites – and a Detective Inspector Stockwell. I was surprised he hadn't thrown in Lord Edgware for good measure.

And then there were the word games: the acrostics, the anagrams, the cryptograms, the codes. These had the effect of deconstructing the books, so that instead of focusing your attention on the characters and the plot, you were invited to consider the very building blocks he used, the letters on the page. This was one of the reasons why my time as Alan's editor was so difficult. I might ask him to take out an extraneous detail or reorganise a sentence because it didn't land

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comfortably on the ear and he would explode in anger. Over time, I came to realise that there were secrets in the book and although no reader would ever be aware of them, I was spoiling his fun.

Charles Clover, the CEO of Cloverleaf Books and the editor of Alan's last four books, had first-hand experience of this when he was publishing *Magpie Murders*. The two of them were having dinner at the Ivy restaurant when Charles referred to Alan's latest novel as '*The Magpie Murders*'. Alan had hit the roof. The title was '*MAGPIE MURDERS*', he yelled. There was no THE involved. It was only later that we discovered the titles of all nine Atticus Pünd novels had been deliberately chosen so the first letters would form an acrostic. *Atticus Pünd Investigates*, *No Rest for the Wicked*, *Atticus Pünd Takes the Case*, *Night Comes Calling* – and so on. What they spelled out was AN ANAGRAM.

Not an anagramp.

By adding a tenth title, *Pünd's Last Case*, Eliot Crace had spoiled Alan's joke.

I went straight back to Crouch End after my meeting with Michael Flynn. He had offered me lunch, but I had nothing else to say to him and wanted some time on my own. I had the typescript with me, although I wasn't ready to read it. In fact, as much as I needed the money, I didn't want to do this job at all.

To begin with, I had no love of continuation novels. Even the name put me off. There can be historical novels, romances, science fiction stories. All of these give you an idea of the authors' interests and what inspires them. But who wants just to continue? What exactly is the point?

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I remember when the trend began – and perhaps it was

Sebastian Faulks who lit the blue touchpaper. His Bond novel was a big success, but suddenly it felt as if every publisher was trying to connect a well-known author with a much-loved character in the hope of a quick profit. I remember someone trying to pitch me Val McDermid doing a sequel to *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. She hadn't ever been approached, though if she had been interested, I suppose I would have gone along with it because I would have loved to work with her – but otherwise my views hadn't changed. Take the originality out of fiction and what's left?

My reservations about *Pünd's Last Case* went much further than that.

Alan Conway had been nothing but trouble for me almost from the day we met. I'd thought his books were entertainments, but it turned out they were more like dangerous weapons, loaded with malevolence and launched to cause maximum damage.

Take his habit of putting people he knew into his stories. Lots of writers do that. Charles Dickens drew many of his most famous characters – Bill Sikes, Mr Micawber, Fagin, Scrooge and others – from real life. But Alan deliberately set out to distort and caricature those closest to him. His sister became a jealous spinster, his boyfriend an idiot, one of his students a paedophile gardener. It was an ugly thing to do and, in the end, it led to real tragedy: to the disappearance and death of Cecily Treherne, who had recognised the identity of the killer concealed in *Atticus Pünd Takes the Case*. Twice, I had been called in to pick up the pieces and, on both occasions, had come close to being killed myself. I was in no mood to try my luck a third time.

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It wasn't as if I'd come out of all this unscathed. I'd lost my livelihood when the business had burned down with me inside it. My eyesight had been permanently damaged to the extent that reading, always my greatest pleasure, now had to be rationed to one-hour doses. Worse than that, the whole of the London publishing scene had turned its back on me once Charles Clover had been identified as the killer. There was a feeling that Alan had got only what he deserved, but it was thanks to me that a successful indie had gone out of business, with its CEO ending up in jail. I no longer had a job, nobody wanted to employ me and I'd had little choice but to sell my flat and move to Crete, an adventure that hadn't ended happily either.

In the long run, I would have been much better off if I had never heard of Alan Conway, and if I had any sense at all, I would have nothing more to do with him. It seemed almost unbelievable that Michael Flynn should have thought up this new novel in the first place and that he was attempting to foist it on me. It was like one of those horror films that come with a number six or seven after the title, where the leading lady, despite having changed her name, gone through therapy and moved to the other side of the world, still finds herself being chased along the corridors by the same maniac with the black robes, the disfigured face and the fifteen-inch kitchen knife.

So why was the typescript sitting on my kitchen table? Why had I even taken it with me from Causton Books? The answer to that was all around me. I had saddled myself with a mortgage that needed to be paid off each month and even the chair I was sitting on had put a strain on my credit card. Quite simply, I needed the money — and more than that,

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Causton Books was the one place in town that might offer me a permanent, senior job. Michael Flynn had said he was open to negotiation. Turn him down and I'd have nothing to negotiate with.

I hadn't even looked at it while I was on the tube train, but finally I allowed my eyes to settle on the title and my first thought was that it would have to change. In every title of the series so far, the main character had appeared either as Atticus or Atticus Pünd. Pünd felt too abrupt on its own. It didn't work. I also wondered if his fans would want to follow him round the South of France while he was in the last throes of terminal cancer. Anyway, Michael had said that he was commissioning three new books, meaning that he was expecting Eliot Crace to come up with at least two more cases after this one. By the time he got to the third in his series, poor Atticus would be on his back, attached to a saline drip.

It was two o'clock in the afternoon, far too early for alcohol, but I went to the fridge and poured myself a glass of wine, adding a plate of cottage cheese and salad to reassure myself that it was just a late lunch. The cat appeared the moment the fridge door opened and began to rub itself against my leg, much to my annoyance. A woman in her fifties living alone in a cosy ground-floor flat is perfectly fine, but the moment you add a cat, it somehow turns into a cliché. I bit into a stick of celery, grimacing at the creature at the same time.

I thought about Eliot Crace. I had to admit that choosing him had been a smart decision on Michael's part.

Eliot was the grandson of one of the UK's most successful authors, a worldwide phenomenon who dwarfed even Alan Conway. Miriam Crace had never written detective fiction,

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but that was what Michael wanted: the famous name without the comparisons. The last thing he'd want to hear was '*Not as good as Granny*.'

Miriam was a children's author who had produced sixty-three books during a career that had spanned about as many years. She was the author of *The Little People*, a fantasy about an ordinary family of do-gooders who were only two inches tall (in later editions this was changed to five centimetres, much to her dismay). At one stage, it was estimated that 95 per cent of homes in the UK had at least one of her books on the shelves and 40 per cent had ten or more. She had sold an astonishing billion copies worldwide – not quite putting her in the *Guinness World Records* but certainly outselling it – and had made the word 'little' comprehensible in forty-seven languages. Miriam had insisted that the family's name should not be translated. So there was never *Les Petits Gens* or *De Små Menneskene*. About half the children on the planet had grown up with Grandpa Little, Grandma Little, Mr and Mrs Little, Harry, Jack, Jasmine and Rose Little . . . and, in the late nineties, Karim and Njinga Little, who had both been adopted.

Although she was a much-loved public figure, a household name, very little was known about Miriam Crace as far as her private life was concerned. She had been the subject of two biographies, but she had worked closely with the authors and the one I'd skimmed through had portrayed her as nothing less than a saint. There had also been a third, unauthorised biography commissioned by HarperCollins that had hinted at darker things, but the Crace Estate, working with a ferocious team of lawyers, had threatened to sue both the author

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and the publisher and the book had been withdrawn before it got anywhere near the shelves.

Miriam had given interviews reluctantly and only when she was promoting a new book or raising awareness for the two charities she supported: the St Ambrose Children's Home and Orphanage in Salisbury and the Miriam Crace Libraries Trust. She came from a religious background – her father had been a deacon in the Catholic Church – and she kept her faith throughout her life. This may have been the reason why she never divorced her husband, Kenneth Rivers. (Like Margaret Chalfont, she had never taken her husband's name, but more peculiarly had insisted that her children should follow suit.) There had always been rumours that her marriage was not an entirely happy one and, sure enough, the couple did separate for a year. In 1955, she had a nervous breakdown – caused by overwork, according to her biographers – and spent six months recharging her batteries in a private clinic in Lausanne. It was on her return to England, the same year, that she had bought Marble Hall, near Devizes, along with fifty acres of Wiltshire countryside. At the time of her death, forty-eight years later, she was still living there with Kenneth, her two sons and their wives, and four grandchildren. Marble Hall was now open to the public.

Today, she was still a major force in publishing, selling millions of books a year, much to the annoyance of many living writers who felt she'd had more than a fair innings. The Miriam Crace Estate continued to be a full-time business, managed by her elder son, Jonathan Crace, who was of course related to my new author. He was Eliot's uncle. *The Little People* had been turned into graphic novels, a cartoon

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series on ITV, a hugely popular musical at the Bridge Theatre, three feature films, a ride at Universal Studios and a vast range of merchandise that included stationery, stuffed toys, biscuit tins, board games, computer games, clocks, calendars and children's clothes. It had recently been announced that Netflix had agreed a deal for two hundred million dollars for the TV rights and were planning a major new drama series to run for five seasons. It was Jonathan Crace who had negotiated the deal.

And what of Eliot Crace?

I'd seen him two or three times when he came into Cloverleaf Books and I remembered him as a very handsome, angelic young man, with long fair hair and an elfin face. He had all the charm and self-confidence that comes with a private education and a wealthy upbringing, although, unfortunately, they had arrived with a measure of arrogance too. He always seemed to be in a hurry, talking too fast, flitting from subject to subject, lurching out of his chair and over to the nearest open window to light a cigarette.

As I'd told Michael, it was Charles Clover who had discovered him and who looked after the two detective stories he wrote for us. But I'd been understating it when I'd said they hadn't done well. They'd barely sold at all. Eliot wasn't a bad writer, but he'd been unwise in his choice of detective: a time-travelling alchemist from the court of Queen Elizabeth I let loose on the twenty-first century. His books had fallen between too many stools. I wasn't sure if they were adult or teenage fiction, real or fantastical, to be taken seriously or to be laughed at – and the book-buying public obviously couldn't decide either. Charles had worked with

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Eliot's uncle and had known Eliot since he was a child, so he was particularly upset when I put my foot down and refused to go ahead with a third Dr Gee mystery. But it had made no sense to publish books that nobody wanted and anyway, Eliot was a liability: high on drugs, drink, parties and anti-depressants that seemed to be working too well. Charles was sure that Eliot would succeed as a writer once he grew up and he insisted that the door would always be open at Cloverleaf Books. But Eliot never came back.

Until now. I wondered how Michael Flynn had got hold of him and how he'd had the idea in the first place. Suddenly, I regretted not staying for lunch.

Instead, I carried my plate and my glass of wine over to the kitchen table and sat down with the typescript in front of me. I had already decided that I was going to read it. I had nothing else to do that afternoon and I thought it would be interesting to see how Atticus Pünd had turned out in a different author's hands.

At the end of the day, what harm could it do?

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PÜND'S LAST CASE

by
Eliot Crace

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CHARACTERS

Atticus Pünd	The detective
James Fraser	His assistant

THE FAMILY

Lady Margaret Chalfont	The wealthy widow of Henry Chalfont, the 6th Earl Chalfont
Jeffrey Chalfont	Son of Henry and Margaret Chalfont, now the 7th Earl
Lola Chalfont	An actress and singer, married to Jeffrey Chalfont
Cedric Chalfont	Jeffrey and Lola's eight-year-old son
Judith Lyttleton	Daughter of Henry and Margaret Chalfont. An ethnologist.
Harry Lyttleton	Married to Judith. A property developer.
Elmer Waysmith	An American art dealer, now married to Lady Margaret Chalfont
Robert Waysmith	Only son of Elmer Waysmith from his first marriage

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OTHERS

Frédéric Voltaire	A police officer with the Sûreté
Béatrice Laurent	Housekeeper at the Chateau Belmar in Cap Ferrat
Estelle Dubois	Director of the Werner-Waysmith art gallery
Jean Lambert	Solicitor with an office in Saint-Paul-de-Vence
Alice Carling	His secretary
Harlan Scott	A private investigator
Hector Brunelle	A pharmacist in Nice
Dr Benson	A Harley Street doctor

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ONE

London, 1955

The rain was lashing down, cold, grey rain that slicked the pavements, hammered at the windows and spat into ever-widening puddles. Rain dripped out of guttering and penetrated the brickwork. It felt as if it had rained all of May, and although June was just around the corner, there was no escaping it. Everyone was in a bad mood as they scurried along the pavements, still in their winter coats. The summer should have arrived by now, but it was as if the rain had beaten it back.

Atticus Pünd made his way down Harley Street, his hands in his pockets, drawing his trench coat closer to his body, trying to keep out the rain. It was a journey he had made several times since the shock of his diagnosis six weeks ago, and he was surprised how quickly everything had become familiar to him, even the certainty of his own death.

He had a brain tumour. Nothing could be done about it and in just a few months it would kill him. This visit to the doctor was little more than a formality. Dr Benson would examine him, ask questions about his physical well-being, his sleep, his appetite, his state of mind – and then send him home with a smile and a few words of comfort. The two of

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them had developed a strange rapport, something more than doctor and patient. They were partners in a process that was universal, beyond their comprehension, and one that neither of them could change.

Dr Benson's clinic was on the ground floor of a tall, narrow building, identical to its neighbours on either side. Fifteen years ago, there would have been railings separating it from the street, but these had been removed along with all the other metal in London, repurposed for the war effort. It reminded Pünd of the times he had lived through, the world tearing itself apart, so many millions of deaths while he had languished behind the barbed wire of a Nazi concentration camp that he should not have survived. Even when Dr Benson had told him the bad news, Pünd had thought of himself as fortunate. He had never expected to live this long.

He reached the front door and rang the bell. Almost immediately, it was opened by a young woman whose face he recognised but whose name he had never learned. She was the clinic's receptionist. She knew every patient who came to the building and remembered those who didn't return.

'Mr Pünd,' she said, with a smile that suggested they were both delighted he was there. 'What a beastly summer we're having! Do come in.'

She showed him into the waiting room with its flock wallpaper, antique floor lamps and mahogany table on which rested the usual pile of magazines: *Country Life*, *Punch* and *Reader's Digest*, none of them up to date. Four doctors shared the building and all of them had patients arriving at the same time. Pünd recognised a foreign-looking man sitting in the corner. From his appearance and his posture, he had to be

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ex-military. Sure enough, a nurse in a white coat came in a moment later.

'Major Alcazar . . .'

The man stood up stiffly and followed her out.

Pünd took his place on a sofa and reached out for one of the magazines, not because he intended to read it, but because it prevented the two other people in the room from questioning him. He flicked it open and glanced at a picture of a country estate in Wiltshire. It reminded him of the case he had just solved in the village of Saxby-on-Avon. His last case, probably.

Outside, in the corridor, he heard a woman speaking, high-pitched and a little querulous, someone who was used to being obeyed.

'I think I left it in the waiting room. It must have dropped out of my bag.'

Pünd had already recognised the voice before Lady Margaret Chalfont appeared in the doorway. There could be no mistaking it. Lady Chalfont spoke in the same way she lived her life: imperiously and with every intention of being noticed. The figure who now stood before him was a tiny bird of a woman who seemed to be shrinking even as she stood there, but who was fighting it with every inch of her being. She was in her mid-sixties, but illness had added ten years to that. Her hair, which had been dyed silver and mauve, was carefully coiffured to disguise how thin it had become, and she had dressed purposefully in bright colours with a green jacket, ballooning maroon trousers and an exotic headband missing only the feather, but none of this could disguise the truth of her condition. She was holding a Gucci clutch bag in one hand, a single glove in the other.

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As she came into the room, she was already searching for its companion. Her eyes darted over to the sofa where Pünd had chosen to sit and he saw the expression on her face change as she noticed him.

'My dear Mr Pünd! What a surprise. You are the last person I'd expect to see in this awful place. Are you ill?'

It was just like her to be so direct. Pünd rose to his feet. 'I am waiting to see the doctor,' he replied non-committally.

'They don't know anything!' Lady Chalfont sighed. 'They look you in the eye and tell you, take this pill and that pill and you'll be fine, but you're not. You never are. When the Grim Reaper comes calling, the doctors can only sit there, hiding behind their charts and their X-rays. Charlatans, the lot of them!'

'You seem unchanged, Lady Chalfont.'

'An illusion, Mr Pünd. Anyway, "*Nichts ist höher zu schätzen als der Wert des Tages*,"* as Goethe so rightly said. And nothing has brightened up this one more than bumping into you.'

Pünd smiled. He had met Margaret Chalfont in Salisbury nine years ago, when she had been one of the main suspects in the murder of George Colindale, who had been poisoned at a New Year's party to which they had both been invited. At that time, she had been single. Her husband – Henry Chalfont, the 6th Earl Chalfont – had been killed by a V-2 rocket in the last months of the war. Pünd recalled that there had been a son and a daughter, both married, and later he had spotted the arrival of a grandson, announced in *The Times*. He had liked Lady Chalfont immediately. She might be loud and

* Nothing is worth more than today.

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outspoken, but she was also cultured, well meaning and, as it turned out, the one who had made the single observation that led Pünd to solve the case.

It seemed remarkable that they should have met now and in this place, and he was wondering what he should say next when his eye fell on something he had noticed the moment he had entered the room but which he had until now ignored. He leaned down and retrieved a single calf-leather glove from underneath the sofa where he had been sitting. Only the fingertips had been visible.

'I believe this is what you are looking for, Lady Chalfont,' he said.

She took it, beaming, and pressed it against its partner. 'You really are a marvel, Mr Pünd. You don't miss anything, do you!'

She was about to go on when there was a movement at the door and a much younger woman presented herself; not a nurse and quite possibly not a patient either. She looked uncomfortable, in a hurry to be out of there. She was very much stouter than Lady Chalfont, with the face of a woman who took herself seriously. She wore heavy glasses and her almost colourless hair was tied back in a bun. Her clothes, like her manner, were businesslike. There was something of the prison warden about her as she stood there, upright, in her ungainly leather shoes.

'Have you found it, Mother?' she asked impatiently, then stopped, seeing that she had company. Pünd bowed to her. So they were related! It was said that Lady Chalfont had been a great beauty in her youth, but her daughter looked nothing like her.

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'This gentleman found it for me, Judith. In fact, we're old friends. This is Atticus Pünd. I'm sure you've heard me talking about him. He is quite probably the best detective in the world.' She turned to Pünd and continued without taking a breath. 'My daughter. Judith Lyttleton as she is now. She drove me here.'

'It is a pleasure to meet you, Mrs Lyttleton,' Pünd said.

'Actually, it's Dr Lyttleton,' Judith replied with impatience rather than rancour, as if this was something she was used to explaining – which indeed it was. 'I have a postgraduate degree in ethnology from University College, London. I've written several papers about Peru. You may have read them.'

'I'm afraid I have not.'

Judith nodded, disappointed but unsurprised. 'We really ought to be on our way, Mother. We must pick up the cases and get to the airport.'

'We're heading back to the South of France,' Lady Chalfont explained. 'My late husband, Henry, bought a house in the Côte d'Azur and I spend the whole summer there. I remarried, by the way. Did you know that?'

'I did not,' Pünd said.

'Technically, I'm now Margaret Waysmith, but I've kept my old name. I like being Lady Chalfont. Why should I lose my title along with everything else?'

She had both her gloves and her daughter was waiting for her to leave. But something held her back. 'It's extraordinary I should have bumped into you today,' she went on. 'Something has happened that I would very much like to discuss with you.'

'Mother . . .' Judith said impatiently.

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'There's no need to hurry me, dear. We've got plenty of time to catch the plane.' She examined Pünd with eyes that were bright and intense. He could see her mind working as she came to her decision. 'I wish to consult with you on a matter of the greatest urgency,' she said. 'Are you still at the same address?'

'I regret that I am not taking on any new cases, Lady Chalfont.'

'I shall write to you anyway. I believe that everything has a purpose, Mr Pünd, and you were sent here today for a reason. We were meant to meet. The truth is that there is nobody else in the world who could help me in my hour of need. Would you be so good as to give me your card?'

Pünd hesitated, then produced a business card, which he handed to her. She glanced at it before slipping it into her handbag.

'Thank you, Mr Pünd. I cannot tell you what a relief it is to know that there's someone I can trust and believe in. Even if you can offer me nothing more, I will appreciate your advice.'

Judith Lyttleton looked more uncomfortable than ever. She glanced at her mother, and for a moment their eyes were locked and something – perhaps an unspoken warning – was exchanged between them. Then the two of them swept out of the room. Pünd heard the front door open and close.

The nurse reappeared. 'The doctor will see you now, Mr Pünd.'

She led Pünd down a corridor that had already become familiar and through a door at the far end. Dr Benson was waiting for him, sitting behind his desk in his stuffy office with the radiators turned up too high. It had been six weeks

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since the examination that had told both men the worst news possible and now their meeting was brisk and businesslike. Dr Benson took Pünd's pulse and blood pressure, listened to his heart and examined his eyes. Then came the questions.

'How are the headaches?'

'They come, but not too often. And the pills that you prescribed are very effective.'

'Are you sleeping well?'

'Yes, thank you.'

'Appetite?'

'I am eating less, I think, but I would have said it is by choice. My assistant has complimented me on my loss of weight.'

'Have you told him yet?'

Pünd shook his head. 'He knows I am not well. He has seen the various medicines. But I have not told him the full seriousness of the situation.'

'You're worried he'll leave you?'

'No, Doctor. Not at all. But James is a sensitive young man. It is better, I think, to keep the worst from him. He is also helping me continue with the book I am writing. It is my hope that *The Landscape of Criminal Investigation* will one day take its place in the British Library, the Criminal Records Office and anywhere else it may help future investigations.'

Dr Benson nodded and reached for his pipe. He did not light it. 'Well, Mr Pünd, you're doing very well. Much better than I had expected. You can call me any time, of course, but I don't think we need to meet again until next month.'

Pünd smiled to himself. He had recognised the moment when Dr Benson reached for his pipe. It was his way of announcing that the meeting was over, and he liked to end

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with a note of optimism. Next week. Next month. Next time. He always looked to the future, reassuring his patients that they still had one.

But Pünd did not move. 'I wonder if I may ask you something,' he said. 'Just now, before I came into your office, I met an old friend, Lady Margaret Chalfont.'

'You know her?'

'Indeed so. We met on an earlier case of mine. I was sorry to see her here and wondered if you could tell me something of her condition.'

'I'm not sure I should share information about my patients, Mr Pünd. Why do you ask?'

'Because Lady Chalfont has requested my assistance in a matter she described as urgent, and because although we only spoke for a few moments, it seemed to me that she was afraid.'

'Afraid of dying?'

'Perhaps. But not as a result of her illness.'

Dr Benson considered. 'Well, as it's you, Mr Pünd, I can't see any harm in telling you, in confidence, that Lady Chalfont is suffering from mitral stenosis. This is a narrowing of the mitral valve which controls the flow of blood to the heart, and regrettably I have had to inform her that, given her advanced age, I do not believe surgery is worth the risk. I'm afraid she has limited time.'

'How limited?'

'Hard to say. But months rather than years.'

Pünd nodded. It had been typical of Lady Chalfont to be so defiant, scornful of doctors and modern medicine, having been told there was nothing they could do for her. 'Thank you, Dr Benson.'

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He got to his feet.

'Has she asked you to join her in the South of France?' the doctor asked.

'She did not go so far.'

'That's a pity. I understand she has a very beautiful house on the coast at Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat. I would have said it would do you good, a week in the Mediterranean sun. This blasted weather here in England makes even the healthiest and fittest of us feel run-down.' He looked at his window and the water buffeting the glass. 'I've never seen so much rain. Perhaps you should think about it anyway!'

Pünd considered what Dr Benson had said. It had never occurred to him that he might travel again, at least not further than the south-west of England, where his most recent case had taken him. But why not? It was not just a question of feeling the warm sunshine on his skin one last time. There was something else.

He remembered the way the mother and the daughter had looked at each other just before they left. Lady Chalfont had already spoken of urgency, the need for help, but it was Judith Lyttleton who had attracted Pünd's attention.

From the moment she had heard his name and understood who he was, Judith had wanted to get her mother out of the room and away from him. She had heard Lady Chalfont asking him for help, but she had made no comment herself, as if it had nothing to do with her.

The doctor of ethnology hadn't just been uncomfortable about the meeting.

She had been afraid.

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TWO

Four days had passed since Atticus Pünd had visited the clinic in Harley Street and he was up bright and early in his office in Clerkenwell Square, working through the most recent pages of his book, which James Fraser had typed for him. *The Landscape of Criminal Investigation* had become the main priority in his life and, given the slow progress of his illness, he was beginning to think there was a chance he could finish it, even if he might not have the time to correct all his assistant's typing errors and spelling mistakes. Well, a publisher would see to all that. It was the content that mattered.

He drew a page towards him and began to read. He knew that he had to be careful. If he worked non-stop, after a couple of hours the typescript would give him a headache that would knock him off his feet. He had to measure himself. Thirty minutes of concentration, then either a walk in the fresh air or a cup of tea, perhaps with a piece by Brahms or Schubert on the gramophone. But the section he had just completed was a fascinating one. It was in a chapter called 'The Killer Tells All'.

He read:

> Just as a poker player has what is called a 'tell', so the murderer will give himself away by involuntary

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behaviour, particularly when he is under pressure. I have named this phenomenon 'The Tell-All' and it once manifested itself in two quite different ways during the same investigation. I have already discussed the case of Eileen Marino, a very attractive and intelligent woman with two children and a career in journalism. She had attempted to persuade me that she very much loved her husband, Paul, a successful lawyer, even though, as it later became clear, she had stabbed him to death on their return from the theatre.

I was interviewing her in the sitting room of their Chiswick home and for thirty minutes she had been completely relaxed. During our conversation, her pet dog pushed open the door and came into the room and it was from that moment that I noticed a marked difference in her attitude. She was nervous and ill at ease. This was her first 'tell'. What was it that had made the difference? For a long time, I assumed that it must be something to do with the animal (which had curled up in front of the fire). Could it be that the dog had been a silent witness to the crime? There was, incidentally, nothing outside the door – not that I could see.

The answer only became apparent to me when I placed myself in her position and realised that, because of the angles, when she looked into the mirror that was in front of her, she was confronted by a full-length portrait of her husband, hanging on

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the wall of the corridor outside. When the door was closed, it had been out of sight, but when she was forced to look at him, she had been overcome by guilt and shame.

Mrs Marino later admitted that she and her husband had argued over the family's savings, most of which she had spent. She still insisted she had had nothing to do with his murder, but it was now that her second 'tell' came into play. Why did she repeatedly dab at her eye as if she were on the edge of tears? It was always the left eye, I noticed, as if she had some strange medical condition that allowed her to weep only on one side of her face.

After I had re-examined the photographs taken at the scene of the crime, the solution to this curious behaviour became quickly apparent. When Mrs Marino had stabbed her husband to death, a few drops of his blood had splattered into her left eye, and it was not remorse I had been witnessing but disgust. Recalling what she had done, in the manner of a modern-day Lady Macbeth she was trying to wipe away the memory of her crime.

Pünd turned the page and was about to continue reading when the door opened and James Fraser came in, carrying a tray with a cup of tea, a folded copy of *The Times* and about half a dozen cards and letters. He had dressed optimistically in cotton trousers, a white shirt and a V-neck sweater, as if the summer had finally arrived. It was true

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that no clients ever called at the office now and Pünd had agreed that a jacket and tie were unnecessary, but it still seemed to him that his assistant was taking informality a touch too far.

'Good morning, Mr Pünd.' Fraser was as cheerful as ever, as if he was determined not to acknowledge Pünd's illness. 'How are you today?'

'I am well, thank you, James.'

'I see you have the new pages.'

'I think they read very well,' Pünd said. 'I'm hoping to complete the chapter before the end of the day.'

'Well, I've brought your tea, the newspaper and the morning post.' Fraser carefully set the tray down on Pünd's desk. 'A couple of bills. I'll sort those out. A note from Detective Inspector Chubb wondering if you'd care for lunch next week.'

'I'm afraid not.'

'That's what I thought. I'll send your apologies. An invitation from the Police Orphans Fund asking you to be the guest speaker at their autumn conference. Again, I'll tell them no. Oh – and you've had a letter from France.' Fraser smiled, pleased with himself. 'I can tell from the stamp.'

'That is indeed good detective work, James.' Pünd reached for the envelope and tore it open. 'It is something I have been expecting,' he added.

'A case?'

'A lady who perhaps requires my help.'

He took out a single sheet of paper. The letter was handwritten in green ink, the words looping and leaning into each other, fighting for space on the line.

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Chateau Belmar

Sunday, 28 May

My dear Mr Pünd,

I was so surprised to see you in Harley Street that I am not sure I enquired properly after your health. I very much hope that you are in better shape than me. You may recall that I was having problems with my heart when we met all those years ago. Unfortunately, it looks as if the beastly thing is about to give up altogether. I am on borrowed time.

So I hope you are well enough to consider this request, which I am making to you with . . . well, all my heart. I need your help. And I only hope that you will receive this before it is too late.

You never met my first husband, Henry. After he died – at the very end of the war – I thought I would never be happy again, but then I met Elmer Waysmith and we hit it off from the very start. We have been married for six years now and he has become my best friend and confidant: someone in whom I have complete trust.

But the day before I left for London, sitting on my balcony with the Mediterranean so beautiful in front of me, I overheard something that shocked me to my core and which I find impossible to believe. I was thinking of approaching the police, although I dreaded doing so. And then, against all the odds, I ran into you.

If you will come and stay with me at the Chateau Belmar (it is a beautiful place and we have an excellent chef), I will explain

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everything. I must know the truth, Mr Pünd, and there is nobody else who can help.

Sincerely,
Margaret Chalfont

Pünd read the letter, then handed it to Fraser, who did the same.

'She sounds a bit desperate,' Fraser observed. 'Will you go?'

Pünd took the letter back and gazed at it for a long time, not rereading it – he had already memorised every detail, down to the last comma and the double crease in the middle of the page where it had been folded into the envelope. *I must know the truth, Mr Pünd.* Those were the words that most troubled him. He had spent much of his life in a search for the truth and if there was one thing he had learned, it was this.

The truth can be dangerous.

He looked out of the window. It was not raining today, but the sky was still grey, the clouds threatening. He reflected that he had spent many hours sitting in the same chair in the same room, and although it was true that he had made good progress with his book, he was beginning to feel almost a prisoner . . . of both his illness and his work. Dr Benson had suggested to him that sunshine and a change of scenery might do him good. Pünd had never believed in coincidence, but he had to admit that the letter was remarkably well timed.

'What is your opinion, James?' he asked.

'I'd love to know what she overheard,' Fraser replied. 'And it would be fascinating to find out what's going on. It's just a

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shame that you've decided to hang up your hat. Shall I write to her that you're too busy to make the trip?'

Pünd thought for a moment, remembering what Dr Benson had said to him. He came to a decision. 'On the contrary, James, you can send her a telegram to say that we will arrive the day after tomorrow.'

'You mean, you're going to take the case?'

'A little sunshine will do me no harm, and Lady Chalfont is a friend. How can I refuse?'

'That's absolutely marvellous!' Pünd could hardly believe how quickly his assistant cheered up again. 'I haven't been to the South of France since I was a boy and my parents sent me on one of those French exchanges. I spent six weeks with a family in Provence. The Duponts. They were very nice people, although they were always shouting. Dinner time was like being at the storming of the Bastille.'

'How is your French?'

'Rusty, but it'll soon polish up. Do you want me to get plane tickets?'

'I do not think I am quite well enough for the demands of air travel, James. I would prefer to take the train. You can book two first-class sleeper compartments on Le Train Bleu to Nice. Can you also inform Lady Chalfont that we shall be staying at the Grand-Hôtel?'

'She's offered to put you up at her chateau,' Fraser reminded him.

'It is most thoughtful of her, but I will be more comfortable in my own domain. I will need privacy and somewhere to rest. The gardens are very beautiful, I believe, and they have a swimming pool which I am sure you will enjoy.'

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'Right-ho. I'll get on the phone and book two rooms.' Fraser sprang to his feet, then turned round before leaving. 'It's not my place to say this, Mr Pünd, but I'm ever so glad you've decided to take this case. You really haven't been quite yourself these last few weeks, and although I know the book is terribly important and all that, I think you'll be much happier sniffing out a crime. That's what you do best!'

The door closed as Fraser headed off towards his own small office next door. Atticus Pünd stayed where he was, his work forgotten, the letter in front of him. Had he made the right decision? He had no doubt of it. The thought of what lay ahead had awoken something in him. Already, for the first time in a long time, he felt alive. And there was something about the letter that alarmed him – even more than the words themselves. Lady Chalfont was in danger. He was certain of it. He was leaving as quickly as he could. He would ask Fraser to start packing straight away.

Still, he wondered if he would arrive too late.

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THREE

The sun was rising on another perfect day in the South of France – but then, when was the French Riviera anything but perfect? Swiftly, the shadows were pushed away. The sea glittered. The palms and olive trees seemed to wake up and stretch out their arms. The first fishing boats appeared, skimming across the surface as they returned to the harbour, and the seagulls hung expectantly in the air, hoping there had been a good catch.

The Chateau Belmar had been constructed on a promontory overlooking the Bay of Villefranche, a front seat in this glorious natural theatre. It was a splendid building, designed in the belle époque style with the emphasis on geometry and elegance. It was painted in that deep yellow which can only be truly appreciated in tropical climates, with white shutters and porticos and a terracotta roof that extended over two wings connected to the main body of the house. It was surrounded by nine acres of gardens designed by the great Achille Duchêne so that the view from every bedroom would have at least one unique feature: a fountain, a statue, a gazebo, the swimming pool or the beehives.

It was not a huge chateau, nowhere near the size of its near neighbour, the Villa Ephrussi de Rothschild (also created by Duchêne). But with its seven bedrooms spread over three

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floors, its two *salons*, its banquet-sized dining room, the patios and terraces, it was certainly spacious enough. It had been bought by Henry Chalfont, who had been born rich and had multiplied his fortune by creating the private bank that carried his name. He had expressed the hope that the chateau would remain in the family for generations to come.

Tucked away in a small bedroom on the top floor, Béatrice Laurent was woken by the sound of hammering at the door.

It happened often and she knew even before she opened her eyes that it was only a dream. As always, she had heard the cars arrive, the shouting in German, then the men pouring into the house, a series of confused images that made no sense to her nineteen-year-old eyes. At the time, she had been a kitchen maid working for a wealthy family in Paris – the Steiners. It was 16 July 1942, the first day of the mass arrests that came to be known as the Vel d'Hiv after the sports arena where the prisoners would be held. Béatrice had seen Monsieur and Madame Steiner and their three children taken away. It was something she would never forget. She had liked the family. They had always been kind to her.

The soldiers had told her to pack her bags and leave, along with the other servants. The house on the Boulevard Haussmann was to be requisitioned, but already it was being emptied. The last thing Béatrice witnessed was the family's silver being swept off the sideboards and the painting – a vase of red tulips on a table – that had always hung over the fireplace in the living room being lowered from the wall . . .

Now, thirteen years later, Béatrice shook off the memories that sleep had brought and forced herself to get out of bed. Her room was small, built into the roof of the chateau, with

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