# FALLING DOWN

**THREE MYSTERY NOVELLAS**

**By**

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**Deadly Delay**
**The Island of Poorly Penguins**
**Crookneck**

The characters and events in these stories are fictitious.
My thanks go to Ken Herrera for his help with Deadly Delay.

# DEADLY DELAY

## CHAPTER ONE

Titus Rohan turned to watch a small man rolling a large suitcase into the Bogotá bus terminus. The man had one of those forgettable faces (the sort where friends say "Well, I *think* that's him, second from the right in the back row, but I wouldn't swear to it") but it was offset by a well-fed look and an important walk; just at this moment his suitcase was preventing his walk being shown in its full pomp.

The woman in front of Titus moved on and he found himself facing the company clerk whilst behind him the small man was overtaken by two tall blonde women who came sauntering through the bustle with an air of enviable detachment. They wore crisp cotton shorts, their tanned calves were beautifully muscled, on their feet were tennis shoes and white socks; they might've stepped, but for their rucksacks, from centre court at Wimbledon. Titus wasn't the only man to follow their leisurely progress with admiring eyes. The passenger with the large suitcase acquired an avid gaze but his mouth retained its pursed set. The clerk had forgotten all about the ticket he'd just begun to deal with and formed his lips into a silent O.

The suitcase man put on a spurt and passed the Viking girls, slipping into line behind Titus. The clerk was recalled to his duties and the queue moved on. Titus handed in a large suitcase, kept a small one, and looked round for a vacant seat. The small man, relieved of his unwieldy luggage, bustled through and sat down beside the woman with grey hair and a briefcase who'd stood in front of Titus and addressed the clerk in text-book Spanish.

Titus sat where he had a good view of the prospective passengers; he liked people, most of the time, and they mostly liked him. For his coming home he'd tried to look neatly casual (he didn't want his mother to think the years away had turned him into a dressed-up stranger or a sloppy mess) but even so he didn't blend in; it's hard to do so when you're six feet tall, have curly hair, fine white teeth, a face which radiates lazy good humour and, behind you, a Jamaican father and an Arhuaco mother. Titus could not have said why people tended to gravitate towards him, to open conversations at unlikely moments and in odd places, to tell him amazingly intimate details about their lives and to ask his advice on things he knew nothing about. But it made life interesting.

Mrs Bettina Henshaw also enjoyed watching people arrive although it can't be said that people tended to gravitate towards her. This may have had something to do with the shape of her chin. She was faintly choleric, fond of dressing in lilac, and adept at insinuating herself into any conversation which looked promisingly pro-American. She was famous back home for the courage with which she tackled the world's less comfortable countries. Her fortitude in the face of ramshackle overloaded buses, metal-stressed trains, and ferries without sea-worthiness certificates, was gradually turning her into a legend in her small home town of Wonnahoe, Nebraska.

But, as everyone is allowed an eccentricity or two, she drew the line at most local food. In the bag tucked into her ample lap were at least twenty packets of diet biscuits in a variety of flavours; also a flask of boiled water. She didn't object to well-brewed coffee and she maintained her reputation for courage by buying fruit with thick skins from grubby urchins; placing a couple of pesos in a dirty hand gave her the sort of warm glow more stay-at-home people get from kindness to door-knockers.

No one in that waiting-room would have guessed Mrs Henshaw was a lonely woman and certainly not when she hunted vigorously in her bag for a notepad and pen to continue a letter to her daughter Mirabelle. She wrote these letters in the way other people kept diaries and urged

Mirabelle to keep them all and return them to her at the end of each trip; even so, she couldn't help feeling that Mirabelle didn't deserve these lovely long interesting epistles.

'Honey, I'm just snatching a minute of two while I wait for my bus to Bucaramanga to leave. A very mixed group of passengers this time and what a lot of backpackers there are! If I'm not mistaken there are at least two other Americans travelling with us but I don't care particularly for the look of either of them. One is very swarthy and greasy, really an Al Capone type, and I have my suspicions what has brought a man like him to Colombia! The other is small and pompous and *struts*—I guarantee he believes the world couldn't get along without him!—and is sitting with an English dame while we wait. I don't think he'll have any luck there! She reminds me of those awful aunts Wodehouse always puts in his books—I *know* you don't read Wodehouse, honey, but I think you should try him the way I did when I was traveling in England, I'm sure all those 'post-modern' Jewish writers you keep reading and meeting in New York can't be good for you. There are two very tall blonde girls with rucksacks, Scandinavian quite likely, they might even be sisters. I remember they used to say there was something being fed to the chickens which was making girls grow too tall. I don't remember now what it was. I was always glad you stopped growing when you were sixteen. The man at Wagon-Lits told me the road through the mountains is *dramático*—he had a very French mustache and was a dark dark brown, not a trustworthy combination I felt—and I told him I knew perfectly well what he meant by *dramático*.'

Dr Franz Brokker had chosen his place to wait so he could be first on board and nab a front seat. He felt no deep interest in 'native peoples' and the troubles of the Third World never disturbed his sleep. But now there seemed more than enough of both jostling on to the coach and one of them, a lively young fellow with frizzy hair under a Suzuki cap and carrying a scarlet backpack, had come and plumped himself down right next to Dr Brokker when it was too late for him to take one of the other front seats.

He sat back, his small fat fingers pressed fastidiously to his tight-set mouth as though to ward off germs. Never mind, he consoled himself, the clinic in Cúcuta was waiting eagerly for him and there he would have the whip hand. They had not questioned his credentials. A man in the forefront of Swiss psychiatry? He would add immensely to their prestige. They were keen to draw upon his vast experience in the use of hypnosis and psychiatric drugs; a small clinic now but—ah!—it had the potential to change the nature of the country's inner life and development. Look at America! Dr Brokker permitted himself a small smile behind his fingers.

It was regrettable that he must arrive by bus but after paying his fares plus advance publicity and a well-stocked sample bag there was not a lot left over. And he suffered terribly from air-sickness. He had tried everything on the market without success. He let his mind dwell on his beautiful luggage, its prestigious labels, its obvious quality; he drifted on to Pierre Cardin suits, monogrammed cufflinks, perfectly manicured hands. He would tell them he had chosen to come by bus to gain a more intimate understanding of the country and its people.

The Venezuelan youth next to him tried to open a conversation but he merely turned and shook his head with what he believed was immense dignity and brought out a medical magazine. The language was a problem but there was no need to parade his ignorance before scruffy youngsters. He would arrange for discreet lessons as soon as he reached Cúcuta and settled himself. What with French and some Italian … it should not be difficult. They said the town had a pleasant climate. He allowed himself the luxury of darting assessing looks at his fellow passengers as they struggled up the steps and along the aisle; his gimlet eyes narrowed … his black goatee twitched with an almost sixth sense … someone here felt as he did, an unshakeable belief in their own superiority … he wondered who it was …

Doug Andrews was one of the last to come aboard. He had been delayed by a long and frustrating argument, then had deliberately hung back. Nothing had been resolved but he was determined to repulse any further overtures and he put on a deliberately irritable expression. He was not normally a rude man but if women were too stupid to notice when they weren't wanted then, damn it all, he would be rude.

Most seats were already taken but there was an empty one beside the man who'd been talking to the 'family planning' 'world famous expert' in the waiting-room; he knew that's what she was because he'd seen her on the front page of yesterday's edition of *El Espacio*. But from what he knew of Colombia it would take more than front page features and wonderful credentials to make people take notice; they preferred, he had discovered, to have babies and kill Indians.

He put his several carrier bags and an Air Canada bag under his seat, sat down, and said without enthusiasm, "Hi, I'm Doug Andrews. How far are you going?"

"Charles Whirtle." The well-fed American began to extend a hand but, as his neighbour kept his in his pocket, he put it away again. "What brings you to Colombia, Mr Andrews?"

"Spending a redundancy payment. And you?"

"Saving souls. This," Mr Whirtle leaned over, as though determined to have human contact, and tapped his neighbour's arm with an unctuous finger, "is the most truly God-forsaken country I have ever been in! Ah, I see you are a sceptic, Mr Andrews, but believe *me*—nothing short of a cataclysm will cleanse the soul of this evil country! However, I am doing my small but important bit to reclaim souls for our Lord and Saviour—to bring these poor benighted idol-ridden people into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ—"

Mr Whirtle snapped open the small suitcase resting on his lap. Doug Andrews glanced around; first at the two beautiful blonde girls across the aisle, who ignored him, then back towards Titus and the rear of the bus where what seemed like a dozen people from babies to old women milled around piles of luggage which smelled of boiled milk. Mr Whirtle took out a sheaf of pamphlets and tracts. Doug Andrews shrugged and turned back to him with a look of resignation.

"I represent the Society for the Propagation of Genuine Christian Salvation, based in Houston, Texas—" Doug Andrews bowed to the inevitable and accepted a pamphlet, "and it is our concern that the Biblical message is being watered down and ignored by our modern preachers who have become infected by the hedonism of our way of life and are afraid to teach the truth. These men—I hardly like to call them preachers, so far, alas, have they drifted—are more concerned about their model of car and how many brands of bourbon they stock in those cupboards they refer to as their liquor cabinets—or even their *bars!* No man of God should have such a thing in his house! But we exist solely to roll back this tide of lazy slipshod evangelism and reach out to the poor, the ignorant, the unfortunate, with the true Gospel message. It will not be easy—no, sirreee, it will require the sacrifice of my entire lifetime—"

Doug Andrews looked up from picking his nails. "So yours is one of those groups which believe in having only one shirt and one pair of shoes—you know, like Mother Teresa?"

Mr Whirtle seemed to lift this question with delicate fingertips, consider it, then discard it gently. "We must, you will understand of course, my dear sir, keep relevant. I think poor old Teresa has had her day. Our own shepherds travel lightly—" His expansive gesture was meant to draw to attention to the smallness of the case on his lap and the fact he was travelling by bus (he, in fact, had a deep-rooted fear of flying) yet Andrews only noticed the flash of his large signet ring, "but we expect to be looked up to with respect. Just as we bring the True Word—" Charles Whirtle tapped a pamphlet appropriately called 'The True Word', "we also must not forget that we represent the American people and the many kinds of progress their way of life represents."

Doug Andrews appeared to have overcome some sort of inner struggle and his long sad face now settled into an attitude of repose. Whether or not he went on listening not even Charles Whirtle could have said with certainty.

There was a diversion. Mr Whirtle lost himself in a long sentence about the dreadful superstitions which continued to abound as a middle-aged couple came panting up to the bus followed by a bus company employee waving his hands and shouting. An agitated conversation followed but just out of reach of twenty pairs of avid ears; then the luggage bay was re-opened, two small cases were removed, and the employee and the couple went away again. Speculation ran up and down the bus. The relief driver closed the bay and came on board.

'Would you care to have the window seat—to give you a better view?" Charles Whirtle said. He always made the offer. Then, when it grew dark, he would offer to change back. People invariably saw it as generosity on his part and didn't notice that he didn't like to look down cliff

faces and couldn't bear to sleep in aisle seats. When they'd changed places he re-opened his small suitcase.

The roads of Colombia, as you know, rarely send people to sleep from boredom. This particular collection of passengers hoped various things: that the weather would stay fine (which it wouldn't), that the brakes were in top-top order (which they appeared to be), and that the drivers were competent men behind a wheel (which they were although not immune to the human failing of becoming sleepy around about midnight). Quite soon most of those on board drifted into the kind of reassured state which a modern coach with tinted windows and well-padded seats can create.

Some people gazed, apparently fascinated, at the *turgurios* and odds and ends of unplanned housing which perch around Bogotá, others tried a little conversation with their nearest neighbour to see if they might have a language in common. The Ramirez family which, with relations, took up most of the rear seats busied themselves with thoughts of hunger; clashing aluminium containers, crackling papers, spilling things, delving into large baskets which were not designed to fit neatly into laps or under seats and discussing their little snack with noisy enjoyment.

The one passenger, apart from Charles Whirtle, who had no plans to view the scenery was the English girl who found herself sitting in front of the pitiable Ramirez cousin who suffered from St Vitus' Dance. Anne Pyke had thrown all decorum to the winds and rushed to buy her ticket (without considering the consequences) when she'd heard that Nigel Drake-Moberley was planning to take this journey. Dear Nigel. She'd met him at several diplomatic functions, she'd found she'd been at school with his sister, she'd believed they really had 'clicked'—even though Nigel, despite some gentle hints, hadn't actually invited her out. But thrown together on a long bus journey—what could be more natural than that they'd spend time together, perhaps sit together …

And now she had to face a horrible humiliation. Here was Nigel, looking as cool and fair and debonair as ever, and by his side was a tanned and frowsy girl in very brief red shorts, a grubby white top which left nothing to his imagination, and a hand with chewed pink nails clasping him in a very possessive way.

It simply wasn't fair! How could someone like Nigel behave like that! How could he be so blind!

But Anne was too proud to show her feelings—and now she had to face the new horror which was banishing all thoughts of Nigel's perfidy. The coach dashed down mountainsides, swung round birdswing bends, ran alongside immense cliffs—and she had to face the fact she'd let herself in for hundreds of kilometres of similar horror. She sat back and closed her eyes, willing herself to stay calm, but terrified that sooner or later she'd give way to hysterics. If only this could prove to be a horrible dream. If only she could find herself strolling in Hyde Park on a sunny Saturday morning. If only it would hurry up and get dark.

The man beside her tried to start up a conversation, by telling her he'd been "ebree-ware" and would like to polish his English some more. But even to look at him was to risk glancing out the window; it would be better to pretend she was very tired and sleepy. She made an enormous yawn and patted her mouth ostentatiously.

Mrs Henshaw was also troubled by the man next to her; not because he wanted to talk but because he kept probing his mouth with a toothpick and spitting out whatever he'd pried loose. She'd hustled in to the coach to be sure of getting a window seat—and now she was hemmed in by this weedy monstrosity in his forage cap and grubby fatigues.

Behind her she could hear voices speaking North American English—in fact, Doug Andrews asking Charles Whirtle if he'd like to have his seat back—but the headrests on each seat were too high for comfortable-craning-round-and-engaging-in-conversation with posterior passengers. Instead, she took out a diet biscuit and nibbled it while she thought on how she would describe this awful man to Mirabelle and how she would merely hint at her own fortitude.

The sun eventually went down behind the cordillera. A light drizzle began to make the road greasy. People with experience of travelling took out pillows or rugs or warm coats; or, in Mr Whirtle's case, all three. Mr Andrews had only a duffel coat but he seemed untroubled by the

growing chill as he sat back and turned his head enough to gaze upon the golden-haired goddesses across the aisle. It was a pity he had worries on his mind. He could quite happily give himself up to a mindless contemplation of their magnificence. The girls themselves took no notice of him or anybody else and nattered on, virtually non-stop, in Swedish.

## CHAPTER TWO

The *cena* stop came at half-past-seven at a small garage-cum-café. Those, such as Nigel Drake-Moberley, who hadn't fully understood the driver's brisk instructions followed meekly in the wake of those who had.

Nigel wasn't hungry; he had the horrible thought there wouldn't be anything he liked on the menu—his mother still liked to tell people what a terribly picky child he'd been—and he was afraid Anne would embarrass him by coming and wanting to sit at his table. It was a bit late now to pretend he didn't know her.

He took Mara by the hand and hustled her across the open space between the bus and the café. "Take it easy, cutieboots, I've got to go to the loo before we go in there!"

"Oh—sorry. I guess I'd better do the same. You first."

"They've got ladies and gents, lovey."

"So they have—I didn't realise—"

"What's eating you now? Not that prissy-faced kid who keeps goggling at you? The one who's following us now?"

Nigel didn't wait to look but shot, post-haste, into the men's and was followed in by a smiling Titus; he, in turn, was followed by a Trinidadian leading an elderly blind man who seemed to be his father. If there was a choice of seating arrangements Titus thought he would choose to sit with them.

The café had tiny wooden tables, each crammed round with four, five, or even six chairs.

Anne Pyke had been one of the first in but now she stood there feeling a little lost amid the bustle and the smell of frying food. She felt a hand placed lightly on her arm. "My dear, you're looking as lost as I am. Come and sit with me—or are you waiting for someone?"

"No. I'd like that. Thank you." The kind little gesture made Anne feel like crying. It had been such a *rotten* afternoon. But here was the woman from the front bus seat who'd looked so forbidding now proving to be the nicest person imaginable. "I'm Anne Pyke."

"And I'm Evelyn Dunbar. Now, where shall we sit? Here, close to the kitchen? So we can call for service if necessary?"

Ms Dunbar must know about Colombian cafés, Anne thought, as she took the chair facing the door. Of course it was silly to keep torturing herself with visions of Nigel and that other girl but she couldn't seem to help it.

Nigel was borne in along with the Ramirez family and almost thrust bodily into the table behind Anne's while the family surged onwards to the corner table where the children were perched on laps and the poor cousin with St Vitus' Dance knocked over a chair.

It was Titus who came to her rescue; the chair was righted, all but the baby smiled at him, and he and the two men from Trinidad, Sam and Jonah Middleguard, took the next table. Three nuns came in and sat down nearby with a succession of gentle chirrups which may have had a religious origin but were more likely a comment on the unwiped table. The two Swedish girls sat down beside the elderly passenger who had been tenderly guarding a large cardboard carton on the bus and which he had now placed between his feet under the table, with both shoes clasping it tightly. Titus longed to know what was in the box.

"What you think he got there, man?" he said to Middleguard. His English tutors would have regarded this 'mangling' with horror but for Titus, heading home to the odd, eccentric, funny, homesick Caribbean-English world of his father's *Baranquilla Bugle,* it was like limbering up.

"Let we wait and ask the man heself—or maybe I going ask Papa make one guess." Sam turned to his father and described the elderly man and his package.

Jonah Middleguard turned sightless eyes in the direction indicated and seemed to sit a minute or two in a trance.

"I t'ink he got cage-bird in dere. Yeah, poor little cage-bird wanting fly up into God's own heaven. He frighten someone say 'No pets going on dis bus, you hear' an' he keep worrying dis poor little bird need air an' he keep opening it tiny tiny bit—"

Titus looked at the old man with respect. A cage-bird hadn't occurred to him but the description of the old Colombian's frequent fiddling with the top opening of the carton, as though he wished to assure himself of the continued life of its occupant (though without opening it enough for even a bumble-bee-sized humming bird to escape) was extraordinarily accurate.

Mr Whirtle and Mrs Henshaw by one of those involuntary twitches which bring people of the same nationality together, whether they want it or not, had entered the café and, as though propelled by the same giant hand, made their way to the table already occupied by Anne and Evelyn.

"Dear lady," Charles Whirtle gave a demonstration of old-world courtliness designed to appeal to someone of Ms Dunbar's age and temperament, "is this chair vacant?"

Evelyn Dunbar said, "Yes. Do sit down, Mr Whirtle. This is Miss Pyke. She has been visiting her father in Bogotá."

"Pleased to meet you, Miss Pyke … ah, and this is a fellow citizen of mine—Mrs Henshaw." His smile grew less encouraging as he introduced Bettina Henshaw. He felt, now that he came to consider it, that two women were enough upon which to spread his limited supply of charm. Never mind. This Dunbar dame looked equal to keeping a dozen Henshaws in their place.

Anne had been gazing round the steamy room, everywhere but at Nigel, and now she said with a nervous titter, "Isn't it funny how those black men like those sorts of names—I just heard those three introducing themselves as Samuel, Jonah and Titus."

"Dear me, yes." Ms Dunbar looked briefly in their direction. "There is a very strong evangelical influence in the Caribbean, I believe, along with more than a smattering of voodoo … I was always rather fond of Titus and Timothy—"

"Timothy who?" Mr Whirtle was still gazing at Anne. It was a pity she was such a washed-out-looking creature; probably needed an iron supplement. He'd done good business as a young man with pep pills.

"Really, Mr Whirtle, and you a missionary!" Evelyn Dunbar delivered her metaphoric tap on the knuckles with an amused crinkling round her shrewd grey eyes. She was fully in favour of spreading the Gospel, provided it was done with skill and tact, but she was equally convinced that American telly-evangelism was having pernicious effects on a whole new generation of American missionaries.

"Er—yes! Quite right, dear lady! *That* Timothy. My mind was straying."

"Naughty, naughty." Bettina Henshaw charged in with her vigour re-established by sitting next to Evelyn Dunbar and broaching a new packet of her favourite lemon-flavoured diet biscuits.

"Oh you are clever," Anne turned to her with another of her nervous giggles. "You'll never have to worry about tummy upsets."

"I've had a great deal of experience, honey," Mrs Henshaw said complacently. "Even more than you would imagine—"

"Oh? Have you been to many other places besides Colombia?"

"Have I? Oh my goodness, have I? Do you know, honey, I have been to *exactly* one hundred and twenty-three countries. I aim to make it two hundred by the time I die."

Evelyn Dunbar could see where the conversation was heading; this Mrs Henshaw would now insist on telling them about the one hundred and twenty-three countries all seen, no doubt, in the company of cardboard-textured synthetic-flavoured weight-reducing biscuits. She turned and with an imperious finger summoned a scurrying waitress to their table. If they had to listen to Mrs Henshaw, in the cause of good manners and trans-Atlantic friendship, then they might as well do it with food in front of them.

Doug Andrews found himself at a chalk-and-cheese table. The swarthy American, Frederick Ruggioli (who'd been cast by Bettina Henshaw as a Chicago hoodlum; an unkind assessment as he couldn't help his looks and was a devoted family man and Rotary member) was already seated opposite Dr Brokker who was inspecting the table and wearing a fastidious curl on his very pink lips. Should he put down newspaper? Not that it would matter. He was certain the kitchen was equally grease-ridden. On the other hand, he prided himself on his strong constitution (not to mention his fine mind); it was regrettable that Swiss psychiatry was infested by mean-brained pettifogging bureaucratic types, the sort of men who belonged in banks not clinics … what it needed was breadth, vision, courage, style, all the qualities he knew he possessed in abundance … but it was possible providence had drawn him to this country for a reason … he forgot his original grievance …

The fourth chair was filled by the yellow-headed pink-cheeked bovine-faced girl who'd been sitting next to Evelyn Dunbar in the bus. Andrews gave her a sour glance then pointedly ignored her. He had a wife and family. Why should *he* do anything more for this moronic Pinker girl? Let one of these other guys take her in tow. He'd already given her the money to get home to Curaçao which was more than any self-respecting family man should be expected to do for a girl stupid enough to believe the blandishments of a fat businessman from Bogotá. She was lucky to have suffered no more than a whack with a frying-pan. Let her go home a sadder and wiser woman. He wished he was home himself, safe from further temptation and indiscretion, safe in his beloved little shop …

Dr Brokker was all courtesy towards Señorita Pinker. His piggy eyes gleamed; he behaved as though discovering her scrap of English belonged in the same league as Archimedes leaping out of the bath-tub and crying "Eureka!" But Eloise Pinker behaved as though he'd slipped on the soap. She turned to Fred Ruggioli and put on her cutest smile. He reminded her of the fat businessman on whom she'd pinned such hopes—and how was she to know he would have such a horrible wife?—whereas Franz Brokker gave her shivers up and down her well-padded spine.

Doug Andrews watched all this with weary detachment. Would this Ruggioli character take Eloise out of his life? Would he be so lucky?

Behind Ms Pinker were four noisy Australians. To say they were noisy might give the wrong impression as they were kindly respectable farming people from Victoria, who had chosen to visit Colombia to see their 'foster families' in Tumaco and visit the national office in Bogotá before travelling by bus to the Caribbean coast to rejoin their cruise ship at Cartagena, but they had drifted into the trap of thinking noise would make up for their lack of Spanish.

This had been exacerbated by difficult travel, little health troubles, and weeks of close proximity; there had been a painful falling-out between Oliver Brenton and his sister-in-law Carol Linley and, by extension, "that darn pest of a woman she plays at farming with", Rhoda Sanderson. His wife Betty had tried to smooth things over by saying she knew it was just his ulcer playing him up—and they had saved so long and come so far they mustn't spoil it now—and she knew he should be drinking more milk to soothe his tummy and it was a terrible pity the milk here somehow didn't taste quite right.

Rhoda had bought herself a *roan*—which, as a cross between a poncho and a blanket, she claimed would have one hundred and one potential uses—from a street peddler outside the Gold Museum, although she'd been disappointed to find it was machine-made, and now the blessed thing had caught under Oliver's chair. He didn't approve of people 'going native' or he'd ceased to approve since she'd started wearing it. Nuisance of a thing! Why couldn't she be sensible like Betty and stick to a cardigan? But that was Rhoda all over—always going to extremes—and it was no wonder Carol was growing more and more *odd*.

Carol was fuming over Oliver calling the waitress with "Here, girl!" Just like Oliver to embarrass them all and Betty merely tut-tutted at his boorishness. What would he be like in another twenty years? She sneaked looks around her and was reassured by the gabble of voices; and only another four days before they'd be on board their ship again and she could avoid him for a whole

lovely week. She turned to Rhoda and began to talk about swine erysipelas; it was the only way to stop Oliver butting into a conversation. He was allergic to pigs.

Betty admired the Scandinavian girls at the next table—"But I don't know why they keep themselves to themselves. I've always heard men are attracted to girls from that part of the world. I suppose the poor dears don't have the language. They should've taken the time to get a phrasebook the way we did."

Oliver glanced over one shoulder. "That sort, I'd say." Betty looked blank. "You know?" He wiggled a shoulder and winked an eye.

"No dear. I don't know."

He leaned over and hissed "Lesbians!" into her ear. Betty went red. "Well, fancy that! I never would've—I don't know … no, I'm sure you're wrong, Olly. Look at the way the one on the far side is eyeing that very Italian-looking man at the table behind you—no, don't go staring like that—"

It *was* true that the girls had taken an interest in Mr Ruggioli's unresponsive back. He was taken up with Ms Pinker who was wondering if she might be able to come to the United States to work, as she'd heard a lot of rich people there liked to keep a girl on hand to mix up a "boorbong-an-sumsing" when they came home from the office and she thought that was something she could manage.

Such pretty girls, Mrs Brenton thought in a motherly way, and surely they could find a nicer man to fancy … that very fleshy neck, that pinkie ring, that furtive way he had of thrusting his chin forward as he glanced around and narrowing his eyes to a slit … but try as she did she could think of no way to warn those pretty girls off Fred Ruggioli; why—it might even be better if Olly was nearly right—because—just look at Rhoda and Carol and how happy they were, running their little farm together …

The waitress came with bowls of hot soup swimming with corn and capsicums, potatoes, avocadoes and goodness-knows-what-else; it wouldn't do Olly's tummy any good but then she was getting tired of the constant worrying over Olly's tummy. Let him do his own worrying.

## CHAPTER THREE

The bus tackled the night and the rain with a good deal of hissing, swerving, braking, overtaking and other behaviour which might raise eyebrows in little flat civilized countries like Holland; but Colombia expects of every man that he will have dare-devil instincts.

Anne Pyke, occasionally catching a glimpse of the ghostly white crosses which hem many of the most terrifying bends and are a reminder that the nerve of a James Bond is sometimes not enough, shut her eyes and tried to pretend she was taking the evening service from London to Falmouth. But it was no use. Those terrible crosses seemed to dance inside her eyelids until she was almost ready to wish they would plunge ten thousand feet and she could scream and be done with it.

The Colombian beside her, who'd been "ebree-ware", was sympathetic. He knew her decision to shut her eyes had nothing to do with not wanting to look at him; that magnificent Mohawk hairstyle he'd had cut by an American barber in St Lucia was still eye-catching even though it was now falling over and sticking out at the sides. He'd have to find another American barber.

He reached over and took one of her hands in his own—"You no look in window. You look me an' I tell you what 'appen when I go E-spain an' go wis girl in Madrid." Anne's preoccupation with white crosses ceased long enough for her to snatch her hand away and say furiously, "I don't want to know! I don't want to hear about stupid things like that!" and then, to her horror, she burst into a storm of tears.

The Colombian shrugged philosophically. It was an awful waste to have to go all this way beside a girl who could only shut her eyes and cry but he couldn't expect to be lucky every time.

One of the nuns, growing suspicious of the motives of the young man with the strange hair, gave Anne a reassuring little smile and mimed the action of changing seats. Anne hesitated—maybe she was making mountains out of molehills (if only they *could* be molehills!)—then she

nodded and gathered up her luggage to move one seat forward. Now she had a nun beside her, a nun across the aisle, and a nun behind her. Surely this was safety? Except that—not even three nuns could prevent the driver driving the bus over a precipice.

At about eleven o'clock the coach pulled into another hamlet, veiled in rain, to allow the passengers to go to the toilet and get a cup of coffee if they wished. Some did. Others looked out the streaming windows and decided they could hold on till morning.

Most of the Ramirez family surged up and forward, turning the orderly line of toilet-goers into chaos. The baby, which had been placid so far, decided to bawl its poor little head off. Titus followed Doug Andrews off the bus, but the two from Sweden and the two from Trinidad remained, perhaps preferring to allow the rush to pass by. Nigel and Mara conferred briefly then got off the bus. Old Pedro Parra and his mysterious carton stayed firmly in place. Mrs Henshaw, whose bladder was not what it'd been, waited for her neighbour to move so she could get out without fuss—but he was having a noisy conversation with the two pimply Batista sisters across the aisle; nice girls, Mrs Henshaw had thought when they first sat down, but now she had her doubts. So there was nothing for it but to say "Pardon *me!*" and push past. Out in the aisle she took a peep behind her. Mr Whirtle, lucky man, was fast asleep tucked up against the window on a snow-white pillow and swathed in a tartan travelling rug. He must have a deal of experience in uncomfortable travel. Well, so had she, she reminded herself. But then Mr Whirtle hadn't struck her as a *sensitive* person—whereas her nerves responded to the lightest sound, the slightest touch. It would be a blessing to have such a phlegmatic nature if, she thought critically, it wasn't merely pills.

An unscheduled stop came somewhere about three in the morning. A couple of the Ramirez children needed to be bundled out into the rain while the driver put on a patient look and drank something out of a Thermos. Evelyn Dunbar watched him and thought 'what a *sensible* idea—next time I must—' Several more people passed her to brave the rain. Eloise Pinker who'd been sleeping with her mouth open woke up with a jerk and "Vhoo-oo", scrambled to her feet and went down the steps to pull up her skirt in full view of the half-dozen male passengers standing in the rain. Evelyn Dunbar clucked in disapproval. Jonah Middleguard, a hand on his son's arm, came slowly down the aisle and melted into the blackness of the night.

There was a muffled sound when someone stepped in a puddle. The driver lit a cigarette, yawned, took a longer draw, then gave a toot on his horn.

An ancient lorry growled past and disappeared into the wet night. *Maldito sea!* The driver gave another toot. Now he'd have the job of getting round that creaking traffic hazard with its tarpaulins flapping and its rear left light missing. Why couldn't *he* get one of the company's newest buses with the inside *lavabos?*

The Middleguards were the last back on. The driver watched Jonah's slow progress with a resigned expression; at this rate the lorry would beat him into Bucaramanga and he needn't worry—and it would be nice if his son would be that considerate when he too grew old and decrepit.

All nights end and the rain went on up the cordillera to see if it could wash some of Bogotá's excess rubbish from the gutters on to the footpaths. The clouds cleared. The brakes squished. The Flota Paloma bus pulled into its breakfast stop. Passengers yawned, stretched, rubbed their eyes, applied their make-up (or, in Ms Dunbar's case, rubbed vigorously with a handkerchief well-soaked in eau-de-cologne till her skin shone pink and shiny), children squealed and tumbled down from weary laps; the nuns let Titus past but sat on for several minutes clicking their beads and murmuring; a couple of passengers including Eloise slept on but someone caught her an unintended blow with a handbag and she woke with a shriek.

It was not exactly a posh restaurant; except for a sign outside it barely qualified as a restaurant at all. A tiny bar formed one side of a courtyard; on the other were a half-dozen tables and a few scattered stools. In the open centre of the courtyard dripping tropical bushes provided colour and showered raindrops on anyone silly enough to come close. A couple of bleary-eyed Colombians sat

at the bar and drank maize whisky—possibly to wake themselves up, possibly to give themselves the courage to tackle the next stretch of highway. Several youngish women scurried in to take orders and compare the number of stools to the number of arriving passengers.

They shrugged and said things like "too bad" and got out grease-spotted notebooks. Mrs Henshaw who had done her hair and fixed her face, in so far as it could be fixed, the minute the sun came over the horizon was first in, followed by Evelyn Dunbar—and, as you might guess, Ms Dunbar sat down and beckoned for service while Bettina Henshaw took out a packet of her own biscuits. When a waitress did come it was to confront Mrs Henshaw angrily. "*No silla!* Why you come here if you no eat?" Then she burst into such a stream of furious Spanish it brought the 'barman' over.

"My dear," Ms Dunbar said soothingly, "I think they don't like you taking a chair if you're not going to order their food. They *do* seem rather short of chairs."

"I *was* going to order coffee," Mrs Henshaw said waspishly. "Now, I feel it would serve them right if I went straight back out that door!"

Evelyn Dunbar said something in slow Spanish to the waitress and the 'barman', the biscuits disappeared back into Mrs Henshaw's capacious bag, and two coffees and two bread rolls were ordered.

Nigel and Mara Biggins had been lucky in the matter of chairs, possibly because Mara's previous boyfriend had been a fierce supporter of Crystal Palace and she had got in her quota of pushing and shoving every season.

Nigel beckoned to the waitress who'd just tangled with Bettina Henshaw while Mara burrowed in her shoulder-bag and produced two coloured pictures torn from magazines.

"*Sí?*" The woman wasn't going to waste breath with things like "Are you ready to order yet?" or "Would you like to see a menu?"

"Er—*café*," Nigel said. Then, more firmly, "Egg," and mimed the action of breaking an egg and dropping it gently into what might or might not be a poaching pan beneath. The waitress gaped at him. "*Café*," she repeated.

"Yes, go on! Oh, what on earth is egg, Mara?"

"Dunno, cutieboots, take pot luck." Mara held up her two pictures—one of a steaming cup of coffee, the other of a bread roll with a slice of Devonshire cheese laid neatly across—and pointed to herself. The waitress wrote something down then turned, undecided, back to Nigel.

"*Café*," she said once more. Then she mimed Nigel's action.

"Yes, you've got it! Now go and do it!" Nigel flapped his hands as though chasing blackbirds, and the woman went away shaking her head.

"You've got to be firm, that's the trick to it." He sat back smugly and glanced around; his eyes met Anne's piteous gaze and he hurriedly turned back to Mara.

She giggled. "You'll have to do something about her, won't you, lovey? I really don't want her trailing down the aisle after us looking like a bilious bimbo!"

"Down the aisle?" Nigel stared at her. "Oh, you mean the bus aisle—"

"No, I bloomin' don't. You jolly well know what I mean. Who rescued you from the man who wanted to sell you that anaconda skin for ten thousand pesos and wouldn't take "er-well" for a brush-off, eh? You tell me that?" Though Mara wasn't sure even the reputed hundreds of thousands of the Drake-Moberley fortune would help her get to the coast with Nigel without clipping him at least once over the earhole.

The waitress brought Mara her steaming cup of coffee and a roll with one neat slice of cheese; she brought Nigel's coffee.

Nigel said "*Gracias*" and hoped his egg wouldn't be long though his appetite had diminished in the interim. He'd have to find a way to prevent Mara speaking of marriage. She wasn't quite what the Honourable Gervaise Drake-Moberley MP had in mind for his only son. He wondered if he could convince Mara there was someone eagerly waiting back home …

Mara ate her bun, showing her strong white incisors, and looked around. The man who sat just behind the driver, next to that awful Dracula-type with the briefcase, was rather a cutie but he probably didn't speak English. Her critical eye moved on, rested on Titus and the Middleguards …

pity, she didn't go much for black guys … they were supposed to be sexy but her Mam wouldn't approve. There was that Canadian (she guessed that was the message of the Air Canada bag he carried everywhere) but although he wasn't bad-looking he had the sort of mournful preoccupied look which usually meant three kids, an orthodontist, and a large mortgage. Oh well, she might as well stick with Nigel for the moment—seeing he was loaded and a pain into the bargain there was no reason why he shouldn't go on coughing up.

Nigel continued to sip his hot coffee and wonder how long his egg would be. Probably it'd arrive just as everyone else was going back to the bus, that was the sort of thing that happened to him. The coffee wasn't very nice and there seemed to be something whitish at the bottom; probably a dollop of condensed milk but if he didn't stir it hopefully it wouldn't make the coffee too sickly.

"Well, bottoms up, turkey-lurkey," Mara said loudly as she took a last big bite and wiped her mouth on her handkerchief.

"Yes, but my egg still hasn't come. They must've forgotten. I'm not going to pay if they can't give better service."

Mara shrugged. "They're probably out squeezin' the friggin' hen's bum to see if an egg'll pop out!" Nigel looked pained; no, he definitely wouldn't be taking Mara home to meet the pater. "Or—maybe they gave it to someone else?" Mara looked around but couldn't see anyone hoeing into an egg.

Nigel swallowed. His egg, very lightly poached, appeared in the dregs of his coffee. "Oh gosh!" He dropped his mug and leapt up. His coffee ran across the table and the egg, like an avenging octopus, slipped after it. Mara took one look and burst into bellows of delighted laughter. Nigel pushed back his chair and rushed out of the café. A waitress went to follow him then changed her mind and went to tackle Mara.

There was a terrible moment when Nigel thought he was going to disgrace himself in the tropical bushes or on the doorstep; then his stomach settled back into approximately its proper place and he scurried towards the bus, his hand still clamped over his mouth. Of course everyone would laugh once they realized what had happened and Mara would get a kick out of telling them. Could he snatch his things off this bus and hide in wait for the next bus that came along?

The two drivers were standing in the parking area, drinking bottles of soft drink and waiting for their passengers to return. They watched Nigel dash past but otherwise showed no interest.

Inside the bus the elderly Colombian had not moved except for a quick trip to the men's after he'd seen everyone go into the restaurant. Mr Ruggioli had returned early (after all, he wasn't taking this trip to eat or sightsee—in fact, he wished he wasn't taking this trip at all—but he was a patriotic man and knew when duty called) and was now leaning over Mr Whirtle to see if he was all right. To sleep through the sun shining, passengers going to and fro, and the pangs of hunger, seemed a bit odd to Fred Ruggioli; not that he hadn't seen stranger things but Charles Whirtle had struck him as your average kind of guy. Tiresome but ordinary.

"Hoy! You okay, mister?"

Mr Whirtle didn't move. Mr Ruggioli repeated the question louder in case the guy was deaf. Mr Whirtle remained snuggled into his travelling pillow.

His benefactor gingerly put out a hand and tapped him on the shoulder, then gave him something which he later described as "a bit of a shake". The missionary responded with an uncontrolled loll to one side and Mr Ruggioli, increasingly worried, shoved him back on to his pillow and felt for a pulse. He could find none—and the man's hands were chill and stiff.

Fred Ruggioli ceased his attentions and rushed to the coach door, his face grown several shades lighter. His way out was blocked by a queasy-looking Nigel.

"Quick! Quick! Get someone! There's a guy in there in a bad way!"

"I'm a—a medical student." Nigel pulled himself together as best he could. "What is the matter?"

"Look for yourself! I'll go call the driver—" Fred Ruggioli squeezed past and tumbled down the steps.

Nigel shut his eyes briefly and begged his stomach to behave. What if the man meant blood or vomit or foaming at the mouth? He really didn't think he could bear to look at anything the least bit

awful. He started down the aisle. Señor Parra continued to sit stolidly in his seat, a protective arm round his box. These foreign people behaved in a very strange way but, no doubt, they had their reasons and he certainly wasn't going to interfere.

Nigel Drake-Moberley leaned over the dead missionary. It wasn't frightening after all; Charles Whirtle looked very little different in death to what he'd looked in life. Not that Nigel had noticed him particularly; there hadn't been any reason to.

He felt for a pulse. He looked into the dead man's eyes. He pondered on a possible cause of death. Heart attack? Stroke? An overdose? He laid Mr Whirtle back. What should he do now? Wait for someone to come and relieve him of this awful responsibility?

It was embarrassing to be so ignorant. How could a man, only in his forties, die so peacefully and with so little outward sign? He undid Mr Whirtle's cuffs and looked at his arms. He undid his shirt and looked at his chest which had a pinkish mottled look. He couldn't decide if it was natural or not. He stared into the man's eyes. He tipped his head forward and lifted the collar away—and there it was: a tiny puncture mark surrounded by a faint redness.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Nigel simply stood there, mouth open, looking helpless. He jumped when a voice behind him said, "What seems to be the matter, man?"

It was the tall black Jamaican or Trinidadian or whatever he might be; Nigel had noticed him now and again.

"He's dead!" Nigel blurted it out.

"Are you sure?" Titus gazed down in a mixture of awe and disbelief.

"Oh yes, as sure as I'll ever be! I've done First Year Med so I *have* seen a dead body, you know." It wasn't Nigel's intention to be sarcastic; he wasn't a sarcastic person. But he felt himself to be dangerously close to hysteria. Any minute now he might flee from the bus, crying "He's dead! The man's dead!" to his everlasting mortification.

"Then we must be getting the police," Titus said with grave calm. "Do you think it was a natural death?"

"Oh!" The idea of its being anything else hadn't occurred to Nigel. "I—yes, I think so. I think he's been stung by something."

The relief driver came down the aisle, drawn by their earnest huddle, and poked a fair whack of a nose over the head-rest of Bettina Henshaw's seat to stare into Mr Whirtle's unresponsive face.

"*Está muerto?*" The casualness of his question suggested dead bodies were a frequent occurrence on the Bogotá to Bucaramanga run.

Titus turned and asked him if he'd mind going and fetching the local police and the local doctor (if the village boasted either) and, after another long stare at the unfortunate missionary, the man scrambled back off the seat and hurried away.

"Look, this is going to be a rotten situation." Nigel took out his handkerchief and mopped his forehead; at least, *now*, if anyone thought he looked off-colour the reason should be obvious. "You know what the police are like here. I don't know how many times I got warned. They'll probably whip us all straight into jail and leave us there till our families come up with bribe money!"

Titus wasn't sure how to respond to this. It *might* happen, just *might*, but at the same time Colombia was his home and it wasn't as though English police were lily-white and incorruptible … he took the easy way out: "But if you're right and it was an insect—"

They were interrupted by the arrival of a large man with pouches under his eyes and guns wiggling on his fat hips. He pushed everyone aside with a sweeping motion of his hands and finished chewing a mouthful before he too pronounced Mr Whirtle dead (although he was considerate enough to refer to him as a *gentilhombre*). Then he looked round helplessly and began patting his pockets; coming up with nothing but a handful of pesos.

Titus intervened discreetly to say, indicating Nigel, that he was a medical student, English, very clever, and believed the missionary to have been stung.

The policeman's already bulging eyes opened wider to display an expanse of bloodshot white. He turned to Nigel, made a buzzing sound, then dramatically swatted his arm.

"A mosquito?" Nigel looked from the policeman to Titus. "I wouldn't think so. Look, you tell him. You couldn't die from a mosquito bite just like that."

"What do you suggest then?" Titus asked.

"Oh heavens, *I* don't know. I'd only be guessing. A bee maybe—or a wasp."

Titus translated this for the benefit of the policeman; but the man's worry about the cause of death had now been supplanted by a larger worry: whose responsibility was the body?

"You must take this man," he indicated Mr Whirtle, "to the next station. They will—" he stopped what he'd been about to say, and said with extra firmness, "they will have the facilities."

Both drivers looked disconcerted. Couldn't they leave the body here and notify the police in the next town—or, even better, leave it here so it could be returned to Bogotá on the next bus and tenderly handed in to the American Embassy like a piece of lost luggage? After summoning the law they had conferred together over their passenger list and they were unanimous on one point: none of their passengers would like travelling with a corpse; not even if they first asked the three nuns travelling to the Convent of the Virgin of Chinchinquira to say a prayer for the dead man.

Their unanimity gave them the courage to say aloud their passengers would be upset. The policeman looked around. What if these upset people forced him to take responsibility? He reacted, in sudden fright, by pulling out one revolver and pointing it at the driver.

"TAKE THIS MAN!"

"*Sí, señor*." They understood that old saying about discretion—and in this too they were unanimous. "We take."

Nigel had retreated to his seat where he now sat with bowed head, trying to remember what little he knew about bee and wasp stings. He thought it went something like this: small swelling, breathing difficulties, drop in blood pressure, paleness, signs of shock, nausea, rash, unconsciousness, death. He wondered if he had the sequence right.

Titus said mildly he thought they should wrap the body and lay it on the empty seat (left by the passengers who hadn't come aboard), or, alternatively, the man in the next seat might prefer to move. The policeman put away his revolver and looked sheepish. Titus, suddenly finding himself in de facto control, went on to say he thought all the details should be taken down and the dead man's luggage searched. Privately, he suspected it would also be useful to know what was in some of the other passengers' luggage but he could think of no way to convince this guardian of the law to take on any extra work, and certainly not in mid-breakfast.

Mr Whirtle was placed, as well as his stiffening body would allow, upon the seat and the bags and briefcase underneath were brought out of the bus while the drivers rooted in the luggage bays and came up with Mr Whirtle's suitcase. The relief driver was then detailed to watch over everything while the policeman waddled away to fetch pen and paper and grab a quick swig of something strong and nourishing.

By this time, all the passengers had finished in the café and were gathering into small mystified whorls and circles round the driver and the little pile of luggage on the damp gravel.

"What on earth can have happened?" Rhoda Sanderson said to her partner in pigs.

"I s'pose it might be a bomb," Ms Linley said dubiously; did people look scared enough for it to be a bomb?

"I do not zink zis country iz civilized," Dr Brokker said to nobody in particular but Evelyn Dunbar heard him and responded tartly, "There was a time, sir, when I would've said exactly that about your country."

"I beg your pardon, madam!" Dr Brokker's eyes flashed in sudden outrage. "I am Sviss—*Sviss*—not German!"

"Oh, are you?" Evelyn Dunbar didn't look in the least abashed. "I thought you were Austrian as a matter of fact. That Freudian beard of yours—"

He looked slightly mollified. "Ah, zhen you have some experience, madam?"

"Whether you mean studying psychiatry or being treated by a psychiatrist—the answer both times, thankfully, is no. I run seminars and training sessions on family planning."

"Goo-od, goo-od! I zink zere are too many people in zis vorld." He appeared to be completely restored to what, in him, passed as good humour.

In the meantime the news of the dead passenger was being passed from person to person like Pass the Parcel, and close on its heels came the information about a wasp sting. This galvanized Mrs Henshaw into speech.

"But I *heard* a wasp last night! Buzzing on the window! And I kept thinking—oh, I hope it doesn't come near *me*—"

"Did you? I didn't." Anne had come up to the circle and now stood there looking droopy; not even a dead man was capable of preventing the continuing nightmare of this journey. Even so, she felt sorry for him. She'd thought him quite a pleasant fellow the previous night at dinner—though this had more to do with a subdued kindness in her own nature than anything Mr Whirtle had said or done. "And how can you be sure it was a wasp? It might've been someone snoring? There were a lot of people snoring around me. People on buses always seem to behave like pigs—"

Rhoda Sanderson heard this and directed a cross look at Anne. "You shouldn't malign pigs, girlie. Pigs didn't invent napalm."

Anne ducked her head apologetically. "No, I don't suppose they did."

"There's no suppose about it."

"Don't tell me she's still raving on about pigs!" Oliver said to Betty.

"I don't quite understand what's going on," Betty murmured.

"A man has *died!*" Mrs Henshaw said loudly. "From a wasp sting! We must form a committee to sue the company! It's a disgrace, that's what it is, for not checking—they should fumigate all their buses—"

The business of laying out and recording Mr Whirtle's belongings had begun. The public nature of it was both a help (so far as Nigel and Titus were concerned) and a hindrance so far as the policeman was concerned. He managed well though. He put things in three piles: those things he could find no use for; those things he fancied but which were not quite his style; and those things which would definitely make their way back to his office for further investigation. It was done with considerable skill; more so, considering he hadn't been able to get in a lot of practice.

Nigel stood there shaking his head and murmuring "that's funny" while Titus jotted cryptic things into a notebook. The dead man's briefcase with its various letters and diaries looked interesting to Titus but the official notebook merely recorded "*I portafolio*" and passed on. The last of the carrier bags, however, caused a minor sensation.

It contained a neat wooden box which, when opened out, showed two compartments of white silk and a fascinating and colourful display of Colombian small fauna. Here were butterflies, moths, humming birds, beetles, toads, and frogs. People pushed and shoved to get a better look.

The sergeant noted the existence of "*I caja*" in his laboured writing; his plump finger moved along the neatly-printed tags—*Papilio childrenac—Titanus giganteus—Heliomaster furcifer—Dendrobates lehmanni—Dendrobates histrionicus—Phyllobates lugubris* … he expelled a large breath. Then he wrote "*CONTRABANDISTA*" and underlined it a regulation half-dozen times. He had solved the case. One of the men on the bus must be an undercover government agent who had acted swiftly to prevent this evil American taking rare species out of the country to make his fortune in New York or Miami (which were the only American cities he knew). This agent, or agents as the case might be, would present full details to the proper authorities at the right moment.

He closed his notebook, told the drivers to take great care of the remains of Mr Whirtle's luggage, said they might now proceed on their journey—and as a final assertion of his authority told them not to stop or allow any passengers off along the way.

People climbed aboard, still talking excitedly to whoever would listen to *their* personal comments and theories. Dr Brokker went briefly down the aisle and looked carefully at Charles Whirtle. He lifted a hand with difficulty; then he placed the tartan rug over the dead face and returned to his seat. Idiots, all of them, the man had clearly overdosed on something but none of them had even thought to look in the pockets or down behind the seat. He would offer his expert

opinion only if asked, though. He had no wish to be implicated in the ridiculous charade he'd just witnessed with the luggage and, at the moment, the bus sounded like a travelling baboon cage.

Baboon or not, Nigel plucked Titus' sleeve and said nervily, "I say—you did study in England, didn't you?"

"Yes. The University of Hull. Why?"

"Ah, Hull … " It wasn't one of the seats of higher learning the Hon. Gervaise had considered for his son. "Well, look. I've been thinking—and I don't think it was a wasp sting after all."

"Are you sure?"

"Well no, not *sure* exactly. But you don't die of a wasp sting just like that, if you see what I mean. The allergy builds up each time you're stung—so you'd know you had a problem—and so you'd carry antihistamine tablets and, most likely, a syringe of adrenaline—and if you did much travelling you'd probably wear a medical bracelet or something round your wrist or your neck to let people know what treatment was needed in case you lost consciousness before you could get help yourself … but this man doesn't seem to have anything like that … "

Nigel, who had just displayed excellent deductive reasoning, now stood there glancing from Titus to the policeman's retreating back and looking miserable.

"So what do you think it might be?"

"It could be the mark of a syringe, a hypodermic syringe—though it's not a place you'd choose to inject yourself—"

"No-o, I think you right, man."

"But it's no good telling that bobby. He only thinks that American chap was doing some smuggling. But do you know what I think? *I* think he'd found out that someone *else* on the bus was smuggling something different … not that it matters what I think, I don't suppose … "

They walked towards the bus steps, running the assessment of Dr Brokker's gimlet eyes.

"On the contrary," Titus said with a disarming grin, "what you thinking, man, it make good sense. But let we wait and listen and think awhile … "

Nigel climbed on board, believing for the first time in days that he really *was* a credit to the canny clan of Drake-Moberleys. It was funny how those black people from places like Jamaica couldn't seem to speak decent English for more than a minute or two at a time. It must be some kind of regression, something to do with neurone pathways in the brain …

He strode briskly back to his seat. Mara was waiting—to remind him of the lightly-poached egg and the fact that *she* had had to pay *his* "bloomin' bill".

## CHAPTER FIVE

Doug Andrews, denied the seat next to Charles Whirtle, had gathered up his luggage and moved back to the seats left vacant behind Titus by the failure of the two passengers in Bogotá to come on board. His movements had been keenly watched by the two Swedish girls, one of whom pointed, though it wasn't clear at what, and smiled and said something to her companion. He re-settled himself, looking rather pale and tired.

Titus had come on board with a certain reluctance. Of course he could sit down and mull over all the things he remembered from his criminology course in England; he could resurrect his dreams of himself being asked to give an explanation of the motivation of a mystery killer, of being asked to advise the president, of being called in when the police were baffled; but neither what he knew or what he'd dreamed of doing now seemed very useful.

An American missionary had died in the night and he doubted whether he was any wiser as to the cause than anyone else on this bus; and quite possibly, if it was done deliberately, a lot less wiser than one or more of the passengers.

He was pleased to see Doug Andrews in the seat behind his. There might be a chance to ask him if he'd noticed anything odd during the night. But on his way down the aisle he decided to take a quick chance. When he reached Mrs Henshaw he excused himself and leaned across to her (her unwanted neighbour was finishing a cigarette by the bus door and ogling Eloise Pinker who was even pinker than usual; turkey-red almost, possibly from excitement—)

“Excuse me, ma’am, but I wonder if you noticed anything odd during the night. It could help to speed things up if there was any way we could pin-point the time of death.”

Mrs Henshaw was quick to appreciate this point; days of waiting round, a dearth of diet biscuits, rude police, obtuse company officials—as she would put it later to Mirabelle “it was a nightmare in broad daylight, honey”—yes, there was nothing slow about this woman when she believed she saw the limits of discomfort looming up. A body, even a remarkable much-travelled body, can only take so much.

“Well, I’m glad you asked me, young man,” she said briskly, “because I did—and I didn’t think it was the slightest point to try and get it across to that half-wit—” Titus assumed she meant the sergeant, “but I can tell you almost to the minute.”

“Hey, that is just great.”

She gave him a slightly repressive look. “But let’s get one thing clear, young man. I will *not* be called as a witness no matter what they decide happened to Mr Whirtle and I will not stay longer in this terrible country, not a minute longer … ”

“Yes, quite so.” He was brisk. He understood now was not the moment to play the amiable unbrilliant *zambo*, however much it might boost Nigel’s paltry store of confidence. “And I’m sure you will find everything will be processed smoothly once we reach—”

“It had better,” Mrs Henshaw’s grimness was impervious to anything but white American charm; and it wasn’t likely that Doug Andrews would want to exert himself. “But, as I was saying, I looked at my watch and it said a quarter to three—two-forty-five—about that.”

“Why did you look at your watch?”

“Haven’t you been listening, young man! Death throes. That’s what made me look at my watch.”

“I’m sorry. I still don’t understand.”

“No, well I don’t suppose you would,” she said waspishly.

“You were asleep?”

“If you can call it sleeping. I woke up because someone—or something—kicked—or you could say *bumped* the back of my seat. I thought the bus must be stopping. I looked at my watch. And then I’m sure I heard a wasp. I didn’t *see* it—but—”

“Did you hear anybody saying anything—or perhaps a sound from Mr Whirtle?”

“No. Nothing. Oh, a lot of snoring—if you mean *noise*—”

“Do you know if Mr Whirtle had been snoring?”

Julio Cortéz in his forage cap had come to claim his seat by Mrs Henshaw. But it wasn’t as bad as it seemed; quite soon now he might be able to sit between the Batista sisters with the sweet Maria on his left hand and the sweet Elena across the aisle on his right hand.

Bettina Henshaw saw the significance of the point but she finally shook her head. “I couldn’t say for sure.”

“You’ve been very helpful though.” (It didn’t occur, until later, for her to query why Titus should be seeking her help.) “I wonder would you happen to have a thermometer? That might help corroborate the time by your watch.”

“You want to take his temperature?”

“Yes.”

She took out her handbag and lifted out a small first-aid purse. “You won’t … I mean … not here—”

“It’s quite okay. I’ll take his temperature under his arm.”

The driver did a quick head count and the bus got under way. Titus was aware of the many eyes on him as he took Mr Whirtle’s temperature as best he could and wrote it in his notebook. As he went to his seat he felt the eyes follow him and understood what he’d achieved. He would now be suspected of having some official status. People would either talk to him or avoid him, they would try to bribe him or ask him to pass on their grumbles … he wondered if it would be a help or a hindrance.

As he squeezed past the nun and took his seat it came to him that the other person (beside Mr Andrews) he must talk with was Jonah Middleguard. But as the bus bowled along and the morning sun shone down with an insouciance which cheered the driver and made him feel it might yet be possible to make up for lost time, Titus spent some minutes carefully noting down each detail he had gleaned. It had been drummed into him by his tutor Dr Inzamam-ul-Haq who asserted that what separated sheep criminologists from goat criminologists was not lack of brains but lack of attention to detail; and, as 'Dr Hack' was fond of adding "the fewer brains you have the more attention you must give to detail."

Titus, without blessing the memory of Dr Hack, made careful lists of everything he had acquired—what he'd seen in the luggage—and then a list of the people he'd seen get off the bus in the early hours of the morning.

He also spent a lot of time pondering on Nigel's information. Was Nigel to be trusted? He looked typical—but how simple to adopt that very English pose. Had his girlfriend been with him long enough to know anything about his background? After all, how easy it would have been for Nigel to remove a medical bracelet and perhaps a bottle of capsules. But was there any advantage in making it look suspicious? Did Nigel want to make sure the case received more than a cursory investigation? Did Nigel know something about the dead man?

And the box of frogs and beetles? Try as he did Titus found it very hard to see Charles Whirtle as a smuggler—or even a collector of specimens of rare fauna. There was something, he wasn't sure what, which spoilt the picture. Yet he might simply have agreed to carry the box for a friend, perhaps as far as Bucaramanga—how far was Charles Whirtle planning to travel?—and Titus wished he hadn't been so long away because he wasn't sure now what could be legally taken out of the country and what couldn't. Of course a little money spread around still worked wonders, he thought drily.

Then he began to draw little boxes with rays coming out of them and question marks all over the place; and then he added two eyes and some hair to each question mark. Dr Hack would've been ashamed of him.

Titus excused himself to the unfortunate nun again and came back to where Doug Andrews was sitting gloomily with a week-old copy of the Boston Magazine hung between his long fingers, and asked him if he'd like some company for a while.

Andrews had seen Titus stoop to speak to Mrs Henshaw but he hadn't been watching when Titus turned his attention to Charles Whirtle. Now he shrugged and said, "Suit yourself."

Titus sat down and said casually, "I was thinking, man. Maybe we should pool our information—then we hand it to the police to save time—"

"Who cares about saving time? And why should we help the police here? Can you see them thanking us?"

This was dampening but Titus only grinned. "Hey man, I not saying you should do they work for them! I just doing this for experience—and to fill in time on this damn bus … "

Doug Andrews, if anything, looked more suspicious. "Well, that's up to you."

Titus tried to remember what was said about unforthcoming people; nothing complimentary that was for certain but he felt that Doug Andrews was just being his normal self; like a dog which always has difficulty knowing when to bark, bite, or sniff.

He took out his notebook. "Could I ask you if Mr Whirtle snored at all?"

Andrews looked startled then, surprisingly, put on a smile. "No. He took several sleeping tablets and then he didn't move, hardly seemed to breathe even, for the rest of the night. So I didn't take any more notice of him."

"Did you know for sure they were sleeping tablets?"

"He said they were. He said he always took them on night trips."

"What did he do with the bottle?"

"Stuck it in his coat pocket."

This opened up a whole new area of speculation. Had Mr Whirtle overdosed? Had he had an American prescription made up by a pharmacist here who had misunderstood something? *Had* there been a wasp and *had* the sting reacted with the prescription?

Titus hardly knew what best to ask Doug Andrews. "The American lady—she say she hear a wasp—"

"That old windbag!"

"But you hear no wasp, man?"

"Couldn't say for sure. I dozed on and off. But if she saw it then I suppose there was one."

"Did you notice when he stopped breathing?"

"No, I *didn't.* What do take me for, some sort of monster? If I'd known the guy had passed out I would've done something about it—"

"And you didn't notice anything funny when you go to your breakfast?"

"I just thought—lucky guy. Wish I could sleep through everything like that. But I assumed the sleeping tablets hadn't worn off—so I left him alone."

Titus wasn't sure how to regard Doug Andrews and he wasn't sure how best to go on with this conversation. Andrews made him feel he was being a pest and a fool and that his questions were annoying and stupid.

He thought he would concentrate on the wasp. Had there really been a wasp? Where and when had it been seen or heard?

## CHAPTER SIX

The two drivers conversed earnestly and anxiously as the bus neared the next hamlet. Should they stop? They had a passenger due to be let down. But *if* they let Señor Parra down the police would be angry—and *if* they didn't the company would be angry at them for carrying a passenger further than he'd paid for—and even if the old man could pay to go further he would be angry—

Personally, both drivers didn't believe the old man could possibly be involved in the death of an American missionary—but might he be a witness? This idea only perplexed them more. How could a sleeping passenger be a witness to anything?

So whatever they did they might lose their jobs but if they searched the old man's pockets and under his hat and in his carton …

As the bus began to lose speed Sr Parra stood up; as it drew into the verge he took up his precious parcel in front of him like someone carrying a rare plant into a flower show and strode down the aisle. His elderly features were creased into lines of determination which suggested people had misjudged this meek old man. The relief driver stood up.

"*Señor*," he said unhappily, "you know we have been ordered to allow no one to get off this bus—"

"What?" Sr Parra managed to look imperious. "*Tonterias!* You cannot be serious! I must get off here! This is my home!"

And it wasn't hard to see where the old man's confidence came from. Parra means grapevine and the Parra clan was demonstrating a wonderful sense of unspoken communication. From houses and huts and ramshackle shops they converged upon the bus to welcome the clan patriarch home; Señor Parra saw them running and his old heart swelled with pride and indignation.

"*Sí, sí,* but you must understand, *señor,* we have orders to—"

Sr Parra was furious. He had not heard the sergeant's order; all he could see was these weedy minions trying to prevent a happy reunion.

"Señor," the other driver entered the fray, "if you would allow us to search your—"

"You must open that door!" Sr Parra's dignity was impaired by his package, but there was something compelling in his: "My family is waiting!" as an emperor might say "My subjects are waiting!"

The other driver tried to take the parcel from the old man's arms. Caught off-guard he could only clutch after it. The driver's hold was insecure, the box slipped, Pedro Parra's fingers scrabbled

on the string, accidentally pulling it off the box. The parcel itself tipped with a noisy thump and squelch into Dr Brokker's lap.

There was an agonized gasp from the old Colombian as the string dropped from his fingers and Dr Brokker plucked clumsily at the box. Through the upended top peeped something white. "Ach! Vat iss zis!" The embarrassed driver stooped to grab the box before its owner could regain possession.

A magnificent wedding cake was deposited on Franz Brokker's knees—"My wedding cake! My beautiful wedding cake!" Pedro Parra's shrill despairing cry pierced through and through every ear-drum, if not every heart.

Dr Brokker leant forward to try and right the cake. An angry zizzing came from the box. Next moment there were four large angry wasps circling the sweet delight of the cake. The Swiss swatted wildly; the insects left the cake and came at their tormentor who sprang to his feet, dropping and trampling the cake as one wasp became entangled in his beard and another stung him on an ear. In the nick of time one driver opened the door with a pneumatic whoosh and Dr Brokker and his attendant wasps fled towards the waiting Parras who opened a bewildered channel like the Red Sea parting to allow him through.

A lone wasp continued to circle the remaining passengers.

Pedro Parra fell sobbing to his knees among the ruins of his cake; a cake such as had never been seen on this mountaintop before.

Bettina Henshaw sprang to her feet—and those who'd believed they were hard done by when Sr Parra screeched now realized they had been mistaken. "A wasp! I knew there was a wasp! I said there was a wasp! You wouldn't listen! I *told* you and you wouldn't listen! I'll sue! That's what I'll do! You'll never hear the end of this!"

Ms Dunbar, fortunately, was possessed of a contralto rather than a soprano with which to hiss at the driver. "You stupid *stupid* little man! Just look what you've done to that poor man's cake!"

The other passengers joined, like a round which has gone haywire, in the uproar. Some believed Sr Parra should be delivered, in chains if necessary, to the police in the next town (a man who would endanger a whole bus by bringing wasps on board!); some believed he and the remains of his cake should be disembarked as quickly as possible so they could get on with this horrible journey; some didn't see any need to think but enjoyed adding to the general hullabaloo.

Evelyn Dunbar who, as the saying goes, kept her head amidst the ruckus now said firmly, "Well. The damage is done and the only thing we can do is take up a collection to compensate this poor man for the loss of his cake." She then took a hand-woven Panama hat out of her bag and began to walk down the aisle shoving it under each passenger's nose and demanding a generous donation to her cake fund.

It had the effect of quietening the bus. People stopped yelling and began thinking up excuses as to why they couldn't donate anything today. Titus had been standing up to watch events unfold at the front of the bus and trying to gauge the different passengers' reactions to this development; now he put his hand in his pocket and found that they were mainly new pence jiggling round in there.

When Sr Parra finally left the bus and was swallowed up, cakeless, in the bosom of his family he was clutching more money than the cake was worth. But no amount of money, his humble mind knew, could make up for his daughter's disappointment in losing her long-promised cake.

Such a cake, such a rare and beautiful cake … a work of art … his old eyes filled with tears again …

In the meantime one of the Batista sisters had somehow managed to end up on Julio Cortéz's lap which delighted him but was also a disappointment; he wouldn't have minded trying a bit of the cake, the less-trampled bits, and perhaps take some home to the family.

But most people had tended to concentrate on the wasp which had zoomed here and zoomed there, apparently disorientated and in search of its fellows. It was Sam Middleguard who finally managed to catch it in a spare shirt. Titus caught his eye and beckoned before he could either dispatch it or take it outside.

A bottle would be the ideal thing but Titus didn't have one on him so the best he could do was ask Sam to put the shirt in his overnight bag and promise he would get the shirt back when the wasp had been delivered. Sam grinned and shrugged. "Don' know what you want he wasp for but don' worry. I got three shirts in dat ole bag."

Mrs Henshaw was still telling people about the wasp she'd heard in the night but Sam came and said to her, "But me father, he hum and hum in the night when he can't make heself sleep. He hum Harry Belafonte maybe—"

"Oh, don't be silly!" Bettina had gone an unhealthy shade of red; she thought she was being made fun of. "Do you honestly think I can't tell the difference between a wasp and your father humming Belafonte! I'm not surprised you people—"

Titus left Sam to handle Mrs Henshaw and squatted in his relaxed loose-limbed way beside Nigel. 'Hey man, you change your mind at all?"

Poor Nigel had been going through professional and personal agonies and now he felt the overwhelming temptation to say simply, "Yes, I was wrong. It obviously was a wasp sting," but something in him held him back from this easy way out. As he had mulled over the problem—anything rather than talk to Mara—he had convinced himself his second diagnosis was right; (besides, it was hard to see how the wasp could have crawled in there without getting tangled in Mr Whirtle's hair and he had heard that insects avoided light surfaces and Mr Whirtle's pillow was spotlessly white.)

If he said "Yes" everyone would be happy; but one of the happy people had no right to be.

Titus correctly read this turmoil in Nigel's face and nodded. "I understand," he said softly, then more loudly: "Hey man, that was strange strange business that old man not seeing they blasted wasps in that cake box?"

"I suspect he suffers from cataracts. His eyes didn't look the best."

Titus nodded and stood up again. So now he needed confirmation of Mrs Henshaw's wasp. He said casually to Anne and a nun, "Did you hear a wasp in the night?"

The nun shook her neat small head. Anne had the dark circles under her eyes which suggest a sleepless night but she said she had dozed on and off and couldn't recall anything.

Señor Rogerio Osorno, who had been 'ebree-ware' was much more helpful. "Wasp?" he said with a big bad-toothed grin. "I hear him. I open my eye. I see him. I go POW! And that is end of wasp!" He laughed out loud and pointed to a little lump of yellow-brown mush on the bus wall. Then he told Titus it was lucky the English girl had moved by the time he went POW! "She loco, loco, loco! She look out window—and WAAGH!" He placed both hands over his eyes in theatrical fashion.

Titus grinned too. It couldn't hurt the girl who had taken out a paperback and tried to bury herself in it. And now he knew there had been a wasp.

"When did she move, do you remember?"

"Early, early," the man shrugged and tapped a wrist bare of a watch. "Before we stop in the night."

"The first stop?"

"Yeah. Before first stop."

"And when do you think you killed the wasp?"

Rogerio shrugged philosophically. He couldn't see any interest in when the wasp had died, only in the fact that *he* had been the one to kill it.

"I just go a little sleep. Little, little. *Vente minutos?*"

"You're sure?"

"Sure?" The man spread his hands. "Maybe yes, maybe no."

Titus grinned and thought of Dr Hack and his dry precise little nature.

But if this man was even half accurate and Mrs Henshaw's information about being bumped in the night was meaningful then there was the very real likelihood that the stray wasp was dead several hours before a murder took place.

Titus returned to his seat, suddenly feeling nervous. Might this mean there was someone on board with a syringe containing something highly toxic—and that unknown person had hated

Charles Whirtle enough to kill him; in which case that unknown person might not take kindly to anyone bumbling to and fro asking questions.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

There comes a time when police orders or not you simply have to go to the toilet. It was Eloise Pinker who was the first one desperate enough to go forward and tap the relief driver on a shoulder.

She mumbled something to him. He turned and said something to his colleague who shook his head. Ms Pinker sat down again looking cross.

But she had opened the floodgates. Mara turned to Nigel and said loudly, "If I don't widdle soon I'll bloomin' burst!"

Nigel was beginning to wish Mara *would* burst and he could have some relief from her. But he murmured, "Yes, they'll just have to stop soon or they'll have a mutiny on their hands."

In fact, the drivers had a far more serious issue on their hands; the scheduled lunch stop.

It was all very well for a fat peasant of a policeman to tell them not to let anyone down until they had delivered the corpse. But they would have to make a decision soon; and they came to what they saw as an excellent compromise solution. When they arrived in the small town where they were due to eat, before they allowed anyone off the bus one of them would go and ask the local police to come and guard the bus during the stop. They had no idea what this might prevent but it would look good when they finally reported to the company.

Titus., too, was in a quandary. He very much doubted whether Nigel had either the confidence or the knowledge to stick to his belief in the face of overwhelming insistence that there had been a wasp and therefore it was the wasp which had stung Whirtle; end of case.

And what definite evidence did he have to back Nigel up? The body would be hustled into dry ice and off to the Estados Unidos as fast as officialdom would allow; and if an autopsy was ever done what, if anything, would show up by then?

The case of frogs and insects had been placed back in its carrier bag and put in a luggage bay. He felt sure it held a key to the situation; not the key the sergeant had elatedly jumped at but a key to Mr Whirtle's relationship with someone on the bus.

The most obvious person to have pushed it under Mr Whirtle's feet was Mr Andrews—and it might be possible to ease him into gentle talk on his visit to Colombia; possible but not easy. There was a grim sanguinuity about Andrews which suggested he wasn't particularly interested in winning friends or influencing people.

But it could also have been pushed from beneath either the seat in front or the seat behind; it could also have been placed there during one of the rest stops. Had Andrews left the bus?

Titus sighed. He couldn't imagine any of these people really wanting to talk with him and he wished he could flash a badge and roar "Answer me or else!" Time was slipping away and he felt he had nothing to show for it. He, the man who'd been going to advise the president, unbaffle the police, confound the populace; ha, ha, ha.

He dropped his head in his hands and tried to re-create the picture of passengers arriving and what they'd been carrying and which one had had that particular undistinctive carrier bag.

The bus drew in to its stop. The passengers were ordered to stay where they were for several minutes.

"Cripey! What does he think we are!" Mara refused to stay in her seat but instead came to the front of the aisle and stood there dancing from foot to foot; an attitude which gained her Betty Brenton's sympathy.

"I do think they're hard," she said across the aisle to Carol. "I mean, coffee does go through you like—like an express train—and there's really nothing you can do to stop it. It's much worse than tea, though I've never found out why."

Carol shrugged. "I guess we just have to grin and bear it. They seem pretty paranoid about everything but I suppose things'll be better after we drop off that poor bloke's body—"

"Well, I don't know, love. I have this horrible feeling no one's going to want to take responsibility and we'll end up carrying it all the way to the coast."

Mara overheard this and whipped around. "If they bloody well try to I'm heavin' the friggin' old arsehole off the bus myself!"

Betty looked shocked and Mara grinned. "Oh, don't worry. I won't ask you old squares to pitch in—but a few more hours in the sun and I'll guarantee half the bloomin' bus'll be willing to give me a hand!"

The door re-opened and the relief driver and a very young man with pimples on his chin but the regulation hardware came up the steps. The policeman stood just inside the bus and the passengers were allowed to file closely past him. He stared at each one, perhaps imprinting the faces on a photographic memory, perhaps hoping to make the sort of eye contact which would suggest someone willing to … but what good would *that* do when he was stuck with minding the bus while they all went off to the café …

At the end of the human flood came Titus. He wasn't quite what the young cop had been hoping for. But Titus gave him a cheerful grin and said hurriedly in Spanish: "There is a dead man there. Will you search his pockets carefully and make a list of everything you find. The sergeant back there—" he indicated the road they'd come down, "neglected to do so and there will be questions asked."

His manner, for all its confiding quality, held a note of quiet authority and the young man said immediately, "*Certainemente, señor*."

"If you find money in his pockets, as I think you will, I am sure you are entitled to take enough to justify giving up your lunch hour—and Señor Whirtle cannot take it with him to heaven—but I would like to know how much you originally found."

The young man nodded again, his chocolate brown eyes glistening with curiosity.

"If you find anything such as medication or letters I think it should be packed up and given into the safe keeping of the drivers to go to the forensic laboratory."

"Ah," the months of boredom in this humid valley, where green things grew on his youthful ambitions, seemed to drop away, "*un caso de homicidio?*"

"I think so. There are some very strange features to the case."

In his excitement the young man grasped Titus by the arm. "If I could be somewhere else!" His free hand and his eyes seemed to beg Titus to look out upon his life; the veneer of white walls, the cascades of hibiscus. The rich man's car parked briefly in front of the one bowser … and behind these things, the rusting iron, the mud, the petty squabbling …

"Give me your name and address and I'll let you know what happens in the case."

Titus took the slip of paper the young man thrust at him with moist eyes. Excitement would drive out in half-an-hour and leave him stranded but if Titus remembered some day he would hear more about the 'strange features'. He prowled the empty bus with glistening gaze until he found the courage to come up and remove the rug from Charles Whirtle and touch his suffused pink body.

Dr Brokker had been reading a magazine in German with an air of grave absorption. But young Augusto Weiss next to him (whose father imported Mercedes Benz cars and trucks into Venezuela) was well aware Dr Brokker was not reading medical literature and he found the doctor's pompous pose highly amusing.

In fact, Dr Brokker had spent his last few Swiss francs on reading matter at Zurich airport, under the impression that while foreigners respect Swiss banks they do not respect Swiss cash. He resented the cheeky young fellow with his wild hair—and yet, perversely, found Mara's raucous complaining discreetly exciting. Now *there* was a girl with red blood! He watched her walk away from the bus, minus Nigel who was rooting in his overnight bag for something, and was galvanized into action; catching up with her halfway to the café.

"Ah—miss—beg pardon. I trust you and your yong gentleman friend are enjoying zis crazy bus—"

Mara shrugged. "Nigel is a pain and a pill. Did you see what he did this morning?" Franz Brokker shook his head. "He ordered a bloomin' egg in his coffee—"

"An egg? You mean—visked?"

"No! No! He said he wanted coffee and then he pretends to break a friggin' egg over the cup—so of course the stupid woman breaks his egg into his coffee!" She started to laugh, throwing back her head and letting it rip. "You've never seen anything so funny as his face when he found that horrible slimy thing in the bottom of his mug! I thought he was goin' to puke!"

Brokker smiled a little. He was wise enough, he believed, to know it wouldn't be wise for him to endorse her criticism; no, he must let her feel instead she was a girl with a wonderful sense of humour. Of course this subtlety was lost on Mara who would much prefer him to say, "Yeah, I've seen some pills in my time and he's the pilliest one I've ever seen!"

He admired her brilliant blue eyes and tousled taffy hair and the long bare reaches of her skin, and he thought he would enjoy tossing her into a bath-tub and scrubbing her all over. He coughed and said formally, "If you would care to share a table with me—"

"Sure. Why not. But if I don't get to the loo soon there'll be the sort of accident I can't bloomin' afford!"

This referred to the fact she only had the one pair of shorts but he was thinking what a fine fellow he was as he kissed his fingertips in her direction and went on into the café; not for Franz Brokker, except in extremis, any vulgar queueing. Dracula or not, Mara felt quite pleased. It wouldn't hurt Nigel to see he was just one of the crowd; and this Brokker guy with his gold cuff-links probably left Nigel for dead anyway.

Titus too had his prey. He caught up with Doug Andrews and said "Hi!" Andrews merely grunted; it was as though his enthusiasm for travel had been progressively diminishing and had now reached rock-bottom.

"Hey man, there's one thing puzzling me," Titus said quickly. "That box of frogs and things—it don't belong to Charles Whirtle—so I ask myself can it be yours?"

Andrews turned to him, squinting against the brilliant sun. "Who says it wasn't his?"

"I do. We came into the bus station together and I see what he was carrying and what he handed in. I'm not going to go dobbing you in—don't be worrying—but I *am* curious." Titus knew he was on uneasy ground; knowing it wasn't Whirtle's box wasn't the same as knowing it was Andrews' box.

Andrews shrugged. "I bought it to take home to my kids. I thought they'd be interested. I didn't realize it'd slipped underneath his seat—and then when that cop brought it out and started dancing round I couldn't very well say, 'Hey, that's mine!' He would've had me in his lock-up before you could say Jack Robinson—"

"You seem to have a very poor opinion of our police."

"Well, don't you? Does Paez or Nukak ring a bell with you? Do you like seeing judges blown up? Don't you worry about the sort of blatant extortion which goes on here?"

Titus felt himself caught flat-footed. Of course, he knew about the massacres of Paez and Nukak Indians, the Arhuaco elders, and of the lawyers who'd tried to get justice and been killed in their turn; hadn't he written letters from Hull to President Gaviria '*Su Excellencia, Con tristeza me he enterado que …* "

His hesitation was enough leeway for Andrews to excuse himself and dart into the dubious-looking outhouse where tarantulas, members of the Family Avicullariidae, and overweight rats might lurk.

Obviously Mr Andrews would not be 'available' for another tête-à-tête; who then could he approach for something on Charles Whirtle? He pondered this as he entered the café, then his face brightened.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

This café had big trestle-like tables seating six to eight people; probably the work of a local carpenter who'd seen public eating in the nature of presidential banquets.

Anne, Bettina and Evelyn were on a first-name basis and had naturally gravitated to one of the rickety tables. There they had been joined by Fred Ruggioli and Eloise Pinker—which

constituted a bit of fast footwork on Ms Pinker's part and the mistaken idea the poor girl was lost and lonely on Mr Ruggioli's.

But the chair between Evelyn Dunbar and Eloise Pinker was empty. Titus sashayed over and said politely, "I wonder—is this chair being kept for anyone?"

"Heavens no!" Ms Dunbar looked up. "We just didn't seem to be a round number."

"A round number?" said Fred Ruggioli, more as a way of starting conversation.

"Oh, you know what I mean," Evelyn said tartly; her nerves were becoming frayed, not least by Ms Pinker's habit of constantly scratching herself. Then inspecting under her fingernails to see what might be trapped there.

Titus sat down and smiled at everyone. He hoped Sam and Jonah would not feel offended. A man came in and said none of the things on the blackboard were available today because his wife was sick—but they could have coffee and fruit and bread rolls with jam if they were hungry; so put up their hands if they wanted those things. Even if they didn't everyone was hungry enough to put up a hand. A few minutes later three small girls began hurrying to and fro with trays of bread and slices of pineapple while the man himself carried in a box of fizzy drinks and began setting them out along the grubby counter.

Bettina Henshaw brought out her diet biscuits with a resigned air; she'd almost been ready to try something more adventurous. Papas chorreados perhaps, or fried plantain …

In fact, a kind of frazzled anxiety was settling over the passengers; too much uncertainty, too much sitting, too much time for dwelling on the nature of Colombian jails …

Nigel came in and stood a minute, looking around with the puzzled look of a boy who's arrived for the 10 am match only to find it was at 9; then he walked calmly across and sat down between Doug Andrews and Rhoda Sanderson, thanking his lucky stars that he at least had an English-speaking table. He didn't feel up to tackling anything much—but after ten minutes chatting about the journey and Charles Whirtle and the wasps he thought Rhoda was a very nice sensible woman and he might invite her and Carol to come for a meal when they finally got somewhere worth going for a meal.

The day was extremely hot and close with a metallic hint to the sky. Fred Ruggioli thought it was due to their position in this valley; though valley, Anne put in, was a misnomer—they were still thousands of feet up, weren't they?

Eloise, perhaps misunderstanding, giggled. Bettina Henshaw was oddly quiet and preoccupied and murmured to Evelyn Dunbar she wasn't feeling terribly well though it was more a kind of tension than anything actually physical.

"It's this trip, my dear," Evelyn Dunbar said kindly. "I'm sure we'll all feel better when—well, when poor Mr Whirtle is removed from the bus—"

"No, it's not—not that exactly. To be honest, I wasn't particularly attracted to him anyway." She tailed off, looking uncomfortable and distinctly unlike her normal self; though, as Titus accepted, people visiting a strange country could rarely be said to be their 'normal self'.

Evelyn Dunbar, perhaps because of the intimacy and tact required by her profession, said, "No, I understand. I've been trying to feel charitable—and sorry for him, only a young man really—but I can't quite … " She too trailed off.

"I wonder," Titus put in, "if you felt you should like him because of his profession—and of course the difficulties and dangers that he must have endured?" (Though endured wasn't a word which sprang to mind when faced with Charles Whirtle.)

Ms Dunbar gave him her brisk smile. "Yes, I think my problem is—or is partly—that I have doubts as to whether he really *was* a missionary—and if he wasn't, then one can't help wondering what he might've been up to that he needed a respectable cover."

"He certainly had plenty of literature with him." Mrs Henshaw sparked briefly.

"Do you think it was a genuine organisation he was working for?"

Both women plunged in together—

"I've never heard of it but—"

"It sounded a bit theatrical to me—"

"I'm sure it'll be possible to find out if it had official permission to work in this country." Titus found himself outwardly calm but hard-pressed not to show an inward excitement.

But it was Anne who looked at him with astute and steady eyes. Then she turned to her compatriot: "Perhaps we expect religious people to be like our local vicar and it can't be realistic to expect an American missionary to behave like that—"

"No, it's not that, I don't think." Evelyn gave the impression of someone who would always try to be scrupulously fair. "It's very hard to pin down—but I think it was that I felt his knowledge of the Bible was quite superficial. In my work, as you can imagine, I have come across quite a lot of missionaries and even when I haven't approved of their methods I think I have always felt that their Biblical knowledge was thorough. Mr Whirtle—" she gazed at Titus with troubled eyes, "seemed—and I know this is a terrible thing to say—but I would have to say I felt he was an uncharitable man. Of course, I may just have rubbed him up the wrong way and it's possible he wasn't feeling well even then … but as soon as I mentioned my reason for being here he said he was very pleased to hear that because—and I quote "the Indians here breed like flies". I said surely that made more potential converts for him and he said I didn't understand that these people were so entrenched in their pagan and primitive ways that they were holding back the country and making life more difficult for the poor people forced to live in slums in the cities—I didn't quite follow his reasoning, I think because at first I thought he was using 'Indians' as a vague term to refer to anyone who wasn't white—"

"The Arhuaco people asked the missionaries to leave their area. Do you think that—"

"No. No, I don't think so. I had the feeling it had to do with the actual land in some way."

"That if the Indians were moved off their land it could then be developed as farms or houses for the urban poor—and so the fewer Indians the easier this would be?"

"I honestly don't know—but yes, that could well be what he meant. I felt he didn't like the Indian people—and at first I *did* think they might have resented him proselytizing—but the more I felt he wasn't genuine the more I felt it was something else to do with the Indians. Maybe he'd tried to buy land and been knocked back. On my way here I was reading a story about a woman called Mrs Gordon-Baillie who ran a fraudulent scheme to make money for herself. She told a state government in Australia she was hoping to help poor Scottish crofters so they gave her a large grant of land—but instead of selling the land and helping the crofters she simply pocketed the money from its sale. It just occurred to me now that it was likely that land had indigenous people on it too. Do you see what I'm getting at?"

Fred Ruggioli had stopped listening to Eloise, mainly because she hadn't said anything worth listening to, and was now listening avidly to Evelyn Dunbar.

"You've sure got a way with you," he said in apparent sincerity. "You should've been a lawyer."

"I think we have enough lawyers," she said mildly. Anne smiled at Ruggioli and he decided that the wistful quality of her smile was rather endearing; but then almost anything might be better than this Pinker dame and her pestering and the way she kept putting a sweaty hand on his thigh. It was his best suit, or the best one he'd brought with him. Then he excused himself to the table saying it was too hot to want coffee, and went out.

Eloise went to follow then changed her mind and stood standing and gazing round rather like a cow which has forgotten the way to the paddock gate. Her eye caught the eye of Rogerio Osorno and he winked. She winked back—then she turned and walked slowly to the door, giving an exaggerated wiggle to her bottom. It didn't surprise anyone when Sr Osorno got up a minute later and followed.

"That girl," Evelyn Dunbar said succinctly, "is asking for trouble."

"The dogs are barking," Mrs Henshaw said suddenly.

"So they are," Anne turned and looked at the American woman with round eyes. "They sound—" she gave an exaggerated little shiver, "I don't know—like the Hound of the Baskervilles … spooky … I wonder why?"

Bettina Henshaw stood up. "I think I'll go outside." She had grown pale and something about her face seemed to twitch.

Here and there, around the white-washed room, a person stood up and went out. The Ramirez family cannoned past; their biggest boy who'd been remarkably good had now decided to be remarkably bad and came close behind the poor cousin to knock things over and spill sugar in such a way that people would blame the cousin. He also put a couple of things under his shirt.

Soon only the 'English-speaking' table and Titus and Ms Dunbar were left inside. She tapped him on the arm. "Pardon my asking, Mr Rohan, but do you have any official authority?"

"Not—not exactly." He felt she would open up if he could say yes; but it didn't matter. She interpreted his hesitation to fit her own need to feel someone of reasonable intelligence was taking an interest in the situation.

"Well, then, perhaps you can advise me … it's been on my mind—though it's probably a misunderstanding on my part … you know I have Miss Pinker next to me on the bus?"

"Yes."

"She said to me—after we'd heard about the death—that this American man was such a fool he deserved to be dead, and she thought things would get better now that he *was* dead."

"That's very interesting."

"Yes. I asked her if she knew Mr Whirtle and she said she knew about him and that he did bad things and that he had spoiled things between her and her boyfriend."

"What sort of things? Did she say?"

"She wouldn't tell me—and when I said she really ought to tell me she got angry and started saying people only wanted her for the things she knew, not because she was a pretty girl. She seems rather unstable, poor thing."

Titus thought she was a very un-pretty girl but he only said, "Did she say anything about her boyfriend?"

"No. I must admit I found it very hard to have what you might call a rational conversation with her. I do hope she'll go home to her family. I don't think she's safe on her own."

They were the last out of the restaurant and Titus wasn't sure what to make of the conversation. The obvious thing was to go and have a conversation with Ms Pinker herself but he was secretly glad when they came out into the open and he couldn't see her standing unattended anywhere; he didn't want her anger and, what he regarded as worse, the possibility of being touched by her fat pink hands.

It was Bettina Henshaw who was standing alone, her eyes darting, her hands clasped. She *knew* what was coming and she felt little unwanted trickles of fear as she watched the four Australians stroll, so calm, so unconcerned, towards the bus.

## CHAPTER NINE

The earthquake began exactly four minutes and thirty-five seconds later.

Yet it began so gently, so seductively, that people who had never known an earthquake before (such as Anne and Nigel and Mara; for whatever else England does it doesn't throw earthquakes at unsuspecting visitors) were surprised. It was, Nigel said to Doug Andrews, "like standing on a waterbed". Andrews, who was tired, grumpy, and enervated, said he'd never stood on a waterbed. But Betty Brenton turned round and said, "What a wonderful way to describe it! I had no idea an earthquake would feel like this! I s'pose the dogs must've felt the subterranean rumblings before we did?"

There was something so artless and sympathetic about her Nigel warmed to her, as he'd warmed to Carol and Rhoda. His own dear mother was more in the nature of an Iceland poppy, cool, delicate, and fastidious—and now that he came to think on it he remembered she had the awful habit of starting every conversation with "Really, Nigel—" Perhaps he could swop Edwina Drake-Moberley for Betty—that would give her something to "Really, Nigel" about. Mrs Brenton looked more than ready to take him under her comfortable wing.

By now, Mara had decided to treat Nigel as a species of bottom-dwelling fish, perhaps a flounder; whereas Betty Brenton saw something of a naturally truculent little boy who has never quite got up the courage to say "No!" or "So there!" to anybody …

The driver sounded the horn. The policeman, who had only let Fred Ruggioli past after some soft soap from him, stepped down and watched the passengers slowly and almost reluctantly begin to queue. It didn't surprise him to see Titus place himself at the end of the line.

Mr Ruggioli was feeling very frustrated. He had had a tip-off from an impeccable source: this bus line, this route, but operative still unknown … he felt they were doomed to remain unknown—especially as he would need to do a fancy disappearing act at the terminus to be sure of getting clear of the Pinker dame. He'd been stupid enough to think, in the beginning, that he might be able to discreetly enlist her to help in keeping people under observation; now he realised he would be better asking a prickly burr—and with his sort of luck she would probably manage to pursue him all the way home and camp on his doorstep.

The gentle shaking of the ground gradually subsided. Somewhere a sheet of iron fell with a crash and there was a lot of squawking and cackling of hens but nothing else happened except for an odd little wind which seemed to spring up virtually from the ground and dispel something of the breathless hush—though it did nothing to ease the kind of gritty apprehension Bettina Henshaw felt like a film over her skin.

The young cop passed a page to Titus and, for those who noticed this, it was all the confirmation they needed. Titus was *somebody*. Titus glanced at it then put it carefully in his pocket. It was interesting to say the least …

Evelyn Dunbar, with the sort of practicality several people had come to expect of her, placed what looked like a tea-towel over Charles Whirtle's face after spraying him thoroughly with an insect repellant with a strong menthol smell. It was sensible—it sanitised the corpse in people's minds—but a part of Titus rejected it. It wasn't time yet to begin disguising the reality of sudden death.

Titus excused himself and wormed his way past the unfortunate nun but she smiled gently and murmured "*De nada*". He stood a minute looking up and down the bus before sitting. Who among these people had something to hide? No, that wasn't the right question. Take any haphazard group of people and there will be things hidden, people who will resent certain questions. They had not passed beyond the law of averages.

He listed those that occurred to him:

The European man with the beard in the front row who was probably not the man of consequence he chose to present himself as.

Doug Andrews whose purchase of the box of frogs and beetles may have been done legally through a licensed dealer or may have been a shady back street acquisition.

Fred Ruggioli whose habit of returning early to the bus at each meal stop might be prompted by the illicit desire to root in bags. What a pity he hadn't asked the young cop what Ruggioli had said to him on his return to the bus.

The two Scandinavian girls whose unwillingness to mix with anyone might be snobbishness or shyness—though his impression was one of total disinterest in everyone and everything. He wondered why they were putting themselves through the discomfort of this long journey if they didn't care anything about Colombia and its people. Had they come on this bus for a reason and how easy for one of them to lean over Charles Whirtle, ostensibly to pick up something she'd dropped or merely to see if he was all right … and the more Titus thought about this the more sure he became that Doug Andrews had always been one of the first to stand up at each stop and the two girls had always waited to let most of the crowd go past … but beyond that he couldn't force his memory.

He had made the assumption, as perhaps everyone had, that someone had leant over Charles Whirtle—but might it have been done earlier? A tiny prick as someone passed him at dinner, or in the men's, or crowding aboard the bus? A tiny syringe could be hidden in the palm of a hand—or it could be something even more rudimentary like a thorn.

A slow-acting poison, or perhaps slowed down by the sleeping pills, and a mere irritating mark; a mosquito in the humid night, Whirtle might think. A drowsiness compounded by his medication; it had probably been a painless way to go …

Titus took out the sheet of paper the cop had given him. On it was set out—a packet of white pills and their brand name, a handkerchief, a wallet containing several business cards with the inscription:

Charles D. Whirtle
Representative S.P.G.C.S.A.
Then a Bogotá number and a Houston box number.

There was a pocketful of loose change and, more interestingly, an unmarked envelope containing the equivalent in Colombian pesos of approximately two thousand US dollars; also a small address book which contained addresses in every major Colombian city—the policeman had not listed the individual addresses but had noted that Whirtle had contacts—perhaps fellow missionaries—in Bogotá, Cali, Buenaventura, Baranquilla, Medellín, Bucaramanga, Cúcuta and Cartagena. In fact the young man had been very helpful.

Titus pondered long and deeply. If he removed the S.A. from S.P.G.C. he had the standard company appellation, *Sociedad Anónima*, which translated as Limited or Incorporated. Then what about the other letters? Sociedad Para … what might the G stand for? Something definite like *gasoline* or *goma* (rubber) or was it the C which held the clue or even the S? Titus wasted his time on a hundred combinations; then put the idea aside. It was more than likely that, if it didn't refer to salvation, it would be one of those vague euphemistic titles which can mean anything or nothing.

What about the $2,000 then. Wasn't that rather a lot for a man who espoused the simple life to be carrying around? Yet it wasn't a large enough sum to arouse suspicion; and he might be merely conveying it to another group of disciples or to help a fellow missionary.

Or he might be one of those people who carry a lot of cash. Or he might not approve of credit cards. Or he might have a personal bone to pick with American Express. Or he might have stolen them from someone else. Or he might have been planning to buy something on his journey for which cash only was required …

It seemed to Mrs Henshaw that the road beneath the bus continued to tremble and that the tyres did not grip. Here and there they had to slow for a tumble of stones on the road and, once, for a small shrub which had come down earth and all and which the bus drove over.

She tried to divert her worried mind to other channels; specifically the dead man behind her. Not more pleasant but less personally threatening. She tried to recollect everything he had said at dinner; she hadn't liked him and she saw no need to pretend to herself that she had or to plague her poor mind to find something nice to remember about him. No, he had been an arrogant yet furtive little man, the sort you would prefer not to buy from.

And that young Englishman with the toffy voice who had somehow managed to convince everyone it wasn't a wasp—even when there was overwhelming evidence it was?—where did he come into it, surely he must have a motive for being stubborn? And that Canadian who'd tried to talk to those snobby Scandinavians rather than to Whirtle and got nowhere? Not that she blamed the girls. He looked a gloomy person. And then there was Evelyn Dunbar. She looked respectable but who could say and by her own admission she hadn't liked Whirtle—yet she'd talked all dinner with him, had accompanied him out of the café, had gone along to his seat with him for a couple of minutes—ostensibly to accept a sleeping tablet …

Then there was this man beside her—this crafty grubby little moron who'd got up several times in the night ostensibly to limber up in the aisle (she was finding 'ostensibly' a very useful word)—and no one could suggest he didn't look a suspicious type … he'd probably recruited those pimply girls by now to his nefarious purposes …

She had almost convinced herself she was living in the middle of a conspiracy (no one could call her a *suspicious* woman—definitely not, but facts had to be faced) not unlike 'Murder on the Orient Express'—and she hadn't thought much of Albert Finney as Hercule Poirot—and her suspicions might be her protection. It was quite possible Charles Whirtle had *deserved* to be murdered but that didn't make her position any more comfortable.

She began to compose a letter to Mirabelle, dwelling on the death and the wasp … and as she thought of Mirabelle at the other end, elegant and busy and uncaring, she realised she too didn't

believe in the wasp sting. She felt with the indefinable understanding of the eternal outsider in her chosen life that Charles Whirtle was a man who made enemies; it no longer mattered that he was American. The blinders of an unquestioning naïve patriotism had slipped a little.

Sam and Jonah Middleguard talked over Charles Whirtle and unlike Bettina Henshaw they shared their thoughts with Titus. Later.

"Dis man, Whittle—"

"No. Whirtle, Papa."

"Turtle, Whirtle, Myrtle—dis man," old Jonah placed his hands carefully and delicately on to the headrest of the seat in front of him, "he is breathing very nice—uh-huh—uh-huh—and den he stop he breathing—"

"That because he die."

"I is knowing he die, boy, but I is feeling someone else there make he head lift up den lie down back one more time—"

Sam was annoyed with himself for sleeping so soundly but his father was a different matter. He dozed on and off. Little catnaps. Now he was excited. If only *they* could give *the* clue. There might be a reward. Maybe a medal.

But Jonah wasn't to be bustled with questions. He sat thinking, his gnarled old hands still touching the seat in front as though the spirit of Charles Whirtle might communicate if he were patient enough; and he thought of the smells of different people who had passed him—the smell of sweat, the smell of cheap scent. The smell of a new leather bag …

And he thought of little noises—the click of beads, the snap of a case, the rustle of diet biscuit packs (sealed in packs of four for continuing freshness), the clash of aluminium containers, the crackle of a plastic bag, the swish of tyres on the wet road, the interminable meaningless murmur of the Swedish girls …

He thought and thought, finally saying cautiously, "No woman come near dis Whirtle—only dat girl—"

"Which girl?"

"Dat girl wanting go north, go United States, wanting, wanting—she t'ink she catch one man—man with squeaky shoes—"

Sam Middleguard grinned. In his own way he was as 'observing' as his father. Fred Ruggioli would probably have them struck a medal personally if they could hand Eloise Pinker over to the police; and he needn't feel guilty, they'd probably send her either back to Curaçao or off to the United States to stand trial—in which case she could come home some day and tell everyone she had achieved her ambition to visit the United States.

It was at this point that the bus which had begun a long climb to a steep bend drew grindingly into the verge and stopped.

## CHAPTER TEN

For a moment the bus seemed to hover as though the driver could not decide whether to turn off the engine or charge forward again, horn blaring. Anne opened her eyes, looked out half-expecting to see another little hamlet and instead looked out over space. She gave a high-pitched squeal then clapped a hand over her mouth. Those at the rear of the bus wondered why they'd stopped; those nearer the front could see a stationary lorry on the bend. For several minutes everyone sat, unenlightened, then the door opened and the relief driver leapt down and began walking up the hill. People looked at watches—and had horrible visions of an endless journey—and what it would do to a corpse Mrs Henshaw, for one, couldn't bear to think.

Something detached itself from the cliff-face above them and came bowling merrily down. It was a stone about the size of a football and it was followed by a spatter of reddish-brown soil. The people along that side, Titus included, watched it with modest horror. It hit the muddy ditch with a plop! And remained there. Everyone let out a breath and Mara said, "Cor lumme! What comes next? A bloomin' house?"

Nigel said coldly, “Colombia is subject to earthquakes.” He had finally decided that not only was Mara unsuitable, he didn’t even like her.

Mara looked him up and down. “Gee whiz! Who would’ve noticed it if the Brain of Britain hadn’t pointed it out! Gosh, you’re pathetic sometimes—” Titus overheard this exchange and, being nine years their senior, wondered what would happen to these two kids. They couldn’t survive each other’s company much longer.

But it was Anne Pyke he felt sorriest for; she was huddled down in her seat conscious of the awful knowledge she felt even less safe stationary than she’d done while they were moving. Perhaps it had been because of the knowledge each kilometre put behind them brought them closer to this journey’s end. Now she’d been robbed of even that small consolation. What had happened? How long would they sit here? An immense brown-scarred valley existed by her side filled with an eerie dirty haze—and was it her imagination in that brief glance outwards or was the narrow verge uneven and crumbling. Might it break away and tumble as the hillsides above were doing? If only she could force her mind to think of something—anything!—else … The nuns seemed to understand her terror because they looked upon her with round brown kind eyes and one of them leant over and unleashed a flurry of soft pats on Anne’s freckled arm.

The driver came back after ten minutes and told everyone there was a landslide around the corner but that men were fixing it. It would’ve been more correct to say that men were looking at it and scratching their heads but he was a veteran of mountain driving.

The afternoon sun shone cheerfully on the bus although clouds had gathered along the crests of the ranges. Several people worried about Charles Whirtle growing hot and bloated; Evelyn Dunbar, who had a habit of remembering the odd things she’d read, thought of William the Conqueror bursting as he was lowered into his coffin and hoped devoutly that ‘Charles the Erstwhile Saviour’ was made of sterner stuff and would reach the police intact; she wondered how the ambassador would cope and whether they would ever learn the truth about Charles Whirtle …

Doug Andrews took out a handkerchief and mopped his forehead and neck. Someone at the front had asked how long they might be stuck here and the driver had shrugged—three hours, four hours, not long. He had put extra chocks behind the wheels and told everyone there was a container of water at the front of the bus if they were thirsty. It was meant to soothe and soporify but Andrews, far from being soothed, believed the journey was jinxed and dwelt on his beautiful frogs shut away in the luggage bay and broiling in the dark. He was a reasonably skilled taxidermist *but* … in his overwrought mind they grew putrid and valueless … though, now that they’d fallen into the maws of the Colombian police, what did it matter? Let them stink out the station. He tried instead to think of his home and his family. Had the consignment of live Surinam toads arrived safely? Was Sara looking after the Malaysian tree frogs properly? She always cried her eyes out when one died but it didn’t seem to stop her forgetting things.

Several passengers took the opportunity to disembark and walk up and down the narrow strip of tarmac. Fred Ruggioli walked down the aisle, darting looks from right to left; he’d never failed before, colleagues said he had a nose for it, but now he began to think of the tomato-growing venture his brother had tried to interest him in, he’d only need to put in $50,000 as his share … pity he couldn’t lay his hands on $50,000 …

Rogerio Osorno followed him just as Mara got up, deciding anything was better than unadulterated Nigel. Her eyes met Rogerio’s and he promptly forgot Eloise Pinker. ‘Sappy,’ she thought, little interested, ‘but at least he looks like he’s got blood in his veins instead of Nigel’s water and Dracula’s oil—’ She thought it was a very clever summing up and she smiled. He smiled too, and winked. He believed he had a very seductive wink. She climbed down, bored, and wished she hadn’t given up smoking.

Further down the road was another bus and, at the bottom of the slope, several cars. It was hot out here too but the clouds were gathering fast and lending a sinister muggy colouring to the scene. For the first time Mara, not the most perceptive of mortals, felt a twinge of fear. She didn’t like *any* of these people but she was stuck with them—hour after hour after hour—maybe for ever! And she longed to be home heating a pork pie, putting on the telly, wondering if it was worth nipping down

to the 'Boar and Bear' and cadging a few drinks; she was a world champion drink-cadger. How had she ever been stupid enough to be taken in by that travel ad just because she'd won £100 on the Pools? She flopped down on the grassy verge and put her hands round her knees. Señor Osorno came and did the same. Eloise looked out and watched them sitting side by side, so close, *her* man, and a great red fury seemed to grow inside her.

Evelyn Dunbar was feeling very tired. She was due to take a seminar in Bucaramanga tomorrow morning before going on to the coast to do three more training sessions. She was an acknowledged expert in training people in the Billings Method but today she was feeling her age and she thought she'd be glad to leave Colombia to sort out its problems without her assistance. And beyond her schedule, which was now thrown hopelessly out of kilter, was her worry over Charles Whirtle; she had spoken with him at considerable length and she felt she *should* know why, if not how, he'd died. He had given her two sleeping pills (though she'd only taken one) so she knew they had not been tampered with. But could he simply have taken too many? Yet there was nothing about him to suggest a suicidal nature. No, if anything she would have said he was feeling rather pleased with himself about something. The completion of a new church building perhaps? An important convert? She felt he was the sort of man who would put a lot of effort and care into social climbing (did they call it social climbing in the USA?) Her own father had groveled and ingratiated his way upwards with superb skill and she thought it was why she had chosen a career which involved constant travel and long periods out of England.

Eloise Pinker, a pugnacious look on her face, had begun scratching again. Ms Dunbar got up and said quietly, "Excuse me. I think I'll go and have a little chat with that Canadian man … "

Eloise gazed after her, faintly startled, then sat back and tried to catch the eye of the relief driver; instead she found Dr Brokker gazing at her with a clinically-assessing look. A text-book case of nymphomania, he suspected, and he wondered if he might be able to find a place for her—a housekeeper?—could she keep a house?—he was inclined to doubt it but on the other hand she might be content to do it without pay and there would be a modest cachet to arriving with a well-fed blonde to see to his needs. He let a grave little smile creep up and curve round his mouth like a cat cleaning its whiskers.

Eloise wriggled her shoulders back into the seat which had the useful effect of making her big bust bigger but she was too angry with other people—not least Evelyn Dunbar—to fully respond.

That English lady, she knew her sort—all sweetie to your face and tittle-tattling behind your back. She was down there now making out that she, Eloise, couldn't keep her mouth shut—that all the world now knew about the dead man and his dealings with that big fat man in Bogotá with the emerald rings all over his fingers … well, who cared what the Englishwoman said, the man was dead now anyway so he couldn't send anyone after her to shoot her as full of holes as a sieve …

Evelyn Dunbar said, a little apologetically, "We haven't been introduced, I know, but as it seems we're stuck here for a while I hope you won't mind me coming along for a bit of a chat."

Titus, when he saw Evelyn Dunbar come down the aisle, had at first told himself that it was time to go and talk to Eloise Pinker; he'd thought the Englishwoman was coming to Anne Pyke. Now, he gave up Ms Pinker with relief and settled back lazily to listen in to whatever he could hear of the conversation behind him.

"Well, sure—" Doug Andrews sounded wary. Did he see himself pinned to his seat by an immovable, boring and garrulous woman? "I suppose anything beats sitting here and admiring the view for four hours."

Ms Dunbar smiled a little. "I may be a pessimist but I wouldn't be surprised if we're still sitting here tomorrow morning—and I hate to think what it's doing to my schedule—but the thing I wanted to talk to you about was Mr Whirtle."

"Yes? What about him?"

"If it wasn't a wasp—and from what I can gather they're not taking that seriously any more, I'm not quite sure why—then I couldn't help wondering if he had intended to kill himself. You see, if we can show that he had the sleeping tablets—which we *know* he had—then it would save a lot of time. It may sound dreadful but I really don't want to be held up for the sake of a man I barely

knew. But the thing which has been bothering me is his motive—and I wondered if he might have said anything to you which would suggest he wasn't as cheerful as he seemed on the surface. Perhaps mention of an illness or trouble with a government department or harassment of some sort … I may be grasping at straws—but if he felt he had a grudge towards this country he may have chosen to die in this public way so as to create bad publicity—"

"Maybe he had a grudge against the Flota Paloma bus company?" Andrews was dry.

"Well, ye-es, anything is possible. I understand he had made a number of visits to Colombia so who knows what might have happened?"

"Not the forgiving man of God then?"

"I have grave doubts about him being a man of God at all—at least not in that sense—"

"Oh, I agree. Entirely. I felt he was a phony. But doesn't that undercut your suicide theory?"

"Not necessarily … " Ms Dunbar passed a notebook across. Titus wondered if she'd show it to him if he asked. "I jotted down what I could remember of his conversation … at the time I felt he had a grudge against the Indians but the more I think about it the more I feel he was unconsciously expressing some sort of inner guilt—" she gave an apologetic laugh. "I'm as full of jargon as Dr Brokker—"

"Dr Brokker?"

"The Swiss psychiatrist sitting across the aisle. I suspect he's been struck off the register or whatever happens to psychiatrists."

"Possibly. But why did you think that about Whirtle?" Titus thought he detected an urgency in Andrews' question.

"Well, this is an awful generalization but the only things I associate with Houston, Texas, are property deals and oilwells—and I couldn't help wondering if he might've been trying to—well, to buy or perhaps *take* Indian land for some purpose or another—and later his conscience had not let him be entirely comfortable … "

There was a considerable silence. Titus was tempted to stand up and look round vaguely as though wondering whether to get off the bus or not. Instead it was the three nuns who stood up and in a 'crocodile' of gentle virtue left the bus and paced slowly up and down the inner edge of the tarmac.

"I suppose sitting on buses for hours tends to make one ponder on the most absurd theories—Ms Pinker is not exactly a lively conversationalist—"

"You can say that again."

"Oh, you know her, do you?"

"Very slightly." He seemed to feel the need to backtrack. "She has tried her luck with virtually every man on the bus, I think."

"Not the black ones," Evelyn Dunbar said shrewdly. Titus gave her full marks for observation and allowed Ms Pinker to retreat as a potential hazard in his life. "I hope she uses contraception," Ms Dunbar added out of habit.

"You don't want lots of little porky Pinkers running around?"

"The girl can't look after herself," the Englishwoman responded tartly. "Oh, I'm not suggesting that you—"

"No. I have more important things to concern me."

"Yes, I've always thought that. You have a preoccupied look—" It occurred to Titus to wonder whether Evelyn Dunbar had more than a desire for information in her approach to the Canadian. "I think you must have been the sort of boy who dreamed of dispatching dragons and you were disappointed to find as you grew up that many things come in shades of grey rather than shining black and white."

He had, she thought, an odd sense of sudden illumination, as though an idea suddenly burned within him and then a naturally morbid nature took over and quenched the flame; what you might call an inspired pessimist.

Doug Andrews shrugged. "Possibly. I'm a very ordinary person, you know."

"Ah no, there you're wrong. I have yet to meet an 'ordinary' visitor in Colombia. I think it is something about the country itself which encourages people to be either more or less than they might normally be."

"And you think that Charles Whirtle began by being less than himself and right at the end became more than himself?"

"Well, yes—yes, that describes it rather well … but still, I wondered if you could throw more light on the situation than my probably wild conjectures?"

"He said it was the most—God-forsaken country he had ever been in—and then, later, just before he went to sleep, he said it was a bitch of a country. He said a bit more along those lines as he was nodding off. I think that's when I decided definitely he wasn't a missionary and never had been … "

"I see." Evelyn Dunbar sounded disappointed. "So it would be very hard to make out a case for him being depressed and suicidal?"

"On the contrary. I think something had happened to spoil some pet project of his but it was only when he was getting sleepy that his guard was down—"

"But he wouldn't have taken enough pills to—"

"You're forgetting that something *did* bite or sting him in the night when he was already heavily sedated—"

"So you believe in the wasp?"

Andrews shrugged. "Everyone went overboard about the wasp—but there could've been a spider in the upholstery or even in his briefcase—he could've been stung earlier in the day and it reacted with his medication—we can only guess until an autopsy is done."

"I see." Ms Dunbar sounded glum. "So you think there's nothing for it but to accept that we may have to hang around Bucaramanga for days?"

"I don't mind," Andrews added fatalism to his pessimism. "So long as we can press them to investigate what Whirtle was really up to here and make it public—"

"You're surely not thinking it would get hushed up? And who by? The American Embassy? Surely not?"

"Madam," Andrews was politely sarcastic, "you're surely not suggesting that hushing up the dirty deeds of an American citizen has never been done by an American embassy?"

She was thrown into a dilemma. It was one thing to conclude that Charles Whirtle wasn't a missionary and quite another to conclude that Charles Whirtle was running cocaine, assassinating public figures, or training terrorists … such a mild pompous little man really.

At last she said with dignity, "I am quite prepared to keep an open mind … though I'm afraid it was the other American man I couldn't help connecting with—well, with drugs possibly—quite wrong of me, no doubt."

Doug Andrews lowered his voice slightly. "The other way around I think. A Narcotics guy or I'm a monkey's uncle."

"Oh!" She stared at him then couldn't resist asking, "How do you know?"

"I don't *know*," he said testily. "But didn't it strike you as odd that he should hurry back to the bus even when he knew that cop was there to keep an eye on things?"

Titus grinned and mentally smote his forehead. So simple. So obvious. And it hadn't really occurred to him. He was glad Dr Hack need never know.

Evelyn Dunbar returned to her seat so preoccupied she didn't stop to reassure Anne on her way along the aisle. Anne continued to sit huddled up in her seat, her eyes firmly closed. She knew people must think her the ultimate in cowards but the fear had her gripped so tight she was afraid to give it the slightest opportunity to tip her over the edge into hysteria.

She was glad the nuns had gone; she no longer need feel that she was a bother to them. She didn't know Mara was outside with someone else and it wouldn't have mattered; she'd given up hoping for anything from Nigel.

But in the unexpected way that help sometimes falls from the blue Sam Middleguard came across to speak to Titus; he had two suggestions—firstly, that Titus might like to go and chat with

Jonah as Jonah had things to tell him—and secondly, that Anne might like to change seats so she could have the window by the inner cliff. Titus accepted both ideas with alacrity and told Sam he was a "damn clever man". Sam responded with a modest, "I know."

He tapped Anne on the shoulder and she looked up, startled. "What is it?" Her voice trembled.

He smiled with a lot of neat white teeth only slightly troubled by his habit of chewing sugar cane stalks when he was at home. "Miss, Titus, he be happy to give you he seat for all this time we sitting here, waiting—"

"Oh?" She looked at Sam, she looked at the empty seat.

"Thank you." She moved across and huddled into the safe corner, drinking up the sight of soil and small shrubs and rocks close beside her. The clouds had thickened and given a faint orange cast to the sunlight. Sam naturally hitched up the baggy knees of his trousers and sat down beside her. For a moment Anne rebelled at the company she hadn't asked for—then her good sense intervened and suggested a conversation, no matter how trivial, might while away the time.

"I'm Anne Pyke," she said formally.

"And I is Sam—Sam Middleguard."

"How d'you do, Mr Middleguard."

"I doing too well, thankyou, ma'am. An' youself?"

"Oh, I'm just terribly stupid about heights. I just can't *bear* them. And I didn't stop to think about what this trip would be like before I booked my ticket."

"No, no. This big big mountain. Even make they little birdies—" he pointed vaguely up to the bus roof, "feel—" he did an elegant spiral down with a finger. Anne laughed. "I'm sure the birds would only laugh at someone like me—same as the fishes would laugh if I went and got myself drowned in the sea."

Ten minutes later she wondered if she really had broken her heart when Nigel ignored her. It wasn't that Sam was … well, he had a flashy watch but the rest of his things were old and baggy and ragged … and he had a blind father … and the two of them only knew about simple tough things like cutting cane and picking fruit … but he made her laugh … she hadn't produced even a little laugh in a long time.

Titus heard the things that Sam and Jonah had been discussing along the way. But his urge was to impel old Jonah forward to a conclusion and Jonah refused to be pushed in his gentle murmuring slow thoughts. In his black world with its extra-sensitive touch and smell and hearing lay the answer. But, for all that Titus desperately wanted that answer, a part of him held back; what would he do with the answer?

If Evelyn Dunbar and Doug Andrews were right in their idea that Charles Whirtle had been killed in a very public way so that a crime committed in this country might be brought to light …

With the help of his own notes he went carefully through the list of people he hadn't been able to eliminate; the others, he was certain, hadn't moved from their seats during the night or would've been physically unable to do anything. He also eliminated Nigel, Sam, Jonah, and the three nuns on grounds that might not hold up if he were required to submit case notes to a superior.

The thing which made him most curious was the visit of Eloise Pinker to those seats, identified in Jonah's mind as the girl with the strong cheap scent—yet he would've sworn that Eloise had never come down the aisle.

"When was this, you remember? At dinner? During the night? Early this morning?" He wasn't sure how conversant with the time Jonah might be, then he remembered Sam's watch which, among its many virtues, gave out a tiny beep on the hour.

"Early, early. When we settle weselves on dis seat and feel de bus go vroom! Everybody aboard!"

"Oh!" For a minute Titus absolutely rejected the suggestion then a possible solution came to him. "I wonder … "

Louder he said, "And what happened then?"

Jonah seemed to find the question puzzling. "Nothing. The smell, it soon gone away, T'ank de Lord."

"And in the night—when you think this Whirtle man stop breathing?"

"Don' know, boy, don' want to know … "

Titus felt annoyed that Jonah should suddenly choose to become uncommunicative. Then a probable reason came to him—why Jonah would only deal in very general information.

"My father is Augustus Rohan—Gussie Rohan. He run the *Barranquilla Bugle*. He look out for you if you have no good papers, man. Don't you go worrying."

Jonah turned milk eyes on Titus and something like a sigh seemed to bubble up. "Gussie Rohan, eh boy? I hear of Gussie Rohan."

He leant over a little further and whispered to Titus, a mere breath which Titus had to bend to catch. Then the old man straightened up. "Don' go asking asking questions all the time, Gussie Rohan's son, listen, listen." He placed a hand behind one ear, "An' you have big eyes to see you world … " The old man seemed to huddle back into his corner. "Dis man, dis Whirtle … he too pleased … "

"Why … what you think he pleased about?"

But the old man only shook his head. "You must asking him."

"But he's dead," Titus objected in a wave of indignant English logic.

"Dead, man—but not buried."

Jonah then signaled this particular conversation closed by asking Titus if traffic had begun to move again. Unfortunately it hadn't.

But Titus understood something. Would anyone who knew Colombia well have premeditated this crime in this way?

Evelyn Dunbar couldn't resist bending down as though to get something from her padlocked briefcase and looking under her seat. There were several pieces of chewing-gum but no spiders. She felt restless. Mr Ruggioli had been standing near her by the door, apparently wondering whether to go out; now, he turned and went back, briskly purposeful, to his seat.

Although she had a good head for heights she felt faintly uneasy. The immense ravine was beginning to fill with murky shadows and she glanced at her watch. The cliff-face didn't drop straight down; it bulged out and gave footing to grass and low scrubby vegetation but, for all that, the sense of depth and space was overwhelming.

She felt she had been foolish to speak of suicide to that Mr Andrews; it would be so easy for her words to be twisted into the sense that she had wanted to avoid an enquiry and possibly subvert the course of justice.

It would be more sensible to accept the situation and make the best of it. Those were the sorts of things she told herself as she walked briskly down the slope, then turned and came back up again. 'But old evils live on,' she thought involuntarily, 'unless some definite action is taken to lay them to rest … ' But was it that she had been converted to Andrews' view—that Whirtle carried his guilt with him—or was she thinking of the person who had succumbed to a sudden impulse? It was hard to see it as a premeditated crime. Whirtle had been one of the first on to the bus but anyone could have sat next to him. Yet, it was Doug Andrews, one of the last aboard … had people been avoiding Whirtle, did they know things about him—but that suggested … and from a different angle she found herself, like Bettina Henshaw, canvassing the possibility of a conspiracy …

Quite a number of people by now had chosen to walk up and down or seat themselves on the inner verge or gather in small groups and talk. The four Australians were carrying on what seemed to be a quite acrimonious conversation; five or six young South Americans including Augusto Weiss were chatting together; Mara was bored silly with Sr Osorno who had put an arm round her waist but so far as she could see it would be equally boring to go back and sit with Nigel who was sitting stolidly in his seat and reading a paperback copy of *Brideshead Revisited*. The afternoon seemed to stretch ahead into dark reaches of such intolerable boredom she felt like jumping up and down and screaming.

Eloise climbed down from the bus looking rumpled and cross. She wasn't bored because she'd by now worked herself up into a fine fury over what she saw as the sneakiness of certain people—and beneath her fury she was miserably lonely—but she wasn't aware of that aspect

because she never focused on any mood or thought unless it was inescapably obvious. If other people would treat her fine then everything would be fine. But—they rarely did. Instead, they spoiled her chances, spoiled her hopes, and she hated them like poison.

She was followed out of the bus by Doug Andrews and Titus (though not together) and the relief driver who began, again, to toil up the slope to the bend to see what, if any, progress was being made. People on the bus were becoming fractious and irritable, especially the children; the people off the bus weren't in a much better state.

Titus was determined to keep an eye on several people (which was difficult when they went in different ways or other people stood between them and himself) while he continued to ponder the question: did Charles Whirtle have a drug connection? It made good sense that someone like Fred Ruggioli might've been sent to plumb the relationship between the Mafia and the Colombian drug cartels but this bus and its passengers somehow seemed too insignificant to be worth pursuing; or was it that events and their awesome surroundings had rendered them all insignificant?

He wished he knew. Then he could know whether it was a line of enquiry to be pursued but softly, softly. The obvious thing would be to buttonhole Ruggioli discreetly but why should the man even lift up the metaphoric hem of his cloak and dagger?

Fred Ruggioli now seemed firmly planted in his seat again and the afflicted Ramirez cousin had been replaced beside him by the obstreperous Ramirez son. Maybe he was enjoying the change; maybe he believed his quarry to be aboard still—though they looked modest enough pigeons: Mrs Henshaw, the Swedish backpackers, Dr Brokker, the driver dozing in his seat, Anne, Nigel, the Middleguards …

The clouds had now shrouded the mountain tops and hidden the sun and a feeling of unmitigated gloom enmeshed this puny human tableau. But mere tableau it was not destined to remain.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

There was a piercing scream which resolved itself into a long drawn-out cry of "Heeelp!" and people began running and bumping into one another. Titus had turned to watch Doug Andrews walk across towards Mara and Rogerio Osorno (who had destroyed their hopes of togetherness simply by being together for an hour) and now he turned and rushed to the verge with the horrible sinking feeling of failure.

Evelyn Dunbar had fallen—he hadn't seen how she fell—and slid desperately clawing at the grass and soil as she went down, and had been caught in a little tangle of prickly scrub about twenty metres down. Below her the cliff-face steepened and fell away into nothing.

Two things happened then (apart from a great deal of screeching and gabbling and Ms Dunbar's piteous appeals for help—quickly—before the roots gave way): Doug Andrews virtually threw himself at Eloise, pinioning her hands behind her back and hissing "You stupid crazy bitch!" and Titus yelled "Bring the ropes!" to the driver who had leapt down but was looking as confused as the sleepwalker who invariably wakes to find himself opening the frig door.

"I'll go down," Andrews said flatly.

"No." Titus suddenly felt cold and clear. "You can work off your guilt by getting in the bus with this woman and making sure she stays there."

"But—"

"No buts. Get on with it."

Andrews shrugged and turned away, propelling Eloise who had given way to hysterical giggles in front of him. Just a shove with her shoulder—and down she'd gone! If only all the people who interfered and spoiled things for her could be removed that easily!

The little man in the forage cap was there, peering down with shrewd assessment in his gaze, as the driver came hauling coils of rope which were knotted and tangled and made slippery with seeping grease.

Then Sr Cortéz leapt on to the ropes like a monkey on to a stray banana and had them both whipped round the bus's rear axle before you could say "*Suerte!*" Even so, it seemed a painfully

long time (and it must have seemed even longer to the woman down the cliff) before he had both ropes to his satisfaction and with Titus' help was scurrying lightly down the cliff face parallel with the painful groove Ms Dunbar had dug in the loose damp soil. Down there he worked fast. Every so often a clod or a shower of soil would burst loose and disappear with a sigh into the ether.

But the bushes held and Sr Cortéz at last signaled for the rope to be drawn up carefully while he climbed hand-over-hand to one side and a little below her. Willing hands came from everywhere to bring her up and help her over the grassy lip and remove the rope harness. But Evelyn Dunbar could only lie exhausted and trembling on the road for several minutes.

Then she said shakily, "This won't do," and with Titus on one side and Bettina Henshaw, giving out odd little screeches like a sympathetic parrot, on the other, she rose slowly to her feet and looked down at her filthy front. Scratches on her chin were ingrained with dirt. Her fingernails were broken and bloody. But with pathetic dignity she went over to Julio Cortéz who was swiftly recoiling the ropes with greasy fingers and gravely shook his hand. "*Muchas gracias*." Then her knees began to tremble with the effort and they gently lowered her to the verge where she sank her head between her knees for several minutes.

It was then that the waiting clouds opened and the waiting rain bucketed down, careless of where and how it fell. People scurried into the bus again, the ropes were put away, Ms Dunbar was helped up again. Mara and her companion leapt up and ran for the bus. The nuns came hurrying but without letting it disturb the tranquility of their expressions—the Good Lord gave rain in the rainy season …

Bettina Henshaw triumphed with clean handkerchiefs, disinfectant, Band Aids, and diet biscuits—and in between she said in little bursts "Oh my! Oh, you poor poor thing!"

The knowledge that it had not been an accident gradually permeated the storm-bound bus and contemptuous looks were directed at Eloise and, by association, Doug Andrews. Dr Brokker put 'schizophrenia' and 'persecution complex' next to 'nymphomania' and decided that Eloise Pinker was an extraordinarily interesting case. What kind of family and home life did she have? Would hypnosis reveal the real reasons for her hostility towards other women?

Bettina Henshaw finally returned to her own seat, reconciled at least to the presence of Sr Cortéz and his flirtation with the Batista sisters who were loud in their praise and admiration—though she did wish he'd leave his teeth alone. Sr Cortéz, once leader of the daredevil group The Flying Privates, expanded visibly. It was destiny which had made him a hero in front of a busload of people; and the Flota Paloma company would eventually, after some unsubtle threats to their image by Batista SA, Pineapple Exporters, make that destiny tangible. Mrs Henshaw offered him a biscuit.

For an hour they sat in the lashing rain and watched small waterfalls pitch into space; those who had room for several things in their mind at once pictured the road crew huddling under an overhang, perhaps even taking the opportunity to eat a sandwich …

Titus came and sat beside Ms Dunbar. Anne felt guilty that she'd been oblivious to everything (Evelyn Dunbar *had* been very kind to her last night—was it only last night?) but commonsense told her that there was little she could have done to help and now everyone else probably wanted to say nice things to the poor woman—*and* she was on the dangerous side of the bus …

"Mr Rohan," Evelyn Dunbar peered out from the rug Mrs Henshaw had sensibly swathed her in, "if it was deliberate and not an accident—do you have any idea *why?*"

"Did she say anything to you before—"

"Not really. She sort of walked down the hill then came back up and when she came up close to me she was sideways on, not looking at me—and I think she said 'You think you're so clever getting him to tell you everything—' or that's the sense I got, her English isn't very good—and then—before I'd had time to try and work out what she was getting at—" She shuddered.

Titus nodded. "I understand. Don't go thinking about it. My belief is this—she met Mr Andrews in Bogotá and the two of them found out something unsavoury about Charles Whirtle. I think that his missionary organization was a front for something else, probably a group which is not too particular what methods it uses to get hold of Indian land or the resources on that land. He may

genuinely have felt that the Bible was a good enough exchange for people's land. Who can say? And even where the Indian *resguardos* have been demarcated by the government they have no control over what is under the ground—minerals or oil—nor can they do much to prevent people coming on to their land … and I think we will find Mr Andrews came to Colombia because of his interest in the fauna, particularly its frogs—"

"Oh? Then you mean—that case was his?"

"Yes. No doubt he will say he tried to extricate himself from Ms Pinker—it seems to be her fate in life—but not soon enough. He tried to ignore her and no doubt he prayed fervently that someone else would take a fancy to her … and then he found, by letting her board well before him, that the only single seat left was next to Charles Whirtle simply because Charles Whirtle had told several people the seat was already booked. I suppose he was hoping for someone sympathetic—the three nuns were going to sit in those three seats and he waved them on. Strange, isn't it? He might still be alive if he'd let them sit beside him."

"You think he said something in the evening to—I'm afraid I've forgotten his name—" She put a hand to her forehead.

"Mr Andrews. Yes."

"But what could he say that would be bad enough?"

"You said he seemed pleased with himself."

"Ye-es … I remember now. I thought him rather smug and pompous." She was silent for a minute but her hands moved restlessly under the rug. Then she said slowly. "It's possible—yes—after a little while in his company I began to feel uncomfortable … as though something in his response—to me, to Anne and Bettina too, I think, was inappropriate … I would not have liked to have had to sit with him hour after hour—even not knowing … " She closed her eyes then opened them again. The rain still pelted down around them; they might've been enclosed in a dim grey world.

"But how did—was it a wasp, after all?"

"I doubt it. Mr Andrews had a very nice collection of poison arrow frogs under his seat. It would only take the tiniest speck of poison scraped up on a pinhead … they contain a substance called Batrachotoxin which works very rapidly on the heart … it's possible he even had something with poison on it from when he was setting up the case for travelling safely … "

"I see … well, it's up to the police now, isn't it—"

"Will you want to lay charges?"

"I—no, no, I don't think so. Oh, I know I'm terribly lucky to be alive … but I think we were all very much on edge already—and then the delay—"

"Then maybe we should ask Dr Brokker's advice?"

Evelyn Dunbar put on a wan smile. "What a good idea."

The storm finally swept onwards. A jagged gap opened in the western sky and an apologetic setting sun shone briefly then was covered again. The relief driver appeared round the bend, someone else's coat over his head, and hurried towards them. A single laneway had been opened. Suddenly people who felt they could take no more gained their second wind. Dr Brokker threw decorum to the hills and climbed down to pee on a bus tyre; so did several other people. The sound and sight of the rain had been particularly trying and a number of people had resolved never again to book a bus ticket without first enquiring whether there would be an inside toilet …

The chocks were removed, the bus engine stuttered into life, the long slow journey up to the bend began. Dozens of vehicles were banked up on the far side. Men with *Para/Siga* signs looked on grimly at a boring night.

Mr Whirtle, growing a little bloated Nigel thought, swayed in the jerk of the bus as it moved, stopped, moved on again. Eloise, condemned to sit by the window hemmed in by a man who only looked at her to pin her with angry looks, was deaf and blind to any sense of regret.

The enforced intimacy was hardest on Doug Andrews as he felt his family life, his little business, his children's love, unravel and thread away into the distance like the Colombian rainclouds. He had been a fool, a God-Almighty fool, but even now he couldn't wish for the resurrection of Charles Whirtle, not even to escape the squalor of a Colombian jail. He sat back and

stared ahead with a sigh. A rough kind of justice meted out to the man who had boasted the other side of that restaurant partition that he'd made the Indians "hop" and then *laughed* as he explained his methods to his companion. Doug Andrews found himself remembering that laugh, the sheer throaty pleasure in it …

He thought of the entomologist he'd been going to visit in Bucaramanga, the shipment of live frogs which was to be ready at the coast. He thought of his little shop which gave so much pleasure to children as well as being snug and cosy and warm on even the bitterest winter day. He thought of Eloise and her sob story and his casual statement. "Hey—look—don't cry. I'll take you to the ambassador—" and her cry that the man had said it was all her fault and there was nothing he could do … was it true, he wondered now … and his sudden spurt of generosity, "Well, look—if this'd help you a bit—"

He hadn't known then that she was stupid, cunning, and labouring under a persecution complex. He was only glad he knew of no rare species of frog in Curaçao … his poor beloved frogs … what would happen to them now … he pictured the terrariums, row upon row, with the meticulous background vegetation and pools he and Sara had created in each one; in their small way they were works of art …

If they didn't want him here maybe they would send him to Texas for trial, make out Charles Whirtle to be some sort of saint, lose him in an overcrowded US jail—did they use the electric chair in Texas? He thought so … the jury would be pensioned-off Klan members who would applaud silently whenever dead Indians were mentioned … he grew morbid and sad sitting there, thinking.

He tapped Titus on one shoulder (Sam and Anne had returned to their own seats) and craned forward. "What will happen do you think—to me, I mean?"

Titus turned towards him; his dark eyes scanned Andrews' long pale anxious face. "I don't know, man. But I'll help you find a good lawyer."

He felt burdened by his private list of things he'd failed to see or failed to act upon; but maybe that was Dr Hack's fault—he'd neglected to tell them that crime is people, ordinary people, though he had said, hadn't he, 'Never overlook the obvious' …

## CHAPTER TWELVE

The dinner stop was very brief, people squelched irritably over the wet ground. Here too the 'quake had set buildings a-shiver and a long crack in the restaurant wall had people preferring to sit as close to the outer door as possible. Passengers slept through the long night from sheer exhaustion and it was only by chance that Titus noticed, between catnaps, that Sam Middleguard had moved back to lean over Anne and murmur something—he couldn't hear any of it—and that Nigel had deserted Mara and was sitting next to Evelyn Dunbar while he smoothed a tube of white cream on her grazed arms.

They came into Bucaramanga in the pre-dawn and drove wearily through the poorly-lit streets of the mountaintop city and into the terminus. Cocks were already crowing. People here and there yawned, stretched, stood up and wriggled stiff shoulders, then began to fold and pack odds and ends of luggage. The relief driver swung down and hurried away to report the presence of Sr Whirtle (deceased and beginning to perfume the bus) aboard while the driver lounged negligently but observantly in the doorway.

The Swedish girls shrugged themselves with lazy grace into their rucksacks, after strapping on their sleeping bags, and prepared to be the first passengers off.

The eldest Ramirez boy had remembered, with good reason, the fork he had taken from the café and now jiggled down the aisle jabbing and feinting at the air in an excess of curbed-in spirits. He was a cowboy, a gangster, a pirate, he was bursting to sink his fork deep in soft unsuspecting skin. Instead he jabbed fiercely into the polyester covering of one of the Swedish sleeping-bags. It made a sharp ffrumpf! His mother saw him and cried "Carlos!" The baby decided it was time for lung exercise. Sr Ramirez sprang up and rushed after his son to grab away the fork and berate his son with "*Tonto! Estúpido! Malo! Varminto!*"

The Swedish girl, cold and fair, turned a look of icy contempt on the scene behind her. Fred Ruggioli tried to restrain the father who had been given an outlet for his tiredness, his irritation, his stiff knees, his failed business venture. Another murder might've been done there and then if Fred Ruggioli—who had at last chosen wisely and whose fondness for children, even obstreperous ones, had a lot going for it and who thought he could manage a second mortgage—had not acted with quick decision and interposed his squat person between father and son.

The Swedish girls ignored them and walked on down the aisle. A tiny trickle of white powder sifted from the mutilated sleeping-bag. Titus, coming behind them, saw it—and smiled—and understood.

*

# THE ISLAND OF POORLY PENGUINS

## CHAPTER ONE

Noni and I came on the Friday and had one lovely unspoilt day of exploration and meeting people and generally getting to know our way around the settlement at Cape Fleur. On the Saturday Tom Kirwin was found dead, hanged in the tractor shed.

A Falkland farm can perhaps be compared with an outback sheep or cattle station; it is a largely self-contained world whose members get to know each other very well. The nature, even the happiness, of this small world depends considerably on the man who owns or manages the farm. Tom Kirwin had a reputation as a much-liked man.

My own knowledge of him was brief yet positive; I would've said, had anyone thought to ask me, that Tom Kirwin had neither a care nor an enemy in the world.

We were driven in from the grassy airfield by the friends we hadn't seen for eleven years, Dora and Ken Porter, to their house which they ran as both a home and a guest house. Ken also worked as the settlement's handyman.

Dora had two other guests staying: a journalist from Brazil who was writing a series of articles for his paper *O Estado de S. Paulo* as well as some longer illustrated pieces for several magazines, and a woman of about thirty from Birmingham who was doing her thesis on 'Parenting in Isolation'. Dora appeared to treat her endless questions on bringing up their two daughters on board a small yacht then on several remote farms with kindly tolerance.

Dora had changed little in the intervening years, perhaps a little plumper but still with her same placid easy-going humour; Ken looked much older with his hair receding and going grey but he moved with the same huge soft springy stride I remembered.

The main house was the home of the Kirwins: Tom and his wife Faith, their middle-aged daughter Nancy, and Nancy's two children Raymond and Libby who were both in their early twenties. In the summer season they also took in guests if there was sufficient demand.

In the bunkhouse beyond the shearing shed were three single men and camped out in a large tent sensibly pitched in the most sheltered spot, north of the shearing shed and east of the main house, were six British soldiers. They had come here to indulge themselves for a week or two in fishing, shooting, canoeing and riding.

On the Friday evening we walked, with Dora, over to the main house to meet the Kirwins and have a cup of tea. Nancy dominated the household with her outgoing friendliness, her noisy guffaw

of a laugh, the sheer jolliness of her big pink-cheeked face and roly-poly body squashed into jeans and a sweater and hidden beneath a floury apron. She told us she'd been making bread but she need hardly have said so; its warm inviting smell permeated the house.

"And you're Connie Hernandez?" she said before Dora could introduce us. The grapevine had been at work, as it always is when anyone new arrives in the Islands. "Though to be honest I don't remember your husband—"

"It's quite a while ago," I said calmly, "and I've gone back to my maiden name. Allman. People find it easier to say and spell and I've always been quite fond of it—even though a friend of mine insists I should change it to Allwoman."

"I wouldn't worry." Nancy moved like a beached whale—yet without apparently doing anything, a teapot, a swag of mugs, a fresh treacle loaf, home-made butter and a pot of rhubarb jelly appeared on the table. "I did the same—but mainly because people simply went on calling me Kirwin anyway. I'm afraid poor Don tended to be seen as—well, more often than not he got called Mr Kirwin."

I agreed in a diplomatic sort of way. Nancy's parents came in just then and she introduced Noni and me to them. Tom was a little sparrow of a man, bright-eyed, small-beaked, restless, lively, cheerful. His wife, like Nancy, was large and slow-moving but if she'd ever been similarly jolly it was gradually disappearing behind a wave of forgetfulness. She turned her milky gaze in my general direction and held out a mottled old hand which I took gently.

They wanted to know what I planned to do on Cape Fleur and asked how they could help. I don't think this was mere politeness but it only lasted a few minutes. Then Tom took the conversation into his able hands (assisted, I suspect, by Nancy) and we heard all about his plan to bring three guanacos and their babies from Staats Island to form the nucleus of his own small zoo to be enjoyed by visitors like ourselves.

Halfway through our tea Raymond came in with a couple of buckets of milk which he strained into big old-fashioned pans in the pantry for the cream to rise. He was a strapping young man with his mother's red cheeks and black curls but without her ready conversation. He was followed by his sister who came in from the garden with a basket of things which she plonked down before saying to us, "Would you like to come out and see the garden when you've finished tea?" We said we would.

Later, of course, I tried to think of anything significant Tom Kirwin had said or done but I couldn't think of a thing; to me he appeared to be an old man living out his life with genuine enjoyment, vigour, and enthusiasm.

Libby took us out and showed us through the greenhouse with its lovingly tended and staked tomatoes, its peas and beans thriving out of the wind, its capsicums and cucumbers and zucchinis. "The trouble with taking tourists," she said without apparent rancour, "is that they usually expect to be able to eat everything they get at home without realizing how difficult it is for us to produce them."

"Yes, I remember coddling a passion-vine and a Cape gooseberry in my kitchen when we lived in Stanley. But I think I tried to grow them more out of curiosity than anything."

"Oh? When did you live in Stanley?"

"Before the war. We left in '81." Libby would only have been ten or eleven then.

"You were lucky," she said vaguely, "not that the war bothered me very much—and I quite like it when the soldiers come out here for a visit—but still it was sad. My auntie was killed, you know."

"No, I didn't know that. I'm sorry to hear it."

We walked on down to the front gate through neat rows of carrots and lettuces. The gate opened on to a rocky beach and a small sheltered bay. To the west and north-west was a great sweeping headland, like a claw of a giant crab, which partially enclosed the harbour; to the south was a wavering coastline and, nearby, the rusting hulk of a boat about the size of a tug.

"Would you like to see it? It's called the 'Abra Dan'."

Noni and I both said we would although it would take a wonderful imagination to read anything romantic into this particular wreck.

"What was it originally?"

I was here to paint wildflowers, not wrecks, but I thought I'd make notes of anything interesting I came across. Circumpolar Tours might decide to retain me to write a book about wrecks; I thought I'd quite enjoy that—and it would stave off the time when I'd need to go job-hunting again.

"Oh, just a little boat for taking the wool to Stanley and bringing out supplies, machinery, stuff like that. It ran aground about thirty years ago and they decided it wasn't worth repairing. We—I mean my dad—chopped out the wooden bits and used them in the fire and to make a hen house—" Libby smiled, a very endearing smile which I felt would curl the visiting soldiers round her little finger, "but now they tell us we shouldn't have done that—that the wrecks are part of our heritage." She smiled more broadly. "Mum just said she was very sorry but it was a bit late now!"

We smiled too. "Do you have any more wrecks?" Noni wanted to know.

"Oh yes! There's the 'Fleur d'Allemagne' down the coast a bit—but there's hardly anything of it left—and they can't say we chopped it up because we didn't … and then there's 'The Skirling Dove' out on one of the little islands—" she waved a vague hand to the north-west. "The Trust is going to come and have a look at it, or so they say, and maybe they'll give us some money to look after it—or maybe they'll want to tow it away. *I* don't care what they do. It's a horrible haunted ship and I never go near it if I can help it—"

"Haunted?"

Libby appeared to be a bright young woman, not at all the sort to let her imagination run riot with her.

She frowned. "I s'pose you think that sounds stupid—and I s'pose it does … I really don't know what it is about it but I hate going out there—" she hunched her shoulders as though she was cold, "just a funny sort of feeling … "

We turned to make our way back along the narrow path between the beach and the macrocarpa hedge. " 'The Skirling Dove' is a very strange name for a ship. Do you know what it means?"

"No. I don't think anybody does. I s'pose when it had all its sails and things set the wind made funny noises in the rigging—but I'm only guessing. It was on its way from California to France when it ran into the beach. It must've been a gigantic storm to take it right up there high in the dunes—and everyone got drowned … maybe it's their ghosts still hanging round that gives you a funny feeling—" Libby laughed, just a little giggle, as though uncertain whether what she'd said deserved a laugh.

"I like ghost stories," Noni put in, "you know the ones with lots of shrieking and squealing—but then the kids come along and show everyone it was only bats or something—and everyone feels stupid for being scared—" Noni has very catholic reading tastes but it was the first time I'd heard her say she liked ghost stories; perhaps she was responding to Libby.

Nancy had walked down to the gate to meet us. In one hand she carried a small basket containing a couple of pots of rhubarb jelly, a fresh loaf, and Noni's scarf. She handed the basket over with a smile. "I thought you might like the loaf. Dora's a lovely person—but she doesn't make good bread. I've never found out just where she goes wrong but her loaves tend to sit in my stomach like a lump of lead—"

I thanked Nancy. Libby said, "They wanted to know how 'The Skirling Dove' got its name but you never found out, did you?"

"No. Privately I've always thought it might be a misprint and they really meant to call it 'The Stirling Dove'. It was owned by a man named Pettigrew. We don't know much about him except that he came from a wealthy family and devoted most of his time and money to inventing things. A sort of mad scientist type maybe—and we heard that he ended his days in a lunatic asylum, poor man. The name possibly had something to do with the conflict within his own family but I'm only guessing. One of the family came out to see if it was salvageable after it was reported aground here—though that was years afterwards because there was no one living here then and everyone on board had perished—and he, poor man, was taken by a leopard seal. The story goes that he insisted on rowing ashore alone from the vessel he'd chartered in San Francisco—and it was getting dark by

the time he set out again to row back to the ship and the people on board saw the dinghy overturn and the seal's head and then he disappeared. By the time they'd launched another boat there was nothing left, only the upside-down dinghy … so that helped to give the wreck its reputation for bringing bad luck … "

"But not haunted?" Sometimes I'm a sceptic and sometimes I think I'm extremely gullible; this time I was just curious.

Nancy shrugged her hefty shoulders. "Who can say? People like to hear about the haunted ship—but, really, I think it's the island which—oh, I don't know, I just don't like going there." Nancy became brisk again. "Anyway, I mustn't keep you. Dora will have tea on soon, I imagine. But come over any time you'd like. I know a spot where pale maidens always seem to grow well, if that'd be any help to you."

I said it would, and Noni and I walked back up the track and into Dora's kitchen with its mouth-watering smell of roast chicken; I didn't know whether this was in our honour or whether the tourists who came to Cape Fleur dined regularly on chicken—in deference to the belief that the outside world looks upon mutton as very dull fare.

When I finally had Noni tucked up snug in bed my thoughts returned, not to Nancy and the Kirwins, but to 'The Skirling Dove'. I'd been intrigued enough by the story to want to go out to the island to see her for myself.

## CHAPTER TWO

It was Ken Porter who found Tom Kirwin. Ken was the obvious person with a reason to go into the shed (although I dignified it with the name 'tractor shed' everyone else merely called it 'the shed') and, after his first horrified investigation, he called to one of the soldiers who was outside the tent loading film into a camera to go and get Dora and then come back and help him get Tom down.

It was about four o'clock, brilliant sun outside because of Daylight Saving, but cold and dark and smelling of a variety of things inside the shed. I came with Dora but, fortunately, left Noni talking to Gill Pederson about what it was like being carted off to the ends of the earth by an eccentric mother. We hadn't fully understood the situation; the soldier had only said "Tom's had an accident" so Dora had fetched her first aid kit.

When we got there we found the soldier cutting the rope which Tom had tied round a central beam. Knocked to one side was a large wooden box which I realised later he must've used to climb on. Ken had unearthed a large piece of canvas and laid it out to receive the body. But Dora and I took one look at the scene in the shed and turned away in horror. Tom had not made a neat job of his end; he had strangled rather than hung and his face was suffused, his tongue protruding, his eyes starting from his head.

"Oh my God!" Dora dropped the first aid kit which clearly wouldn't be needed. I stooped to pick it up and heard the tinkle of broken glass. "Does Nancy know?" I said to Ken.

He shook his head before taking the body gently from the soldier and laying it on the canvas. I went up and put a clean handkerchief over Tom's awful face. Then, for a moment, we were a silent tableau round the canvas. Behind us were bags of fertilizer, piles of hay, drums of diesel, odds and ends of farm machinery, an old motorbike in the shadows. In front of us was Tom, bathed in a kind of horrified disbelief. Not Tom! We all protested silently, Ken and Dora with greater vehemence and shock. They *knew* Tom.

Then Dora bowed to the inevitable and said jerkily, "I'll go and warn Nancy you'll be bringing him down to the house."

She walked away without a backward glance. The two men folded the grubby canvas over Tom and lifted the ends to bear his sparrow-weight down to the old house where he'd spent his entire life. I followed behind, still carrying the first aid kit.

We went in the back gate and solemnly up to the back porch. Dora came to meet us with, "Faith's still having her nap. Only Libby's here. I remember now—Nancy and Ray took Johnny up to the rookery on Three Mile Beach—"

She held the door wide as the men manoeuvred Tom's body through. "I wonder—could we do something—to—to make him look better?" I'd been thinking the same thing but hadn't liked to say it aloud.

"I think if we lie him down then we can see." Ken led the way into the house and put him on the big sofa in the front sitting-room. They folded up their musty sheet of canvas, and Dora and I very gingerly closed Tom's eyelids and put his tongue inside his mouth. Then she placed a tiny piece of sticking plaster over his lips. His body was still warm and I had the strange feeling that if we were to tiptoe out of the room Tom would slowly begin to recover.

We could do nothing about the livid marks on his neck, except to pull his coat collar higher. Then I said to Dora it might be better if I went away, as I was a stranger, and could I do anything for her back at her house? She asked me to put the roast in and tell Gill what had happened.

I was going out just as Libby was coming in the other door. I heard her sharp exclamation, Dora's voice—then I slipped out the back door and hurried away along the lane.

Now that I was on my own I found myself asking 'Why?' 'What was it in Tom Kirwin's life which had suddenly made the idea of going on unbearable?' I thought of him as he'd appeared to me yesterday speaking of his plans for the guanacos, his jaunty enthusiasm—and now I couldn't help wondering 'Had I seen the real Tom Kirwin—or had he been putting on a brave face because he had visitors?' But you can't mistake the look of a happy person. The lines on their faces tip upward. Even if they need glasses to read their eyes retain a twinkle.

Had something happened between yesterday and now, some heartbreaking news which had driven him to this desperate step? That was difficult to accept. Tom Kirwin appeared the sort of man who could take, and probably had taken, many hard knocks. But everyone has a breaking point and I could only speculate on what news, what event, might've proved too much for the old man.

Gill and Noni were working on a large jigsaw puzzle and eating chocolate biscuits when I came in. I threw another lump of peat into the stove and pulled the kettle forward. A kind of reaction seemed to have set in and I couldn't stop shivering. A hot drink might help.

"What's the matter, Mum?" Noni left the jigsaw and came over to me. "You look like *you've* just seen a ghost."

"Not a ghost, chiclet," I said and suddenly I felt like crying—for even if I hadn't *known* Tom Kirwin my first impression of all the Kirwins was that these were my kind of people. "They've just found Mr Kirwin dead."

"Dead!" Noni went through a bad period after her father died, when she seemed to expect all her loved ones—her Nana, her best friend at school—to die. I regretted very much having to bring death back into her life but I couldn't see any way in which we could spend three weeks here and she not find out about Tom Kirwin. "You mean because he was old—that old man we saw yesterday?"

"Yes."

But I knew I was only answering the last part of her question. It might be that Tom Kirwin had always intended this way out rather than feel he was becoming a burden on his family; he might have chosen the tractor shed knowing it would most likely be one of the men who would find him. But none of this seemed very convincing to me.

"He *was* an old man, that's true." Gill had come over to us. "But I used to look at him and think I'm sure he'll make it to a hundred. I went for a walk with him one day and it was all I could do to keep up—and there I was thinking *I* was reasonably fit."

I had, up till now, thought of Gill with her prim little mouth and her cap of prim little curls as a rather pedantic and stuffy person; nice, but not a person you would especially choose to while an afternoon away with. Now I found myself agreeing whole-heartedly with her.

The kettle boiled and I made us all cups of coffee and came and sat down to watch them tackle the puzzle again. They had in a lot of sky pieces and part of the waterfall and it was starting to look pretty good. Then I remembered Dora's roast and sprang up again.

Dora looked very tired when she came home about half-an-hour later. Nancy and Ray with the man they called Johnny, João Vidinha, in tow had come back from Three Mile Beach—and Nancy, after a couple of minutes, had pulled herself together and taken charge of everything. The

Nancys of this world are like that, unfairly burdened but immensely comforting to us lesser mortals. She had seen what should have been obvious to us all: the police and the hospital must be contacted. She said she would see to it all; then she and Libby and Ray had gone up to see where it had happened. I could understand their disbelief.

We didn't talk of it over dinner but there was a strained air to our conversation which suggested we were all thinking of it and little else. Only Johnny Vidinha seemed to eat and chat in a natural way.

"Those penguinos—they are like little people, the way they walk—so full of their own importance—like politicians. Well, our poor president is no longer full of his own importance," he added mildly.

"Where did you go?" Ken looked grim tonight.

"We went north for, perhaps, three kilometres—then we turned and went across a little bridge and came to a long beach and there were lots and lots of little penguinos, little baby ones—" Johnny speaks excellent English but for some reason he always calls penguins 'penguinos'.

Noni looked at him with bright eyes. I could guess she was wishing we'd come to see penguins, not tiny modest little wildflowers which often require you to lie flat on your stomach and stare into bogs and crevices or contort yourself to see beneath overhangs to view them in their full glory. "I'd love to see the baby penguinos—" she began, then realized what she'd said and gave a little giggle.

"We'll go one day," I promised.

"I'd like to see them too, before I go," Gill put in. "They'd be the gentoos wouldn't they? If they're on a beach?"

Dora nodded. "Yes. We've only got gentoos and rockhoppers here—but there's jackasses out on Percival Island if you've got the time and energy for a trip out—" People here sometimes call the Magellanic penguins 'jackasses' because of the noise they make.

"We'd enjoy that, I think … though—isn't that the island with the haunted wreck?" I thought back to our conversation with Libby.

"Well, I don't know about haunted," Dora put on a travesty of a smile, "but the rookery out there doesn't seem as healthy as the one here, the gentoo rookery I mean. There seems to be more that don't hatch and more chicks that die. Just a bad position I s'pose. Penguins are like that. Once they've chosen their spot for the nesting season they'll stick with it no matter how unsuitable or uncomfortable it might be—"

"Yes—to see the little ones with the quills on their heads trying to get up the rocks—" Johnny gave a low whistle. "What crazy courage! They could go up the rocks like this—" he held his hand at a modest slant, "but no, they must spend two hours trying to get up the rocks like this—" he held his hand at the vertical. It's something I've often wondered about too.

I think we were all vaguely grateful to Johnny; due to his penguins the meal had passed off quite easily. He took Noni away to teach her some chords on his guitar before writing up his day's notes, and I helped Dora clear the table and went into the kitchen with her. We were paying guests, but still …

"It's so *horrible*," she said suddenly. "I couldn't bear it when Nancy started crying. I felt she'd never cried in her life and there she was doing something she didn't know how to do—and it was just sort of ripping her apart. And then, she just sort of said, no, this won't do—and she was back to her normal self but with such an awful look on her face … I was so glad to get away and come home … but I'll have to go back, I can't just run away and leave everything to her … "

"But leave them for a little while," I counseled and she accepted that, thankfully, as a reprieve. Still, I couldn't leave it there. "Dora, it doesn't make sense to me—what do you think?"

"You're right, Connie. Oh, I know Tom was a bottle-a-day man and I s'pose his liver was shot to pieces after fifty years of it—but even so—not like this. That's what I can't accept—if he knew he wasn't well—that he'd choose that way … he *just* might've taken a boat out and gone in … no! I can't even make myself believe that! I simply can't see him doing anything to cause Nancy and Faith trouble and upset. He was such a—such a *decent* person!"

We finished the washing up and I went upstairs. That morning I'd begun a painting of marsh daisies down where a tiny rivulet made its way into the top end of the bay. Now I took it out and stared at it; the composition, I thought, wasn't too bad—and if I combined them with short rushes for height, thrift for colour, teaberry flowers for grace, and leaves of the *cotula scariosa* for in-fill I might end up with an attractive picture. My job was to provide accurate photographs to go in the company's guidebook and pretty pictures for the company's unique and much-sought-after calendars. I hoped they would remain much-sought-after when my paintings began to appear.

After sitting staring at my daisies for a while I realised my mind hadn't budged from Tom Kirwin. Because if, as everyone seemed to be saying, he was not the man to ever contemplate going up to his tractor shed, standing on a box and tying a rope round a beam and round his neck, then it left an unpalatable alternative. Someone here, despite the kind things they were saying about him, had gone up there and done it for him. I hadn't yet met the three men who lived in the bunkhouse or the other soldiers but it didn't seem to matter—because—what possible reason could any of them have for wanting Tom Kirwin dead?

## CHAPTER THREE

Noni came in early on Sunday morning and sat on my bed. We had the two small single rooms upstairs which Dora's girls used when they were home from the hostel in Stanley. The sun was shining but a strong wind was blowing. I could hear the swish of things in the garden and a faint rattling.

"Will we have to go to church, Mum?"

This sounded odd coming from someone who already looked angelic in her white nightie with her golden-brown curls every-which-way.

"No. There's no church here. People listen in on the radio to one of the church services in Stanley—if they feel like it. I don't know what they'll do about Mr Kirwin's funeral. The minister might come out here … "

She got down again. "I don't think people should have funerals. I think they should just be wrapped up in a piece of pretty material and put in the ground like that. Then you wouldn't have to keep thinking about it and what it might be like inside the coffin and whether they might've started breathing again … "

I didn't know she had thoughts like these. "It'd certainly be easier—and much cheaper—but I don't think it would stop you thinking about it, would it?"

"No-o-o … " she rested her chin in her hands and stared into the mirror on my bureau, "I think I'll go and see if Johnny is up." She picked up my watch but as I'd forgotten to wind it she put it down again.

I didn't know what to make of this sudden desire to be in Johnny Vidinha's company; perhaps he reminded her a little, a very little surely, of her father. I let her go; there wasn't anything to be said against Johnny. He belied my experience of 'Latin' by being sleepy, good-humoured and, I suspected, rather lazy. Jorge, on the other hand, had been like a bent bow; you felt if you touched him he would twang. Though I could never say it aloud, to Noni or anyone else, my first reaction after his death was how peaceful life had become.

When I finally came downstairs it was to find everyone else had finished their bacon and eggs and gone out; though, in Noni's case, this only meant walking the little way down to the bay with Johnny to look for shells.

I wondered how long *O Estado de S. Paulo* would allow him to fritter away his time in the Falklands before demanding a reckoning. In this, though, I did him an injustice. His photo of Noni on the beach eventually appeared in black and white in a 'special feature' and the coloured version appeared as the front cover of a travel magazine and was subsequently cut out, glued to cardboard and carried everywhere with her to be shown to unsuspecting strangers with the laconic question (which concealed an immense pride): "Would you like to see a picture of me?"

But before any of that could happen a great deal of turbulent water had to flow under the bridge.

I got myself organized and went out, coming upon Nancy just about to mount a woolly brown pony near her back gate. With her she had a metal measuring tape and a spade. She said good morning but nothing in her tone suggested it was good. I expressed my sympathy as best I could and mumbled something about finding it unbelievable.

"So do I. But if it's unbelievable that *he* did it then you'll have to believe that I did it just so's *I* could gain control of the farm—" Her voice was curt and I felt an unbearable brittleness in her manner. "I think he would've told us what he was planning—if he was." She mounted and lifted the spade by its handle and laid it across the pommel. She was about to give the indolent pony a kick in the ribs when something else seemed to occur to her. "The pastor'll be here tomorrow. You might like to come to the service."

Did that mean there was nothing to be investigated? That everyone, despite their protestations, was accepting it as suicide? I thanked her and she rode away to dig a grave for her father.

Sounds of hammering came from the rear of the tractor shed and I detoured that way. It was Raymond putting together a long box with amateurish carpentry. Was this too personal a matter to allow for Ken's help? Raymond's face was red with exertion despite the fact the wind was whirling up the shavings and sawdust around him.

He lifted a hand, then bent to his work again. I felt I shouldn't disturb him with questions or condolences and I walked on, skirting the shearing shed and its pens and coming round past the bunkhouse with its washing-line and rusting Landrover cannibalized and mounted on blocks. Recently I read that the Landrover is being billed as 'a weapon of defence'; I don't think I'll save up for one, after all.

An old man was sitting on the front step to the bunkhouse whittling away at a piece of wood. I wondered if this was his way of spending his Sundays. As I came closer I thought what he was making might be a cross. He heard me and glanced up, then he smiled and said "hulloo-hulloo!" I took this to be his welcome and ducked under the clothes-line where a couple of very ancient navy singlets were whipping in the wind.

"Hullo. I'm Connie Allman … I wonder—is that a cross you're making?"

"Yer." His hands were very gnarled and brown as was his face and neck. His cornflower-blue eyes struck a startling note. "Fer ol' Tom, the poor ol' bugger." He lifted his leather apron aside to show the cross in its entirety and I stared at it. It was quite small, perhaps three feet at the most, but he was carving it as a beautiful Celtic cross with an intricate pattern of leaves and spirals.

"Was makin' it fer meself," he went on in his slow voice where I seemed to hear a whiff of Ireland behind the lazy Falkland drawl. "Thought I'd go before poor ol' Tom—but yer never know about these kinda things, no yer don't." He looked up again with those extraordinary blue eyes and sniffled.

"It's wonderful!" I said sincerely. "You must've done a lot of carving?"

"A fair bit, a fair bit, lass … but always hard ter get good wood … " He lifted a hand and I naturally looked round the treeless landscape; nothing but the macrocarpas and, scattered across the slopes, hedges of gorse. Perhaps a little driftwood along the shore. He took up his small chisel again and I said I'd love to see more of his carvings one day if he wouldn't mind showing them to me.

"Come termorrer," he said, then he seemed to remember the purpose behind his work and shook his head. "Another day, not termorrer." He took out a grubby rag and blew his nose.

I thanked him for his invitation and went away, avoiding the Landrover and some piles of rusting junk and cutting across the dandelion-starred grass to the shore path beyond the 'Abra Dan'. The rocks were festooned with long brownish streamers of kelp and, further out, the waves lashed in dramatic fountains of spray against the base of the headland. It wasn't a terribly nice day to be out walking but I knew if I was going to get anything done I'd have to do what everyone else here does—ignore the wind as best you can and get on with your work.

The track was quite well-travelled, its sandy surface scuffed by people and ponies and dogs, so I didn't think I could get lost. I passed through a gate in the wire fence which went right down to the beach and ended at low-tide level. The foreshore was ringed with the silvery leaves of sea-

cabbages; if I were to leave them till the end of our stay then, with luck, the flowers would be coming out. After a while my makeshift easel and camera and box of paints began to grow heavy. But I had decided to walk as far as the 'Fleur d'Allemagne', not least because Tom Kirwin had said there was a place nearby where dog orchids and lady's slippers grew together. I felt it was a chance not to be missed. I also felt, in a strange way, that I was doing it *for* Tom Kirwin.

The old ship, as Libby had implied, was virtually gone. There were a few rotting spars and planks tossed high above the tideline and half-hidden in diddle-dee scrub. I squatted down beside one of these ancient timbers. It was so riddled and seamed with holes and channels I wondered if the ship itself had been rendered unseaworthy by the depredations of teredo worms and other little wood-eating creatures. I thought I could just discern the shape of a hull beneath the water but this could easily have been my imagination; I had come to see a wreck and therefore my mind's eye was obediently going to find me a wreck.

The 'Fleur' of the vessel's name was in honour of the German wife of the owner of the Dieppe company which had built and sailed the ship. Perhaps she'd been particularly beautiful, perhaps it'd been a tradition, perhaps it was her money behind the venture … but however it was it hadn't brought the ship luck. If it had run aground only five years later there would've been people nearby to bring help but in the year it came ashore the nearest settlement was fifty miles to the south-east and the unfortunate survivors had chosen to walk due east. The bones of several of them had been found years later and returned to Cape Fleur for burial.

I took several pictures of the old timbers, bleached and silvery and ineffably sad. I felt a sense of kin with the old wood even though I knew it was a contrived and spurious sentiment; and only because of its link with my name. The Allmeni tribe, or some of it, were chased out of their peaceful Bavarian fastness many centuries ago by the warlike Germanic tribes, and they fled first into Switzerland, then into Italy, then they were granted asylum and some land in the mountains by the French king; but like all people who have been rudely shaken out of a complacent way of life and dispersed they found it difficult to settle. France and its neighbours took their name for the country they had left behind (Allemagne, Alemania, Alemanha) and the people themselves continued their gentle diaspora, calling themselves Allman or Allmen when they reached England and Ireland … and here was one of their descendants standing on a windswept heath in the uttermost part of the earth. It seemed very appropriate—but not very productive.

I went in search of the tiny orchids. Unfortunately, I couldn't find them. I quartered the ground within about a hundred yards, then two hundred, of the wreck; and finally decided Tom Kirwin's 'nearby' had probably meant anything he'd wanted it to mean. Still, this was no reason to waste time. I got out my things and went to work on a branch of diddle-dee, taking artistic licence and sprinkling the branch with round red berries even though these wouldn't be ripe for months more.

Then, tired of being buffeted by the wind, I packed up again but instead of returning by my original path I walked inland to the small gully which seemed to run roughly in my direction. As I followed it I made notes of anything I could use in the weeks to come, but still no orchids.

I struggled through a wire fence with my paraphernalia and found myself approaching the settlement downhill. The soldiers were outside their big tent drinking pannikins of tea and preparing what smelled like a stew in a large aluminium pot. It reminded me my own lunch was probably waiting. Maybe next time I should take sandwiches with me but I didn't like to leave Noni for too long, not until I knew she was settled in and happy.

One of them called out, "Hi beautiful! Come on over and say hello!"

I was keen to get back to Dora's but it would've been churlish to walk straight past and I hoped one of them might like to offer to carry my things; I was quite tired from the wind pulling and snatching at them.

They all stood up, politely enough, and the one who'd shouted now introduced them. "I'm Brett—and this is Smithy—" (Smithy was the one who'd cut Tom Kirwin down) "and Pete and Buggsy and Jacks and Tim—"

They all said something and Smithy put down his cup and held out his hand. I gave them my name and asked how they liked being here. They took this as referring to Cape Fleur and said

things like “Not bad”, “Okay”, “Quite nice people” and one of them added “That Libby is a bit of alright”. I wondered if Libby would say that about him. He was thin and gawky and suffering a bad case of acne. His ears stuck out.

Smithy said, “Bad luck about that poor old guy. Still, he must’ve known he was heading down the home straight and thought he’d just hurry things up a bit.”

I thought an air of casual callousness might help you to survive army life. “It would seem so,” I said mildly. “How much longer will you be staying here?”

“A couple of us’ll go back with the padre tomorrow. The rest are staying on till the weekend.”

“I see. Have you found much here to do?”

“Not much.” The one called Buggsy grinned. “We went out to those small islands one day and Smithy climbed up the old wreck to see what it was like inside—”

“Yeah, and I’ve never seen anyone come down so fast!” Jacko laughed.

“You would’ve too—if you’d got a whiff of what it’s like in there!” Smithy sounded faintly aggrieved.

“But—surely there aren’t *bodies* in there now? Not after all these years?”

“Oh, wouldn’t think so. No, the hold was full of wood and I assume it’s rotting—but it was more likely to have been a penguin or a shag that got in and couldn’t get out again—”

“It’s funny though. How come that old ship hasn’t rotted away? Even though the water must be able to drain away you’d still think it would rot from the inside out?”

“Probably one of those timbers that don’t rot easily—”

“Yes, like Huon pine,” I put in.

Smithy shrugged. “Could be. But quite likely if they do try to move it the whole thing’ll just go kaput!”

“Are they going to move it?”

“Well, that’s what we heard. Dig it out of the dunes and drag it down and park it outside their front door so all their visitors can take pictures—”

“They’ll be sorry if they do. Stink ’em out of house and home—”

“I thought *they* thought the boat was haunted?”

“That’s only Libby. I bet she says that to all the visitors just to make them think this is a very exciting place. Poor kid. She’s probably bored out of her mind here.”

“Yeah—but I still don’t see her running off with you, Pete—”

I decided I’d rather hurry on to Dora’s than go on with this conversation; and this afternoon I thought I might walk over to see Libby.

## CHAPTER FOUR

I came round by the beach and the front door like a formal visitor; though I felt the sense of Nancy’s come-any-time I also knew I was a stranger.

Libby came to the door. She looked red-eyed and blotchy and I wondered if she too had been busy with the preparations for her grandfather’s funeral. “Oh, hullo … ”

She gave me a long look as though to decide whether she could bear a visitor or not.

“I’m terribly sorry about your Grandad—I think everyone is—”

“Well, somebody isn’t!” she said sharply. “Somebody tricked him!”

This was a bit like handing over a ‘With Deepest Sympathy’ card, your expression suitably grave, and having a bucket of water sloshed over you in return.

“Tricked him?” I said cautiously.

She went and dumped herself on the sofa where Tom Kirwin had been laid, pulling her knees right up so she could clamp her hands around them. “Do you think my Grandad would go and *hang* himself? Because if you do then you don’t know anything about anything!” And, to my dismay, she burst into noisy sobs. I would’ve liked to sit down beside her and put my arms around her but, as it was, I merely hovered and looked awkward.

Then I thought it might be better if I also sat down and waited quietly for her to calm a little; which I did. “You know, I find the whole thing very hard to believe—but are you suggesting someone might’ve *murdered* him?”

Libby looked up with eyes which managed to be both tragic and amazed. “Murdered?” She sort of choked on the word.

“Isn’t that what you mean?”

“No! I just thought—maybe—someone tricked him into climbing up there—somehow—and then said something to him like ‘think what it’d feel like if you were dying on the gallows?’ just mucking round, you know, and then the box tipped over—or they bumped it—and that was the end—”

“But—surely your Grandad wouldn’t go playing round like that—”

“He might’ve done—” She said it miserably. “He didn’t mind to go playing round like that—you know, play the fool just to make someone laugh and things like that—if it was someone young like Ray—or me—or Pete—” I seemed to think Pete was the young man with acne and I tried to recreate him through Libby’s eyes, “or even Noni maybe—”

“Not Noni,” I said more sharply than I’d intended.

“Well, I just thought *someone* might’ve got him going—and then they got scared and ran off and left him—”

This sort of horseplay was a bit hard to associate with the man I remembered but of course Libby knew her grandfather and I didn’t.

“In that case,” I suddenly saw the need to tackle this whole thing in a calm practical manner and see who we could eliminate, “I think we should make a list of who was actually here who might’ve seen him or talked to him up at the shed. So then you’ll know—”

“Who I can trust?”

“If you’d like to put it like that.”

I wasn’t sure myself what was the right phrase but anything seemed better than letting her sit here in this big comfortable over-furnished room creating suspicions of people she’d previously liked.

She uncurled herself jerkily and went away to get a pencil and a scrap of paper. Then she put down everyone’s name and began to put ticks and crosses. Nancy and Ray and Johnny she bracketed together and ticked. Pete, Buggsy, Jacko, Tim and Brett (with a question mark) also got bracketed. Apparently they’d gone, or said they were going, out riding. The other soldier had stayed behind.

“But this doesn’t mean any of them are innocent,” she said fiercely. “Not till we’ve checked. The only one we can cross off is Nan—”

“Dora and Noni and Gill and I were together for about an hour before Ken came … your Grandad was still warm when we brought him down to the house—”

“Then Ken did it—Ken! They had an argument and Ken lost his temper!” And she threw herself back down into the cushions and burst into renewed tears.

I felt very helpless. It was true Ken had a fierce temper when he got really riled up. But I couldn’t see Libby’s grandfather riling him up. And they would be more likely—in that event—to come to blows. But even that was almost impossible to believe.

“Libby—” I came over and sat down beside her and put a hand on her arm.

“Don’t touch me!” She hit out wildly and I moved away again. “Everything was all right till you came here to paint your stupid flowers—and now it’s all wrong!”

I wondered if I could get Gill Pedersen, with her social work skills, to talk things over with Libby; she surely couldn’t make a worse hash than I seemed to be making. The trouble was I felt so harrowed by Libby’s pain I couldn’t think of anything useful to say.

“I’m terribly sorry—but if it makes you feel better to see me as the villain, go ahead … ” But of course that wasn’t any better.

She shot me a blazing-eyed look of dislike. I don’t know what would’ve been said or done next if we hadn’t both heard doors opening and closing and, next minute, Nancy came into the room. Libby shot off the sofa and barged out of the room without another word and without looking

back. I felt like saying "poor kid" but she wasn't a kid and I know I would've resented anyone saying that about me when I was twenty-one.

Nancy came in and sat down heavily. Her face looked older and tireder, and it had the fallen-in look of someone who's just had a lot of teeth taken out. She didn't say anything immediately and I could only think of stupid tactless things like "did you finish the grave?" In the end, we sat for a minute or two in silence and perhaps that was the best thing which could've happened. Sitting there, looking at the worn red carpet, feeling the warmth of the small peat fire in the grate, hearing the faint sigh of the wind reduced to a mere whisper by this thick-walled house, aware of Nancy's large red hands clasped in her lap—I seemed to understand with my heart rather than my head all that Libby had been trying to say. She and her grandfather had been too close for him to leave her without saying goodbye.

## CHAPTER FIVE

"I know I must be in your way," I said at last, "but if there's anything I can do—"

"No. But thanks all the same. There's a lot of decisions to be made but no one else can make them for me," She lifted a hand and began to pluck aimlessly at some specks of grass on her heavy sweater. "There's a man from the UK has been negotiating with my father to buy the little islands out there … he was coming on Saturday—next Saturday—to see Dad—and I s'pose bring the papers with him … he wants to buy the islands—Dad was insisting he would only lease them—but at the moment I don't think I care what happens to them—not that he'll be able to arrange anything until Dad's affairs are tidied up … "

She fell silent and I hesitated to bombard her with questions but at last I gave in to my curiosity. "What does the man want them for? Surely they're too small to be worth farming?"

"Oh, of course! No, he wants the birds. He's going to use them as a breeding ground so he can ship birds to his bird park. He's retired now. I forget what he made his money in—wire-netting or something like that … he wants to station someone here on the islands to do research and send eggs to the UK for hatching there—"

"It sounds okay—but you could put him off for a few weeks—until you've had time to think things over. After all, this breeding season is over—and I would've thought a lease would be all he'd need to collect eggs?"

"Dad thought so. He didn't like the way the man was pressing him—he said he wasn't selling any of the farm until he knew what Ray and Libby wanted to do—but this fellow was offering good money … "

"I see … I know this must sound awfully nosy but do you know if the farm goes to you or directly to them? Don't tell me if you'd rather not."

"Oh, it's no secret, Connie. It comes to me. The trouble is—it's not that simple. He bought a house in Stanley for himself and Mum to live in eventually—when they need to be nearer medical care. At the moment he has a tenant in there—but the house passes to Mum now—but she couldn't live there on her own. I'm sure it'll be no trouble to go on renting it out—but she's the one who needs to be close to medical care—now, with her eyes so bad … "

Nancy, at that moment, seemed to find her mother an insuperable problem because she sat there frowning and chewing her bottom lip.

"Ray plans to go to an agricultural college in the UK next year—I don't know how much of it'll be useful to him here but I think it'll be good for him to go out and meet people and see a bit of the world—and Libby's started talking about going with him and doing a course in landscape gardening there … "

I understood Nancy's dilemma better now. She wanted the best for each member of her family but she was looking at loneliness and being dependent on people who weren't family for the farm's continuing operation. The bird man might find his way to ownership had been smoothed.

"Well, I s'pose things'll work themselves out somehow," she said more briskly. "Would you like a cup of tea? Mum usually has one about now."

"If I won't be in your way."

"Heavens no! As a matter of fact I think it's done me good just to say what the problems are, they don't seem to look quite so *large* now."

That, of course, is often true. But sometimes people avoid you next day.

Faith Kirwin came downstairs slowly, her hand on Nancy's arm, and I poured out three cups. Faith looked frowsy and vague—as though everything had suddenly become too much for her. Her thin white hair stuck up in little wisps showing a mottled pink scalp. There was still sleep in her eyelashes. But after she'd drunk her first cup of tea she seemed to brighten up—though I still felt uncomfortable each time those blank milky eyes turned to me. What did old Mrs Kirwin see? Me: a reasonably spruce and (I hope) competent thirty-three-year-old woman? Or a brownish blob?

Nancy told her "everything" was done and the Pastor was coming tomorrow morning. I assumed from this it was the Free Church minister who was to tenderly consign Tom Kirwin to his grave and I wondered whether they took any position in regard to a supposed suicide. Consecrated ground and all that. I hoped they were very understanding. At that moment I was feeling very protective towards Nancy; perhaps because I felt I'd been such a disaster with Libby.

I told them about not being able to find any orchids this morning and, to my surprise, the old lady told me exactly where to go along the gully and how far from the 'Fleur de'Allemagne'; it was as though she carried into her increasingly dim world a photographic view of the settlement and the land around it.

She seemed happy to talk about flowers and birds and where to pick teaberries and, a bit later, how she'd urged Tom to sell Percival and Rockwall islands to the millionaire from the UK. I wasn't sure if Nancy would like me to re-start on this subject but I couldn't see any harm in finding out her mother's opinion.

"Did you think it would be better to sell rather than lease?"

I made it sound as though I had no preferences myself which, really, I didn't—except for the fact that when it's a millionaire tussling with an ordinary farmer you tend not to want the millionaire to win. But I couldn't help wondering whether feelings had run high in this quiet household over the issue.

"Those islands are no good," she said with a firmness she hadn't previously displayed. "No good at all."

"You mean—as land?"

She sat there, not looking at me, but staring at a big framed photograph on the wall. Underneath was Nancy's spinning wheel. I hadn't particularly noticed the picture before. It was Faith and Tom on their wedding day fifty years ago and perhaps her eyes turned to it simply from long habit. Tom Kirwin still had his sparrow look and he appeared to have borrowed someone else's trousers. Faith looked charming.

At last she said, "No."

I waited and hoped she'd go on.

"No doubt you will think me a silly old woman … but Percival Island is—is *cursed*. It's because of what they did there. The ground is so soaked in blood everything is unhealthy … nothing grows as it should … "

She drained her tea noisily. "Nance, you'll take me to Tom now, won't you?"

"Yes, Mum." Nancy stood up with a sigh. "It was kind of you to come over, Connie. You'd be very welcome to come to the service tomorrow if you'd care to—but don't feel bad if you'd rather get on with your painting."

I said I'd come and as I stood up I mentioned seeing the old Irishman carving the cross and how beautiful it was.

"Yes, Arthur is very good with his hands. Though, as a matter of fact, he's an old Manxman. He likes people to get that right."

"I'll remember." I thanked her for the cup of tea and carried our things over to the kitchen sink before going out and walking home to Noni and Dora.

And would Dora know what Faith Kirwin had meant by "what they did there"? What and who?

Dora was churning butter. Ken was unloading peat into the peat shed. From the upstairs came the tap-tap of Gill's little typewriter. Of Noni and Johnny Vidinha there was no sign and I felt my first doubts: was it wise to let her go off in his company without supervision?

"Oh hi, Con." Dora stopped turning the handle and straightened up. "How I hate this horrible old contraption! I think I'll put up my charges just so's I can get something new."

I asked her if she knew where Noni was.

"Sure. Johnny's taken her to give her a riding lesson. Or maybe Noni's taken Johnny to give *him* a riding lesson."

I smiled at that. Noni was quite good with animals and could ride a quiet pony with a fair degree of confidence.

"Something very slow, I hope?"

"Tame as a mouse." Dora began to turn the handle again. I have never regarded mice as particularly *tame* but I accepted her reassurance and offered to turn for her.

"If you like. I've been thinking for about ten minutes that it's on the point of coming—and still nothing happens."

She went away and took an apple crumble out of the oven and sat it in the warming drawer. By the time she returned the buttermilk had begun to appear and I thankfully let go the handle.

"I've just been talking with old Mrs Kirwin—"

"How is she taking it?"

"On the surface, very well." I told her what Faith had said about the islands and asked her if she knew what the old lady might have meant.

"Oh, the penguin pens, I s'pose. You can still see them."

I understood then. The bad old days when penguins, in their millions, had been killed and rendered down to provide oil for Europe, each penguin yielding up its life and about a pint of oil.

"I've heard they boiled about half a million just from those couple of islands—you can still see the walls and things—"

"Would it have been the Kirwins, do you think?"

"I don't honestly know, Con. I've never thought about it before. They would probably have been living here by then but I think the government sold quotas—so the people who did it were sometimes entrepreneurs rather than the people who had the land—I've heard even people like Shackleton were involved in it—or maybe it was the seals … Ken thinks that's what wrong with the penguins over there—they took the biggest healthiest ones and the others became in-bred—though I would've thought a wild population would gradually right itself … "

"I wonder if Faith feels they were responsible in some way?"

"I don't know. And, to tell the truth, I think Faith has some pretty odd spells but I wouldn't say so to Nancy."

"I see. Have you heard anything about the man who's wanting to lease the islands?"

"Well, apart from the fact he's rolling, only that he wanted to buy them. It didn't make sense to me. I mean if the government's given him permission to export a certain number of eggs to the UK then why worry about actually buying the land? He'll have to pay the export fees anyway—and it's not as though Tom had wanted to put sheep on that might've disturbed his breeding program." She shrugged. "No. I think the trouble is, they suspect him of using this as leverage to get them to sell the whole farm. I haven't a clue whether that's a possibility or not, I've never met him, but I think he's one of those blokes who thinks that money can get him anything he wants—and he can't see that they genuinely love this place—at least, Nancy does."

"Yes, I got that impression."

Dora had ceased to be Australian; she'd been away for more than twelve years and Australia was little more than a place tucked away in her memory to be brought out and reminisced upon when they had nothing better to talk about. Yet I felt this evening a particular kind of affinity, a kind of easygoing acceptance, which I tend to regard as Australian and yet which also comes naturally to the Islanders once they put their reserve aside. Perhaps this explained both their decision to stay and their enjoyment in running their home as a guest house.

"I wonder what they'll do now—about the islands?" Dora mused as she poured the buttermilk into jugs.

## CHAPTER SIX

The wind, far from dying down with evening (as it often does), had redoubled in fury and was now dashing rain at the front windows. But the house was double-glazed and well-built and the sound was not intrusive. Dinner was a quiet meal; only Noni and Johnny seemed to have lots to talk about—though both of them looked as though they'd been carrying their ponies round all afternoon and were about to buckle at the knees.

It didn't surprise me when Noni went and curled up on the sofa by the fire immediately after dinner and put her head upon a cushion. The long room with its heavy curtains pulled tightly closed was warm and sleep-making. Johnny came and sat down beside her with his guitar and played quiet things which reminded me vaguely of Astrid Gilberto. Then he asked the yawning Noni if she'd like to choose something and she took a while, I imagine running her favourite songs through her mind and reluctantly deciding that Johnny wouldn't be likely to know them, before saying, "What about 'Bananas in Pyjamas'?" apparently in the touching belief that he might know that one because there are a lot of bananas in Brazil. Johnny said regretfully he didn't know it, would she hum it for him?

So she sang in a little wobbly but unselfconscious voice "Bananas in Pyjamas are Coming down the Stairs" and Johnny, with a few fumbles, put it to music. They tried it through a few times then he said, "I don't think a pyjama would stay on a banana. It would fall straight off."

Noni giggled and he looked over to me, as though to draw me into a conspiracy. I looked away. I'd just been thinking his interest in Noni was a bit excessive; why shouldn't he turn his interest to Gill Pedersen? So far as I knew neither of them were married. And the more I thought about it the more I started to think how thin his cover really was. I found it hard to believe the good newspaper readers of São Paulo cared two pins about penguins in the Falklands or what it was like to live on a sheep farm … and then I took my suspicion on to Gill Pedersen—what was *she* doing here, really?

It wouldn't take her all this time just to ask Dora a few questions and Nancy's memories of parenting were probably a bit out-of-date.

And the soldiers? Was it really so much fun out here? Stanley mightn't be a bustling metropolis but at least it could provide films and dances and a choice of pubs. And no one but a masochist goes and voluntarily lives in a tent in the Falklands anyway.

I could make everyone out to be a suspicious character with very little trying. I must find a chance to ask Ken what he'd gone to the tractor shed to do.

Noni snuggled down into her cushion and I thought I'd end up by carrying her to bed. Johnny played a lively little piece which made her open her eyes again then he laid his guitar aside and said to no one in particular (Dora had come over to join us), "I like it here. No cars, no horns, no sirens, no pollution … do you know, when I came here I was thinking the place really belonged to Argentina and the English should go home—and I kept on thinking that when people tried to impress me with how English they were … and then I started to realize they were only doing that because they were afraid of Argentina and underneath they weren't English at all, they were someone unique … I think when I go home I will say that and say Argentina doesn't know a thing about the islands … " He gave me another of those looks which seemed to be aimed at drawing me into some sort of confidence.

But I was very tired and so was Noni. I stood up and said rather curtly, "The reason Argentina has always refused to take the case of the Falklands to the International Court of Justice is because it doesn't believe it can win. It's as simple as that."

Noni climbed off the cushions and stood up. Johnny looked at me in surprise but said he would put that point of view in his column.

As we went upstairs I couldn't help remembering something which had happened when we'd lived here before. My husband had pointed out that a man who was claiming to be a Chilean was

really an Argentinian and the man, when asked, admitted it and was deported. Now I wondered if Johnny Vidinha was really an Argentinian masquerading as a Brazilian?

Noni got into bed with a sigh of relief but she didn't seem ready to drop off to sleep.

I've never thought of myself as a very perceptive person but I had the sense to say, "What is it, Hey-Nonny-No, did Johnny make you stay out longer than you wanted to?"

"No." She giggled a little. "He got tired before I got tired. But when we were putting the saddles and things away in that big shed there was a soldier there and he was taking a bit of rope down from the roof—and I couldn't help thinking maybe that was where Mr Kirwin hanged himself. People use ropes like that, don't they?"

"Yes, it probably was. But you mustn't worry about that. Poor old Mr Kirwin probably wasn't feeling well inside himself and didn't want to keep having pain—or something like that."

"No. I looked but I didn't see any blood—"

And here I was trying to gently turn aside the whole sad business while this ghoulish child of mine was all agog for the details!

"You're not upset about him dying?"

"No … I was just curious. It wasn't like Daddy dying. And even that seems sort of fuzzy now. I think I'd rather have some one like Johnny for a dad. He doesn't get impatient and lose his temper over little things all the time … "

So Noni's memories allowed for other realities of Jorge? I was learning new things. "He never lost his temper with me—Daddy, I mean—but I used to think, if he loses it with everyone else, perhaps someday he'll start losing it with me."

She snuggled down. But I was now faced with the knowledge: the more nice things she found in Johnny the harder it would be for her when he left, and he must be leaving soon.

Instead I said calmy, "Do you remember which soldier it was in the shed?"

"No. They all look a bit the same to me."

"Do you remember what he looked like at all?"

"Not really. He had brown hair and he was fairly big. Johnny was telling me a story about jaguars—"

It could be Smithy but, equally, it could be any of the others except Tim who was blonde I think—and Pete whose thinness and bad skin would more likely be noticed before the colour of his hair.

"I hope you won't have nightmares about jaguars, sweetheart."

"No, it wasn't a very scary story … he's going to tell me about all the dangerous snakes he's seen, tomorrow—and how they get the poison out of them. Are there any poisonous snakes here, do you know?"

"No. No snakes, no scorpions, no dangerous spiders. You can sleep safely."

## CHAPTER SEVEN

A military helicopter brought the Reverend Alex McDavitt and Detective-Inspector Ronnie McCrae in mid-morning. The weather, if anything, was worse; with the wind flinging rain which bordered on sleet at everything. The men went on down to the main house with Nancy and were there about half-an-hour. I longed to know what was being said, but I had no excuse to join them.

Eventually, the home-made coffin was brought out and placed on the back of an extremely ancient truck and Ken, with the men from the bunkhouse, set off up the slope. We all followed, squeezed into the settlement's various vehicles.

I hadn't known what to expect in the way of a cemetery and was surprised to find a large fenced plot containing at least two dozen graves. A big boulder with one side smoothed off and rather shaky letters cut into it said 'To the Memory of all Those who Sailed in the Fleur'; they'd run out of room to put the ship's full name. A simple wooden cross with a piece of tin nailed to it had painted in white letters 'Donald Kirwin Who Died in the Battle of the Somme', then a date and a verse from Isaiah.

A large black hole yawned and I thought of Nancy here, hour after hour, tipping out the heavy peaty soil. My own Sunday exertions seemed puny in comparison. Her efforts suggested the Kirwins only adhered to the Free Church in a very casual way but I found myself wondering if her decision not to use the tractor and the post-hole digger was because they were out of action, because it would be too difficult to manoeuvre up here among the rocks and gravestones, or because she felt the need to work out her fierce resentment and grief in a paroxysm of hard physical labour.

Noni put on her mittens and slipped a hand in mine; something she hasn't done for years. We turned up our collars and wound scarves tighter and wished it might be seen as reverent to hide behind a balaclava at a funeral. The three men from the bunkhouse stood with streaming eyes and red noses and deferentially clasped hands. I thought they must've been extremely fond of Tom Kirwin. Possibly they were but as they coughed and sneezed their way through the service I realised they were all suffering from heavy colds. Old Arthur had set up the beautiful cross, now sanded and varnished, but it was spoiled a little by the fact that he'd forgotten to bring a handkerchief and kept using the back of his gloves.

The minister must've known Tom Kirwin quite well; he drew on several personal anecdotes. But nothing he said gave a deeper understanding of the dead man. Perhaps he was as bewildered as everyone else. And I suspect he kept the service to a minimum as the sleet chilled our faces and we turned our backs to the wind and put up our hoods; reverent or not, Tom Kirwin would have to be buried without that last small respect.

The graveyard ran along the northern slope of the hillside which, in the days when Yorkshire fog was seen as *the* pasture grass for the Falklands, must have been well sown. The grass rippled and billowed across the hill and down into the valley where a small stream made its way to the coast. Further up its course it opened out into a sheltered bowl carpeted with sheep. I noticed Johnny Vidinha looked at them with a kind of longing; perhaps they hadn't, so far, been so obliging as to compose themselves into a lovely compact picture. The sun, strangely, continued to shine through the slanting sleet. The wind whipped viciously round our legs.

I had lost track of what Mr McDavitt was saying; entranced instead with the subtle beauty of the landscape, the infinitely varying patterns of cloud and light, the delicate gradations of colour in the sombre landscape below me. If it wouldn't look churlish I thought I would brave the wind a little while longer and go down to the gully below to see if there was anything of use to me growing along its banks and in its rushy pools. My deadline wasn't yet pressing but a few more upsets and I would start to panic; after all, our departure date had to be adhered to.

Nancy asked everyone to come back to the house for tea and scones and I thought of her and Libby busy cooking when they had so many other worries on their plate. I looked at Libby with sympathy but she scowled and turned away. It hurt even though I knew it wasn't personal. The only alternative to blaming someone she knew and liked was to blame someone like me.

I asked Noni if she'd like to go back with Dora but she said no, she'd rather go with me. Johnny made as though he would like to come with us then he seemed to change his mind because he walked away to the Landrover with Dora and Gill.

A sheep track took us away around the curve of the hill and there we came upon something Cape Fleur is not well supplied with: a stone run. These strange rivers of stone sweep down the Falkland hills, sometimes forming fascinating patterns of parallel curves. But I was more interested in what I might find growing there.

As a botanist I am a rank amateur; when it comes to sketching and painting I only scrape in a few marks above average. But I love the combination of the two interests. And the chance to come back here and do both—and get paid for it!—seemed a heaven-sent opportunity. I just hoped I wouldn't muff it.

We were lucky enough to come upon vigorous clumps of *nassauvia serpens*—which people here sensibly call the snake plant—growing like demented green sea-anemones among the boulders and I sketched the location in my notebook so I wouldn't waste time finding it again. Perhaps if I teamed it with yellow-flowering plants and lichen-encrusted boulders for the eventual composition; perhaps a clump of the little yellow native violets …

We went on down the run, causing a gentle stampede among the sheep, but not finding a patch of almond flowers as I'd been hoping to do. (They like similar places.) We followed the creek back towards the settlement and I made a few more notes.

I've never felt terribly comfortable with the idea of eating and drinking immediately after consigning someone to the grave, even someone I don't know well, but Noni said she was starving and she treated the barley sugar I found in one pocket with contempt.

We were puffing from battling against the wind by the time we came up the slope and saw the waves heading pell-mell for the shore and the more comforting plumes of smoke being snatched away from the chimneys. I didn't envy the soldiers their happy-go-lucky tent life but perhaps they saw it as a learning or toughening experience.

We caught up with Dora who'd stopped by her kitchen to pick up a container of mince pies to add to the repast.

She said, "I thought Nancy said the police weren't interested in the business but Ken says Ronnie McCrae certainly asked him some pretty specific questions. I don't know if it means anything but I don't s'pose they would've let Tom be buried if they weren't satisfied, do you?"

"No. Did he accept a reason for Tom's—"

"Oh, the grog of course."

Noni had scurried on ahead, I hoped merely to get in by the fire and not to get to the hot scones first. I turned to Dora and said the thing which had been festering in my mind since we'd laid Tom on the sofa: "Dora, you know when we sort of tidied Tom up a bit—after we'd brought him down and before Libby came in—did you look closely at his neck?"

"We-ell, no, not really. I mean, it was very red from rope burn—is that what you mean?"

"No. Just below the mark made by the rope where it pulled up under his chin was a very faint mark as though someone with sharp fingernails had dug into him … "

She didn't say anything immediately. "Ye-es—yes, now that you mention it … but it was probably Tom himself trying to remove the rope when he realised he was making a mess of it … oh Con, this is awful! I hate even thinking about it!"

I didn't know I had this relentless bulldog quality in me. "But it could also mean that he was strangled and then hung by someone wanting it to look like suicide."

"But, Connie, when you think of who has long fingernails—people like Gill and Libby—and even old Arthur—he keeps his quite long, I don't know why—and I can't imagine any of them throttling—" she choked over the word, "It just doesn't make *sense*—"

I wondered if I'd turned a vague idea into a definite action simply by saying it out loud—because now I felt the need to defend my idea and convince Dora.

"It needn't be *long* fingernails. But if someone first dug in trying to locate the carotid artery," (I knew about carotid arteries from doing a CPR course; it was a pity I couldn't have used it to save Tom Kirwin) "it might leave those marks. Then, perhaps he decided it would be quicker to go for brute force—"

"He?"

"Oh, I don't know. I can't imagine any of us doing it but I s'pose we all would've had enough strength—and especially if we caught Tom by surprise—but I'm not sure if we could've lifted him—"

Dora seemed to retreat from this conversation; for which I didn't blame her. "I think it's no good us discussing things like that. There's nothing we can do." She was suddenly facing up, if in a different way, to Libby's fear.

Dig too deep and I might find something I can't live with.

Nancy, Faith, the minister and the Detective-Sergeant from Stanley were seated at the far end of the room. The rest of the settlement, the soldiers, the guests, and the helicopter pilot, all milled round vaguely. Libby shoved a plate virtually under my nose; she seemed to think I'd shown an awful lack of tact by turning up to this tea. So I felt, in return, that I should make myself as inconscpicuous as possible.

I found myself standing beside old Arthur. I told him his cross was a work of art which seemed to please him. He'd put away his gloves and someone had supplied him with a paper

serviette which he was using as a handkerchief. I remembered what Nancy had said about him being proud of his Manx origins but, although I could think of lots of things I would like to ask him, there didn't seem to be an opening in this particular conversation.

Afterwards I was sorry I hadn't tried harder.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

I'm not sure what it was that woke me. My first not very coherent thought was that Noni, poor love, *was* having a nightmare. But as I got out of bed and prepared to tiptoe next door and make sure everything was all right I realized it couldn't be Noni. It was a faint crash backed by a sound which I can now describe as a roaring but which, at the time, I couldn't identify.

Noni was curled up fast asleep with her odd little toy creature, which she calls Poss, barely peeping above the blankets. I closed the door again. There was a light left on at the far end of the corridor in case anyone needed to go to the bathroom in the night and as I stood there undecided but sure the noise couldn't be my concern (perhaps the wind had brought a tree down?) Ken Porter came suddenly out of his room and hurried towards me, pulling on his coat as he came.

"What is it?" I said sleepily.

"Looks like something's on fire—but I can't tell from up here—might be the shearing shed—might be the bunkhouse—think it's too big for those blokes' tent—"

He hurried on downstairs and I went back to my room and scrambled into some clothes. I can't have been thinking very clearly because I found, later, I'd put my shoes on the wrong feet; maybe that helped to prod me awake.

When I finally got downstairs Ken had taken the Landrover so I set out to walk. The wind had dropped considerably but it was still enough to bustle along the process of combustion.

As I came to the top of the laneway I could see clearly: it was the bunkhouse. There was nothing I could do but hurry on while I wondered about those poor men with their colds. Had they got out in time? A kind of dull despair seemed to infiltrate my thoughts and run wild.

There were various people rushing around—the soldiers (all of them, I think), Nancy, even Alex McDavitt; I'd forgotten he was to stay on after a couple of the soldiers and the Sergeant had departed—all calling out and sloshing something on the fire and I took heart from their presence.

The fire was past its zenith, perhaps because of their efforts, perhaps because it had run out of combustible material.

As I came closer I saw a body wrapped in blankets and lying on the ground. I tried to remember what should be done for cases of smoke inhalation—but I knew this was a way of trying to keep at bay the terrible thought: someone else was dead.

Nancy recognized me through the smoke. The garden hose she'd hooked up to somewhere in the shearing shed wavered and was firmly directed again. "Connie!" Her cry was husky and she broke off to cough. "Go down to the house and help Libby!"

I turned without question and sped away. I was probably the last person Libby wanted to assist her but I couldn't say no.

She was in the kitchen with two of the men, I couldn't remember their names but it came to me then that the body in the blankets must be Arthur. Both of them looked ghastly, singed and blistered, and Libby was bandaging the arm of one of them.

"Nancy said you might need help," I said without preamble.

"Well, I don't. Go back and see if Arthur's all right!"

"I'm afraid Arthur is dead."

All the youth and exuberance seemed to drain out of her and she suddenly looked pathetically white and frightened. But "he must've been smoking in bed" was all she said; perhaps because it all might become easier to accept if she could see Arthur as being the victim of his own carelessness.

"Here, then, come and finish this." She became brusque and businesslike. "I'm going up." I took the bandage and ineffectually began winding it up the man's arm. We exchanged names—he said he was Colin—I asked him how badly it was hurting and he said Libby had already given him some tablets, and then he said he'd like to lie down for a bit. I tried to remember whether hot or

cold drinks should be given in a case of shock and helped him through so he could lie down on the big sofa where we'd laid Tom Kirwin only two days ago. The other shepherd was slumped back with his eyes closed and I said quietly would he care for a cup of tea? He opened his eyes a fraction and said what he'd really like was a tot of whisky.

The big room was cold as no one had had time to relight the fire in the grate. I pictured Faith upstairs, alone and worrying about the strange voices below, but I didn't feel I could leave the men to go bumbling around upstairs in the hope of reassuring Faith.

I couldn't find any whisky in the sitting room and tried the kitchen where I unearthed half a bottle. I stoked up the fire, drew the kettle forward, and found two glasses. The whisky seemed to perk them up so I asked whether they agreed with Libby's idea of Arthur smoking in bed.

"Might of … he always went to bed last so I couldn't say for sure … wasn't a heavy smoker if you know what I mean … "

No, I didn't think Arthur had been. I hadn't noticed a nicotined finger or a smell of smoke in his clothes. But he might belong to that class of smoker who likes one after each meal and one before bedtime just for relaxation.

"Did the fire wake you up?"

They both said it had but they were a bit confused over where and how they thought it might've started.

I didn't know where everything was kept and didn't like to keep poking through the shelves and cupboards so I just poured myself a cup of hot water and sipped that. Both men drifted off to sleep and I hoped I'd done the right thing by them.

At three o'clock in the morning your thoughts aren't usually at their brightest and mine waffled round vaguely eventually coming to rest on the unanswerable question: why should anyone want to get rid of Arthur? He'd seemed an inoffensive and kindly old man. Even if he had some revolting personal habits it wasn't likely that one of these men had suddenly said "enough's enough". But if it wasn't directed at him as a person then was it because he'd seen someone go into the tractor shed with Tom Kirwin—and come out alone. Or had it been directed at one of the other men but Arthur succumbed because he was the oldest and frailest? And if it had been was it for the same reason—or something quite different?

Had someone taken a punt on them all being overcome—or had that same someone known in detail the men's habits (in particular that Arthur did smoke in bed) which therefore narrowed the field a bit.

Was it someone with a grudge against one of the men? Or was it someone with a grudge against the Kirwins in general? With Tom out of the way and Faith in poor health Nancy would be very vulnerable to pressure—and would her children rally round or would they be only too glad to have an excuse to leave?

I didn't have any answers but the trouble was, deadline or not, I knew I wouldn't be able to concentrate on my work until I'd tried to find some. It wasn't that I felt any ability for worming things out of people or putting together apparently unconnected facts until they added up to a believable answer. But I felt I had to do *something*.

Once more I checked the men carefully but they both slept on, their pulses firm, their breathing reassuringly steady. Then I pushed the kettle off a little so there was no chance of it boiling dry, did up my coat again, and went out.

Nancy was coming down to the house. She stopped when she saw me. "Are they all right?"

"I think so. But Colin should go to the hospital to have his arm treated as soon as possible. He's asleep at the moment. They both are. What about Arthur?"

"Poor poor Arthur. Oh my God, Connie, it's so horrible. I've never seen a man burnt to death before—I hope to goodness I never see another one—"

"I think he probably would've died of asphyxiation before the flames reached him—"

"No. No, he didn't." She swept away my attempt to comfort; I wondered how she could be so positive. "The men'll be bringing him down in a minute … "

The flames were gone now. The only light came from a fitful moon, a couple of torches, and the back porch light.

"Nancy—the reason I was coming up was to say—please put someone on to guard the bunkhouse tonight—and *don't* leave it unguarded till Sergeant McCrae comes back. I don't know if I'm worrying unnecessarily but I'd rather be sure."

She was silent for so long I began to feel uncomfortable. Who was I to be throwing my weight around and telling people what to do? Then she said quietly, "Yes. Maybe you're right. But who can I trust?"

That was the question which undermined the value of any precautions. Who, apart from myself and Noni, could I say with absolute certainty could not be involved? My friendship with Dora and Ken suggested they couldn't possibly be guilty of anything and I knew Ken had been in the house when the fire started … but no, I couldn't even say that for sure. He (and any of the others in the house) might've gone out and come back but he'd shown no sign of being out of breath, nor had he smelled of smoke or petrol or kerosene …

I had to make a choice. "Ask Alex McDavitt to stay there for a while, then Ken could take over from him, and then I'll come back—"

Nancy, too, seemed to come to a decision. "All right. I'll do that." She turned and went back up the hill to return a minute or two later with two men following with the old Manxman. I stepped aside to let them pass, not sure who they were but believing one was Ken because of his height. Libby came after them.

I went on up the slope and walked slowly and carefully right round what was left of the bunkhouse. The air was filled with ash and the sickening smell of wet charred wood and burnt plastic, burnt feathers, burnt wool. The old vehicle on blocks was still there, seemingly unscathed, but most of the bunkhouse roof had fallen in and the whole thing, in the eerie light of the moon, was a hideous mess.

A figure came out of the gloom. We approached each other like ships through a fog. It was one of the soldiers though I couldn't see him clearly enough to put a name to him.

"Be careful!" he called out, "there's still some hot spots—and I wouldn't trust the rest of the roof to stay up there! You'd better stay back a bit."

"Okay, I will. Don't worry!"

I moved back obediently and stood there like a bemused tourist. When he seemed to have convinced himself I wasn't about to do anything rash he turned and walked away.

I had an idea and I didn't want anyone to see me testing it. After waiting another minute or two I walked quickly up to the front step, being careful not to touch it, and as it was simply a block of dressed stone it had remained almost unscathed. Beside it had been Arthur's leftovers; where years, perhaps even decades, of patient whittling had left a hill of shavings, small off-cuts, sawdust.

I bent swiftly and sniffed.

## CHAPTER NINE

It was nearly half-past-four when I climbed into bed again. I'd hung round, as inconspicuously as I could, by the far end of the bunkhouse until Alex McDavitt materialized out of the night.

Yesterday I'd done little more than say "How do you do" to him. Now I hurried over to him and told him what I'd noticed and asked if he would also check. It wasn't evidence of anything but I felt an impartial witness could be valuable. Then I walked wearily back to Dora's and got under the blankets with a sigh of relief; but also enough disquiet to keep me awake for quite a while.

That smell. It reminded me of the time Noni had to take firelighters on a school excursion and forgot to re-wrap them securely and everything in her pack became permeated with that horrible greasy kerosene-y smell. But who here would use firelighters? Did the British army supply its men when they went 'bush'? But of course the component parts, I assumed, would just be easily available things like paraffin wax and kerosene …

The three shepherds would have had no need for such things, not like us new chums. After a lifetime with peat they knew exactly how to close down their stove of a night so there would still be coals in the morning, taking into their equation such complex things as the strength of the wind and

the quality of the peat. But someone could have spilled something. Someone could have left a pair of smelly boots at the door rather than bring them inside. I could think of a dozen perfectly acceptable reasons if I tried long enough.

Which one was the soldier who'd warned me back? Pete and, I think, Buggsy had gone back to Mount Pleasant, south of Stanley. One of them I hadn't heard speak—or not more than a "hi"—so I wasn't sure if I could recognize his voice again. That left three; and of these three Brett had a quite strong regional accent. Liverpool perhaps. But they must all have been there helping put out the fire—and I suppose he'd thought something like 'trust a woman to go poking round like that, getting in the way, and making a nuisance of herself, and then screaming for help when something *does* fall on her' … somewhere around there I went to sleep.

It was a subdued breakfast. Johnny, Gill and Dora all said they hadn't heard a thing. I thought Dora must be a very sound sleeper, considering the noise Ken must've made getting up and getting dressed. Even so, I wished I hadn't heard anything; then I wouldn't be carrying round this miserable sense of responsibility.

Ken had already gone out so I was left to fill in the details for everyone else. Dora looked suspiciously red-eyed. Gill said mildly, "I wonder if there's anything we can do—or do you think we'd be in the way?"

"If you have some nursing experience I'm sure that would be useful."

"No, I'm afraid not."

"I did a first aid lesson," Johnny put in. I wondered if he meant one lesson or one course. "I will go and see."

I said wearily I'd better think about getting back to my flowers and Noni looked first at me then at Johnny, then said she'd come with me.

"Had Arthur been here long?" I asked Dora.

"Oh heavens yes! Forty years probably. Poor old bloke. He wasn't exactly *bright*—but then neither am I—and he *was* wonderful with his hands. He made our girls a rocking horse when we first came here. The horrible little things," she went on with a rueful grin, "just went and said they were too old for rocking horses—and there he'd spent a couple of months on it. I could've wrung their little necks."

Then she seemed to think that wasn't a nice choice of words and subsided, looked flushed.

"Perhaps if the Pastor hadn't stayed on it wouldn't have happened," Gill said, obviously following a line of her own. "It's not that I'm superstitious—but I've always noticed that bad luck tends to come in threes—"

"Then how can you expect that man to stop the bad luck even if he does stay?" Johnny said with unexpected practicality.

"And my own experience, for what it's worth, is that bad luck just hits you out of the blue. If it would come in neat little parcels then we could probably cope better. Anyway, it's not a very comforting thought," I said to her, "because I don't think Nancy can take much more even though she sounds so strong. Oh! I s'pose I should go up and see if Ken is needing me to take over outside the bunkhouse."

Dora looked over in surprise. "So *that's* what he meant. He said to tell you Raymond's there so you don't need to worry."

"I may be rather dense at this time of the morning," Gill put in with an apologetic air, "but why are you having to be outside the bunkhouse? Why not down with the men in the house if they're needing some sort of support?"

I also seem to be rather dense early in the morning. Even though I'd accepted everyone's statement of being asleep I still should've waited till I could speak to Dora alone—or gone without saying anything to anyone. Now, I couldn't think what to say to appease their curiosity.

"Various reasons—not least that the fire might flare up again—especially if the wind changes direction—"

"And someone is afraid that someone might take something—how do you say it? Looting?" Johnny said. Gill shot him a short sharp look which would've withered a less placid man. We all knew he was thinking of the soldiers.

"I know there was looting in the war—but it was mainly the Argie soldiers," Dora said quietly. "I can't imagine it happening *here*—and I doubt that those men had much worth taking even if it didn't get burnt."

Johnny inclined his head like a small boy who stands corrected by the teacher's superior knowledge; but he shot a look to one side and Noni suddenly giggled.

I drained my coffee and stood up. "If you'll all excuse me."

Noni jumped up to come too. We collected out anoraks and I brought down my unwieldy bag of things. At least the wind was no more than fresh and the sun was shining. I told Dora we'd be in for lunch then we headed towards the bunkhouse. It wasn't my idea to take Noni there, I could imagine how grim a sight it would be in daylight, but how could she avoid seeing it? Would her curiosity allow her to stay away for more than a few hours?

We'd only walked about half way there when we heard footsteps behind us and Johnny Vidinha came hurrying to catch up with us. We stopped and waited; not because I wanted him (even though I'd absolved him of any connection with the disasters which had befallen Cape Fleur) but because there didn't seem anything else to do. Noni looked pleased to see him and she continued to smile until we'd gone past the deserted army tent and come in sight of the bunkhouse.

"It *is* horrible," she said simply. But she still wanted to walk all around it asking "what was that?" and "Why would that have gone that funny shape?" I didn't have any answers and I left Johnny to make guesses if he wanted to exercise his mind.

Raymond was sitting in the wheel-less Landrover and looking bored. He obviously could find no point to his surveillance. Neither could I really. Not now. If we weren't dealing with a tragic accident then we were dealing with someone who probably had more brains than me; and also someone who'd neither roused anyone's suspicions nor anyone's antipathy.

I felt depressed thinking about this. After all, what skills could I bring to this problem? I can bake quite a good fruitcake. I know quite a lot of Latin names of plants though not always on the tip of my tongue. I can sing Waltzing Matilda without having to stop and think how the next verse goes. I like to think I've produced an above average child in Noni but she would probably have turned out that way with almost any mother.

The only thing I had which someone mightn't have taken into account was a grim and strengthening anger. I'd liked Tom. I'd liked Arthur.

I can't subscribe to Gill's more gentle and conciliatory view of humanity in which she seems capable of blinding herself to the bad. We cannot separate out what we do and the person we are. In my book we are what we do and we do what we are; they cannot be neatly compartmentalized so that our sense of responsibility and accountability conveniently drops through the cracks. If someone had cold-bloodedly strangled Tom Kirwin and burnt old Arthur to death then I was dammed if I was going to go peacefully about painting flowers and saying it wasn't my business.

The trouble was—I had to be ready to leave on the 'Wakefield' in just over three weeks time. The 'Wakefield' was on charter to Circumpolar Tours and would be running its first re-creation of Sir Ernest Shackleton's historic voyage in the tiny 'James Caird' from Elephant Island in the South Shetlands to South Georgia, after his ship had been crushed in the Antarctic pack ice. As well as a film crew they had a full complement of passengers willing to pay thousands of dollars for the pleasure of being made seasick and cold. Circumpolar Tours was providing my berth so I could spend a week on South Georgia painting its few flowers, such as the Antarctic eyebright, and my parents had paid for Noni because she couldn't bear the idea of being left behind while I rushed off and did 'exciting' things.

So if I missed the sailing from Stanley I would probably find myself out of a job; and saying I was playing sleuth might not go down terribly well with the company's head office in Sydney.

Raymond got up, yawned, and said, "She's all yours."

"How are the men, do you know?"

He shrugged. "Okay, I'd say. But the Islander will be here about eleven to take Col out—"

I don't think it was mere callousness on my part but I was more interested in who it would bring in.

Raymond wandered off towards the house, still yawning, and I sat down in the old vehicle with its rotting seats. “What would you like to do?” I said to Noni. “I s’pose I’d better stay here till the plane comes in.”

“I can take you up the cliff to see the baby albatrosses—” Johnny began.

The thought horrified me. A push, a stumble, Noni falling to the rocks below, Gill’s prediction of bad luck coming in threes proving all too true—“No!” I could see nothing else but the fact of Noni falling. “Not when I’m not there to see you don’t do anything silly!”

Noni looked hurt; as though I’d said she still didn’t have enough sense not to touch a hot iron. Johnny looked at me and I think he read distrust in my face.

“I thought you were taking your first aid skills down to help the men?” I went on in a hurry.

“Yes, I will do that.” He turned and walked away without another word.

It was a horrible moment; feeling that sudden jolt of fear and now, on top of it, the knowledge I’d hurt Johnny probably for no reason. Noni climbed into the old vehicle. “I don’t think Johnny is a crook,” she said to the empty windscreen.

I didn’t want to have to discuss these fears with Noni; surely they were too big a burden for her young shoulders? But I had to say something.

“He’s probably a very nice man—but we’ve only known him for three days.”

“Yeah, I know.” She gave a very grown-up sigh. “Stranger Danger and all that stuff.”

“Something like that. I don’t mind you going with him—so long as I’m there too. And anyway—shouldn’t he be busy writing all his articles and things for his newspaper? Isn’t that what he came here for?”

“He’s on holiday now. He says he likes it here.”

I found that idea rather odd. Johnny Vidinha looked completely out of place on Cape Fleur. Put him in charge of a not-very-savoury bar and he’d look right at home. He didn’t belong in an anorak and boots; he belonged in a flamboyant bow-tie, a big pinkie ring, perhaps a couple of gold-capped teeth. The image of him tramping over moorland, riding shaggy ponies, being pecked by penguins and bumped along in old Landrovers was amusing rather than fitting. But to be fair I suppose most of us differ from the image we present to the world.

“And what about Gill? Did she tell you why she’s spending so long at Dora’s?” It was sneaky to be using Noni to collect and impart information about other people.

“She’s busy putting all her notes together and typing them up. She says she likes it here because no one interrupts her.” I felt like making a sarcastic noise. What would it take for Gill Pedersen to feel interrupted, I wondered.

Two of the soldiers came round the corner carrying rifles. Noni gave a small squeal.

“Lor lumme! What’re you two doing sitting in there?” One of them gave a shout of laughter. Noni recovered her poise enough to stick her tongue out. I recognized Brett and Smithy.

“What’ve you been shooting?”

“Trying to,” Smithy said with a grin. “Bloody awful things called skuas. But you didn’t answer the question.”

There was no reason why we should. We were paying guests with the right to indulge in any eccentricity we fancied. I said non-committally, “Planning our day,” and almost in the same breath Noni said, “Waiting for Johnny to come back.” It was the better excuse.

“Johnny?” the other man said. “That spivvy Latin character?”

Noni fortunately didn’t know what this meant but a babe-in-arms could tell he didn’t intend it as a compliment. She turned away and thrust her hands into her pockets.

“Do you always judge a book by its cover?” I said drily.

Smithy grinned. “Yep. How else?”

I couldn’t think of a useful retort and he walked up to the front step and looked into the mess inside. Then he stepped to one side and looked up. “I wonder … ” He turned and walked back slowly. “They said the poor old bugger was smoking in bed but he might just as easily have dropped something into his shavings. It’d smoulder in that pile of sawdust for hours. Did he smoke while he was carving, do you know?”

"I don't know about that—but he didn't do any carving yesterday. He had such a rotten cold Nancy told him to go to bed for a while. I don't think he actually went to bed but he certainly stayed indoors—"

I wondered if Arthur had been the last to bed last night; though the others had probably been equally keen to hit the sack.

"Well, that's one theory gone west." Smithy didn't look put out. "But if he had a cold I imagine he didn't smell the smoke till it'd got a good hold on—"

"Yeah, okay, Sherlock—but it's not our problem—and any minute the jealous Johnny will come back."

This statement didn't endear me to young Brett. Smithy tucked his rifle back under his arm, said, "See you around then," and they both walked away.

There and then I decided if I had to pin crimes on anybody I'd like to pin them on Brett with Smithy as his accomplice. A completely unscientific attitude—and it didn't solve the problem at the heart of the matter: why should either of them want to destroy an unimportant Island family and an even more obscure old shepherd?

## CHAPTER TEN

Noni was cross with me. She took a Paul Jennings' out of her coat pocket and buried her nose in it; and in the two hours we sat there she read 'Unmentionable' right through. I sat and pondered and felt increasingly stupid and conspicuous sitting there. Of *course* nothing was going to happen! And nothing did.

But after a little while the peace of the landscape began to filter through my anxious thoughts. An unseen bird trilled high up in the crystal clear air. A Falkland 'robin' came and perched on a sheepyard fence and displayed a breast so brilliant it would've put a real robin to shame; just as his mane, *Sturnella loyca falklandica*, would make a real robin feel life wasn't fair.

Equally brilliant colour came from a little patch of orange hawkweed verging the path. I'd only ever seen it before verging Ross Road West in Stanley and wondered how it had transported itself all the way out here … and, from there, I began to feel perhaps I should leave well alone and get on with the work I could do instead of worrying about the work I didn't know how to do.

A young Border Collie came scampering up the hill and bounded round the jeep. Nancy followed more slowly. "Look," she said when she arrived, "you go on and enjoy yourselves. I don't feel right seeing you sitting here—and Noni … this is our problem, not yours."

"Well, I think it's everyone's problem. But I don't s'pose us sitting here will come up with very many answers."

Nancy shrugged. "Everything *was* all right—so I s'pose—eventually—it'll all come right again … "

I wondered if she was thinking that everything had been all right until I'd turned up—or was she merely stating a fact or even expressing her philosophy of life?

She turned and looked at the remains of the bunkhouse.

"Was it insured?" I said tentatively.

"No. Nor was Tom's life—and I don't think Arthur would've been. The Worker's Compensation will look after the other two … I'll have to advertise for someone to take Arthur's place. Poor Arthur."

"Did he have any family?"

"Not that I know of. He never sent letters to anyone. There'll be another funeral … " She leant up against the old vehicle. "You go on now. I'll sit here till it's time for the plane … why don't you take one of the canoes out for a while? The water's not too bad inside the bay. Everything's down at the harbour—paddles and life-jackets—"

Noni finished her last page and closed the book with a snap. I felt the decision had been made for me.

"That sounds nice. But I think I'd better put in a couple of hours on my flowers first."

Nancy took my seat and I had the feeling she was glad to sit down. “There’s some scurvy grass by the front fence—and dusty millers … Libby could show you where.”

I was pleased about this. What is called scurvy grass and dusty miller in the Falklands is different to what goes by those names in Australia, so it would be good to include them and give interested people a chance to compare them. I was less pleased at the thought of going down to the house and talking to Libby and, probably, finding ourselves with Johnny’s company again. Still, it seemed worth the small inconvenience.

We skirted right round by the ‘Abra Dan’ and found we didn’t need to go into the garden at all. Here, on the foreshore, was enough to keep me busy. I set everything down and got to work. Noni wandered on down to the beach and found a little patch of sand where she set to work with her hands and a stick to turn it into a castle with a moat. The oystercatchers ran to and fro on the wet rocks nearby and piped with a sweet mournful sound. Time passed. I heard the drone of the Islander in the distance but didn’t look up.

At last I had the little stiff rosette of leaves for the dusty miller done to my satisfaction. Its long single stalk rose up now in a way which looked completely natural instead of like a weird washing-up brush.

In the background was the murmur of voices. I couldn’t hear who it was or what was being said. I looked round—and found Johnny Vidinha had materialized beside Noni and was helping her deepen her moat. At that moment I wished, how I wished, that he would pack up and go back to Brazil and take my intangible fear with him.

I heard a vehicle. Somewhere a dog barked. It was hard to regain my concentration but I began to sketch in the leaves of sheep’s sorrel which would do for background and which I intended to present in its red autumn colours.

I let Noni and Johnny drift out of my thoughts again and when I put my pencil down, perhaps some twenty minutes later, and looked I found they’d gone. There’s nothing like a disappearing child to galvanize a mother into action and I hurriedly began to pack my things. I didn’t know what to think about Johnny and his Pied Piper quality, at least as far as Noni was concerned.

Of course she might only have wanted to go to the toilet or to see who’d come on the plane—and she would therefore reappear at any moment. But I had the awful panicky feeling that I must find her, see that she was safe, as soon as possible.

Footprints went down to the beach and came back up again; so they hadn’t gone on along the beach climbing over the rocks and exploring the little tidal pools. I hurried up past the Kirwins’ house and garden. By their back gate stood a Landrover and next to it was Alex McDavitt talking to Detective-Sergeant McCrae. They were a comforting sight but I barged up to them and said with the tactlessness which arises from anxiety: “Have you seen my daughter go past?”

The minister looked up. “Why yes, only a minute ago.” He pointed and there were Noni and Johnny toiling up the slope beyond the shearing shed, no doubt to get a look at the plane on the grassy airstrip; though I couldn’t see the attraction in simply seeing it. If Alex McDavitt was still standing here without any sense of urgency then it would be a while before it would be taking off again. I felt a bit of a fool when there they were, plainly in view, and reminding me a little of Winnie-the-Pooh and Piglet going for a walk.

But the minister seemed to understand because he said mildly, “I think you are right to want to keep her by your side. There is something evil here and wish I knew who has chosen to sin so grievously.”

His pleasant freckled face seemed to narrow and grow stern. The sergeant looked a little uncomfortable. Perhaps he put crime and sin in different compartments. But he turned and put two fingers to his mouth and let out an ear-piercing whistle. The two figures on the hillside turned, hesitated. I waved my arms vigorously; I would make sure Noni got the chance to see the Islander taking off if that was what she was after. They hesitated a little longer then started to walk back down.

Sergeant McCrae, that duty done, turned to me and said more seriously, “Now, is there anything you can tell me?”

I looked at Alex McDavitt and he nodded. “I already told Ron about the woodshavings and something put on them. He’s taking a sample back with him.”

“Thankyou … I don’t know but I *think* someone wants to push the Kirwins into selling up. I have no idea why. But it was Tom and Nancy who wanted to hold on to the farm—the others don’t seem to have the same feeling for it—and now, with Tom gone, I don’t think Nancy’s going to be able to hold out. I’m not even sure if she can be regarded as safe here.”

Ronnie McCrae looked at me dubiously. “Well, I know the young ones often want to get away for a while—go to the UK maybe—but they mostly come back sooner or later.” He thrust out his bottom lip. “Is that the sort of thing you had in mind?”

“No. I think it’s something more serious than that. After all, Faith Kirwin is planning to go to Stanley anyway and I’m sure Nancy wouldn’t stop the kids going with her if that’s what they wanted to do. No, it has to be something more than that. I think it would be worthwhile to look into the background of everyone here—it’s just possible someone believes this farm is more valuable than it appears to be … ”

“Mmm—well, they never found a goldmine under a peatbog yet … ” He didn’t look impressed and I didn’t blame him; it all sounded pretty thin to me too. “I hear that millionaire chap is coming in tomorrow—Sir Ronald Davies-Smith, you know—and he’s got an eye on the islands here I believe—but then he’s also made offers for about half-a-dozen other offshore islands. Big business apparently, putting penguins in parks.”

Alex McDavitt gave a little cough. “But not big enough surely to turn to crime.”

“Don’t know about that,” Ronnie McCrae growled. “When I did my training in the UK, first week I was there I saw an old man bashed to death for £50, things like that. I mean—hrrmm—I didn’t actually see it done, of course. Here, you’ve got to go out and urge people to drink up—just so’s you’ll have the fun of getting your breathalyzer out later for something to do—”

Alex McDavitt looked dourly disapproving and the sergeant seemed to realize his words didn’t quite fit the occasion. He then proceeded to make it worse by saying hurriedly that of course this was a serious matter, no doubt about that, but he felt fully confident of getting to the bottom of the mystery and he would talk to everybody, ask some tough questions and all that sort of stuff.

But I’d heard the deferential way he’d spoken of Sir Ronald and I suspected the only people he would be tough with would be the ones he felt comfortable about using his authority on: kids like Raymond and Libby, the old shepherds …

He wouldn’t browbeat the four Royal Marines (I called them Marines but, in fact, I never asked if that was what they were); he’d send a polite little note mentioning the matter to their Commanding Officer. He had that unfortunate, if understandable, trait which many Islanders display. They feel inferior when they have to deal with people from the sophisticated outside world—and they are afraid of offending anyone from England who might have the slightest bit of influence or power.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

I roused a little on Noni for going away without telling me. She looked mulish and went out of her way, during lunch, to show everyone what a horrible cranky mother she was stuck with.

Afterwards we went down to try the canoe but I suspected we would make a ham-handed mess of it. Canoeing needs goodwill and co-operation if you aren’t merely to go round and round in circles.

There were two canoes, one with outriggers like a Pacific Island canoe. I was keen to try this. We picked out the smallest lifejackets and put them on. All the paddles were aluminium and full-size; at home Noni had had a small wooden paddle of her own but she hefted this one with confidence.

Jorge had been one of those people who take up something new with great enthusiasm, buy all the most expensive equipment, then lose interest after a couple of months. That had happened with his new fiberglass canoe. He’d decided to take up archery instead. But Noni and I also enjoyed

the canoe and so we insisted on keeping it in a friend's boatshed and taking it out whenever we had the chance.

It's hard to remain sulky and cross in the joint effort of launching a canoe, getting settled, and finding a comfortable shared rhythm. This was a wooden canoe but otherwise it was very similar to the one we'd had—with two seats and a luggage compartnment in the middle. Within a couple of minutes we were paddling with confidence on the mild swell of the bay. Whether we could maintain this on the rougher water outside the headland was another matter but after about half-an-hour of practice we felt confident enough to try. This canoe seemed to ride higher in the water—whether because of the outriggers or the different material I couldn't say—and I felt we were expending less effort for more result. The effect was exhilarating.

Perhaps we stayed out longer than we should, considering our muscles were not in training, but by the time we'd drawn the canoe up the ramp and put everything away in the boatshed we were convinced we could make it across to Percival Island provided the sea continued to behave itself.

As we came down over the bridge and along past the hedge of broom which marked the Kirwin's north side of their big garden Nancy left off picking Red Lion gooseberries and shouted, "You did very well out there! I'll be putting on a cup of tea as soon as I've finished here!"

I wasn't sure if this was Nancy being hospitable or whether she had something she wanted to say to us. Still, it would be a good chance to ask her about getting out to the islands; were there dangerous currents or submerged shoals or anything like that.

I called out that we'd love a cup. But, almost immediately the words were out of my mouth, Noni said she'd rather go back to Dora's and I wondered if this meant our brief honeymoon had come to an end. Was it that Johnny Vidinha had cast a spell on her or was it, more prosaically, that she couldn't bear to hear Nancy and me talking over funerals and suchlike?

"If you'd like to," I said reluctantly, "or would you like to come to Nancy's and then we can walk up the cliffs to see the birds later, seeing I didn't want you to go without me before?"

"No. I'm too tired."

I watched her walk away, then spent a few minutes browsing along the wet banks of the tiny rivulet. I wasn't looking for anything in particular—but there, so easy for the casual walker to miss, were the tiny spreading leaves of the *lilaeopsis* like tangles of green spaghetti; there too, scattered and almost invisible, were buds of its tiny white flower. This little ground-hugging plant grows nowhere else but in the Falklands and I immediately began the enthusiastic composition of a new picture in which I would give it the foreground and—yes, I would devote the whole picture to flowers unique to these islands … *nassauvia gaudichaudii*, Falkland lavender, *pratia repens*, vanilla daisies … I was tempted to rush straight off to Dora's and grab my things and come back but Nancy had gone in and, regretfully, I left the little stream for later in the evening and went round to the front gate.

It was only Nancy and her mother at the table. Ron McCrae was in the front room talking with the remaining fire victim. We chatted for a few minutes about the weather and Nancy told her mother we'd been out on the bay and Faith related a long story about how she and Tom had built the barge the farm now used in place of the 'Abra Dan' but somewhere in the middle of this she lost the thread of her story and started to tell us what Nancy had been like as a baby. It was probably the last thing Nancy wanted to hear about but she sat there in tolerant silence and I didn't like to redirect her mother.

But when the old woman stopped talking to tackle a scone I said to Nancy, "I hear you're expecting Sir Ronald Somebody-or-other sooner or later—and I wondered—is anyone else coming here in the near future?"

"*Sir* Ronald!" She gave a bit of a snort. "What is so glorious about selling chicken wire?"

"I s'pose he provided ten thousand jobs in a depressed region or something? Maybe he provides bird cages and hen coops By Appointment to Her Majesty?"

Nancy put on a bit of a smile. "Perhaps that's it. Anyway, I'm sure the cunning old devil is playing us all off against each other and he'll end up with his islands and pay chickenfeed—" She

gave me another pasted-on smile and I thought, more than anything else, I'd like to see again the Nancy I'd met the first evening; so apple-cheeked and jolly.

"But, as well, there'll be Dora's girls home from Stanley. And Bob Birtwhistle from the Grassland Trials Unit will be out to look at his plots. They've got new names for everything now, Departments of this, that and the other thing, but I can't keep up with all the changes. Still, he's a lively young chap—you'll probably like him."

"Probably."

It would be nice to be able to talk with someone without being troubled by this subtle bile of distrust.

"And then there's someone coming from the Trust to look at 'The Skirling Dove' and see if it's worth preserving and promoting as a tourist attraction—but I don't know just when … when they can spare the time I'd think … oh, and Dora has a couple of tourists arriving from the UK—the husband had a breakdown of some kind and his wife's a writer, I think she writes romances but I couldn't say for sure … I s'pose they're thinking it'll be *so* nice and quiet here." There was a tinge of bitterness in her voice.

"So that means Johnny and Gill are going?"

"Yes. I think Gill's going with Ronnie tomorrow. He's taking Arthur's body with him—he seems to think it'll be possible to find out whether Arthur had been smoking, things like that. But Johnny—I really don't know. You'll have to ask him."

She pushed back her chair and stood up. "I'm sorry to have to leave you … but stay and talk to Mum if you'd like."

"Yes. Thanks, Nancy. There's just one other thing I was curious about—the soldiers here—have any of them been here before?"

"Oh yes, nearly all of them I think."

She excused herself and went out.

Faith seemed glad to have me to herself. "You mustn't take any notice of what my daughter says about Sir Ronald. He's a very charming man—"

"Did he come out here to see you?"

"Out here?" For a moment she seemed confused. "Oh no! Nancy's never met him. No, Tom and I met him when we went to Stanley to buy the house—it's quite a nice big house—" (I couldn't see why Faith would especially want a *big* house) "—you must come and see it. Do you know where the school is? The Infant Junior I mean?"

"Yes. It's near there, is it? And how did you come to meet Sir Ronald?"

Fortunately she only took up my second question. "He invited *us*. Fancy that! He said he'd heard we had a couple of islands that we might be interested in leasing—and then, a little bit later he thought he might buy them … I thought what a help that would be! Young Ray has a government scholarship to go and study in the UK but Nancy was going to borrow the money to send Libby too—"

"And what would Nancy do if you all went away?"

The old lady chuckled suddenly. "Get married again, of course!"

This idea had never occurred to me and now its obviousness struck home. I could imagine the Islands' middle-aged men queueing up. But who in particular? I thought of old Arthur looking at Nancy and Nancy speaking about him and I wondered. Of course it hadn't been that sort of relationship but I could understand him staying on here, year after year, feeling that Nancy's friendship—the same sort of deep unspoken affection she'd given her father—was worth more than anyone else's love …

"The money for Libby to go to the UK—" I thought what awful cheek I had acquired in the space of a few days, "was Arthur going to lend it to Nancy?"

"Well, well, well—fancy you guessing that! And now she's going to get it all anyway because he said he was going to leave his savings to her. So that's a blessing."

I didn't like the way this conversation was going. "But—surely—just an old shepherd like Arthur—he couldn't have had much?"

"But he had nothing to spend it on, dearie, that's the secret. He told me he had at least £10,000 saved up in his forty years here."

## CHAPTER TWELVE

The next morning was perfect; one of those rare days the Islands can offer in which the very air goes to your head and you forgive them every uncomfortable vagary of wind and rain and lowering sky.

I had thought I'd be stiff and sore, and was agreeably surprised to find I had nothing more than a very slight stiffness in my shoulder muscles. Noni probably didn't even have that. She skipped at high speed down the stairs and saw Johnny waiting for her; unless he'd been hoping for Gill. She raced up to him and said loudly "*Não—não—não!*"

He grinned over her head at me. "No is a very useful word for a pretty girl to know."

"Is it?" I said drily. "Except that we're *not* planning to go to any Portuguese-speaking places."

"Never mind." I wondered what was needed to squelch a man like Johnny Vidinha. "We are certain to meet *somewhere*."

"In heaven maybe." I didn't feel like getting into a silly argument this early in the morning so I went through to the kitchen to see Dora and ask her for her opinion about canoeing out to the islands.

"I've done it myself—with Ken I mean. The hardest bit is when you come round by the headland—if you're not well out you have the horrible feeling you're going to end up on the rocks. Then, when you get to the island, you have to work your way into that little bit of an inlet where there's a mooring post. Part of the sand spit is a quicksand—or at least it's s'posed to be. I've never seen anything go down but maybe that's because the gentoos aren't heavy enough. Nancy told me her grandfather saw a seal sucked down once."

Noni had come in and was listening avidly. "Did it hurt the seal a lot?"

"I think they shot the seal. It was an old bull and it might've come ashore there because it was hurt already."

"Anything else to steer clear of?"

"I'll make you a map—and what about lunch? It'll take you at least an hour to get across—unless you've got muscles like Superman—"

I felt Dora wasn't terribly happy about us going. I wasn't either but only because of Noni.

"Look—if you get too tired going over—what say you light a fire at about lunchtime? I'll come and look out then—and Ken could take the old boat across and pick you up."

"Okay, thanks. That would take a load off my mind."

We took everything down and loaded the luggage compartment and made sure the waterproof cover was on all round, put on our lifejackets, and made our way out on to the gentle swell of the bay. We remembered Dora's instructions and didn't try to cut corners.

The ocean side of the headland, with its cliffs and cluster of small stacks, was a magnificent sight. Although it wasn't really very high, the great wheeling mass of seabirds round it gave the impression of greater height. We plugged on, saving our breath, rise and dip, rise and dip, a thousand times. I wondered how deep the water was here; not very deep probably as we could see the wavering brown of kelp under us. But far from being reassuring this gave me an uneasy feeling, as though these powerful strands might ensnare us, draw us down into the cold cold depths …

"Look, Mum! Is it a whale?"

I turned in a hurry and lost my measured stroke. There, just in front of us and a little to one side, were a couple of dolphins. We stopped paddling for a minute or two and they put on a magnificent display of leaping and diving with a kind of infectious *joie de vivre*.

"Aren't they wonderful! It's better than seeing them at SeaWorld!"

She took a businesslike grip on her paddle again. I did the same but glanced back towards the cliffs in the hope that we hadn't lost too much of our hard-earned leeway. On the top of the cliff was a small figure apparently holding up a pair of binoculars. It was impossible to see who it was as it had the sun behind it and, anyway, my own binoculars were well-wrapped in plastic and

stowed in the luggage compartment. It was only nine o'clock but I couldn't help wondering if Dora had been so worried about us she couldn't resist coming up early to check that we were safe.

We paddled on and the dolphins stayed with us all the way. Dora's map was substantially correct. We had no difficulty finding our way into the tiny inlet and tying the canoe to the mooring post let into the sandbank. Then we simply sat there and rested our tired arms and looked around us.

At first glance it was a beautiful spot; not the spectacular beauty of some of the coastal cliffs and stacks, but a more gentle beguiling beauty of acres of white sand covered with a couple of inches of transparent blue water which showed the ripple marks beneath. Where the sand gradually gave way to tussac grass clumps there was a large rookery of gentoo penguins. A narrow belt of dunes curved away along the south-west side of the inlet and caught high in them was the dramatic bulk of 'The Skirling Dove'.

I wondered how much the island had changed in the more than a hundred-and-twenty years since the old ship had run aground; quite a bit surely for it to have ended up there, way above the shore line. We took off our lifejackets and unloaded everything on to the warm sand and I said, "Which would you like to see first? The penguins or the wreck?"

"Penguins."

So we took our cameras and some sandwiches to eat; though we soon realized this was a mistake. Gentoos nest in a very unsophisticated manner; whatever their surroundings yield up—grass, bits of seaweed, even stones—is dragged into a circle. But by this late in the season the rookery is a very messy smelly affair, with well-grown chicks, months of excreta, bits of regurgitated fish, blowflies, and the soft ground among the tussac clumps churned to a quagmire.

"I think we'll eat later."

We found it easiest to paddle across the wet sand and take photos from the seaward side; even so it seemed to me there were quite a lot of dead chicks. I thought I would brave the swamp and, if they weren't too badly fly-blown, rescue one to take back for further investigation.

Noni took our sandwiches and picked her way gingerly up the hill. I chose the chick easiest to reach and put its filthy bottom end into our empty lunch bag. I could see no sign of external parasites; nor did it appear to be fly-blown or touched by the scavenging gulls and skuas. Probably the parasite burden was inside. It was hard to decide how long it had been dead.

I carried it back to the canoe and laid it down on the bank so I wouldn't forget to pack it later. I washed my hands first in the rivulet, which was little more than seepage, then in the bottle of water we'd brought with us. I hefted out our small Esky plus the couple of things I'd brought to help in exploring the wreck before heading uphill to join Noni.

Away from the dunes the hillside was criss-crossed with the small paths of the Magellanic penguins which had taken the higher ground behind the gentoos to make their burrows. We chose a path taking us in the direction we wanted to go and made our way up the slope, sometimes stopping to peer down a burrow to see if there was a chick visible. By the time we'd come level with the wreck we were hot and ready to discard our jumpers which we tied round our waists. Then we altered course and made our way through the tangle of grass and rocks towards 'The Skirling Dove'.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The wreck was a three-masted barquentine, tilted towards us but still too high out of the dunes for us to merely walk on board. Noni sat down and began on the delicious egg-and-bacon pie Dora had packed. But I had come this far, I couldn't now simply sit down to lunch without a first quick look inside the wreck. Of course, it was only in my imagination that it contained something of worth and wasn't merely the foetid hole which Smithy had implied.

My first idea had been to try and lasso something with the rope I'd carried up. Now, as I walked round the ship and found fallen timbers I wondered if I could manoeuvre a couple of these planks into position and use them like a makeshift ramp. It took me a long while to shift them and

get them well dug into the sand; even so I didn't relish trying to clamber up. They might not take my weight.

I took the rope, a torch, and a large envelope and made my way up with great caution. If I fell I would only fall into the sand and the spiky sand grass—but I might still manage to do something awkward like spraining a wrist.

The superstructure, partly through the smashing of the masts (which I assumed had happened when the ship ran aground) and partly through a century of weathering, had gradually collapsed inwards and in the centre portion of the vessel it was possible to see right down into the hold. I tied the rope round a protruding stay and after half-a-dozen tries managed to get a loop round a stay of the hull on the far side. Then, holding my lifeline, I made my way gingerly across the remains of the deck and knelt down.

It was very dark inside and even the torch didn't do much to dispel the gloom but, after a couple of minutes, my eyes became a bit better accustomed. There was a smell certainly but I didn't find it unpleasant, more like a room shut up too long than something dead, and there was little sign of dampness. The rain which came in must escape and percolate downhill till it reappeared as seepage at the bottom of the slope and developed into the trickle which entered the inlet.

The timber of the cargo was visible and had shifted slightly to one side showing the grey lumps of some sort of ballast. Far from being either trunks or boards the wood was cut in a variety of ways, probably to show off the grain of different species to best advantage for the critical eyes of French cabinetmakers.

I wondered if it still had any value. Perhaps scientific curiosity only but I felt sure there'd be institutes in California willing to salvage it. But I'd climbed up more in the hope of proving or disproving a different idea.

The inside of the ship still showed strips of whatever it had originally been painted with and after a bit of careful reaching and clawing I managed to pull off a strip and put it in my envelope. But, now that I was here, I was strongly inclined to think that even if the ship had been completely covered in a lead-based paint which was leaching out and poisoning the young penguins a much greater source of lead just might be whatever they'd used as ballast.

But how to get safely down into the hold and bring out a sample? If I had another rope it might be possible. If I had a tomahawk I might be able to get through the wooden hull—though I couldn't be sure of that and anyway I had nothing suitable; no magnets, no grappling hooks, no rope ladders. And I was reluctant to take risks with only Noni to rescue me. But I *would* like to know.

In the end I tied the piece of string I had in my shirt pocket round the torch and carefully lowered it. This wasn't a great deal better but I felt certain the ballast wasn't merely stones but had a neat grey shape. Lead ingots? I was enamoured of my theory and felt sure I was close to proof. A hundred-and-twenty years of lead gradually contaminating everything—the sand, the water, the grass, the soil.

My amateurish knot slipped and my torch fell with a thud. For a moment the ballast seemed to glimmer, then the torch went out and the hold was returned to near-darkness.

I left my hand rope and the planks there. Sooner or later I had to come back with some more ropes. Noni was still eating and I sat down beside her, suddenly ravenous.

"What do you think, sweetheart? Shall we signal for Ken or have you got some energy left?"

"Lots of energy." She raised a scrawny little arm and showed me her biceps.

"Looks good. No blisters?"

She opened her palms out. "I'm okay."

"Then we'll brave the sea again."

"Did you find anything in there? Can't I look?"

"I've gone and dropped the torch, I'm afraid. The ship is full of wood." I told her my ideas about the lead, knowing she'd like to know there was a cause and therefore a cure. I go round telling anyone who will listen what a clever daughter I have. I don't think Noni reciprocates but this time she looked at me in what I interpreted as muted admiration.

"It's funny no one ever came and looked."

"Mmm, but you know that wrecks are ten a penny round here. You've seen that teatowel Dora has up on her kitchen wall? The one with the wrecks?" She nodded. "And that's just in Stanley Harbour—so multiply that by about fifty and it adds up to an awful lot of wrecks."

"I s'pose so—but if *I* owned a wreck *I'd* go and look in it, that's for sure."

"Even if you believed it was haunted?"

"I'd still go."

We lolled around for another hour or so before packing up and making our way downhill. I added a couple of photos of tussac and native rushes to my reel but that was about the extent of my official day's work.

The tide had gone right out, uncovering the sand flats where oystercatchers and pipits and two-banded plovers ran about. Our trouble was, we soon found, that the inlet had dwindled to a mere trickle and we would have to carry or drag the canoe out to the sea. We packed our things in and wrapped the dead penguin chick in everything we could scrounge. I took the risk of putting my camera in a plastic bag and hanging it round my neck; with luck I would get some thrilling pictures of the birds and the cliffs. There was no sign of anyone up there and I felt vaguely guilty at the thought of Dora toiling up and down unnecessarily.

We came home easier and faster than we'd gone out. Now and then we shipped our paddles and drifted a while but the dolphins didn't return.

Even so we were weary by the time the canoe was safely home and we'd unpacked the luggage compartment and I'd further swathed the chick in an old sack I'd found in the boatshed. We passed Nancy's garden but at the top of the lane two people converged on us from different directions, both apparently coming to carry our luggage. One of them was Johnny Vidinha; he took the Esky and said did we have a nice time? Noni who'd been looking tired perked up immediately and began to tell him about the dolphins.

I asked did he come up the cliff with binoculars and he coloured a little and said, yes, Dora had asked him would he walk up at about half-past-twelve. I said no, much earlier, about nine. He said no. He and Dora had been helping Gill carry down her luggage at about that time.

The other man came up to us. A young man with ruddy cheeks and very untidy tow-coloured hair. He introduced himself as Bob Birtwhistle and said we looked as though we could use an extra pair of hands.

I thanked him for that and said he was the person I was wanting to talk to. Johnny gave me a funny look then strode off towards Dora's with Noni nearly running to keep up.

I told Bob Birtwhistle about our trip to the island and explained about the dead penguin and what I thought the trouble might be. He whistled and said, "It's possible, of course."

"I'm glad you think so. Anyway, what I've done is bring a dead chick back plus a sample of paint from inside the ship. So if you could arrange to have them tested in Stanley that would be wonderful. At least then I'd know whether or not we're on the right track."

"Can do. Would you like me to take them now?"

"Yes please."

I took out the envelope and handed it to him and he put it in his coat pocket. Then I unrolled the penguin from its sack and laid it like an offering at his feet.

He knelt down and turned it this way and that with long grubby fingers. He gazed into its sightless eyes and looked inside its little red beak.

"I don't honestly know," he said at last. "I believe lead poisoning causes convulsions—but I can't see any sign of that. Penguins aren't my area but I'll get someone on to it as soon as I can."

He wrapped the penguin up again and took it away and he was as good as his word. But his warning, not to go back to the island under any circumstances, reached us too late to be heeded.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

That evening I spent a long time soaking in a hot bath, partly for the sake of my tired muscles and partly because it was a nice peaceful place in which to think. Was I jumping to wild conclusions based on a wild hunch? I suspected so. But even if I wasn't—who could I mention it

to? Nancy was the obvious person. It was 'her' ship. But I held back, aware that even in this relationship there was a new and insidious doubt. Cold logic told me she'd had a lifetime to investigate 'The Skirling Dove' and therefore there could be no connection—even if some sort of hormonal imbalance was slowly turning her from a pleasant kindly woman into a homicidal maniac—but cold logic doesn't have a lot to do with human relations.

Noni went early to bed and was fast asleep by half-past-eight. I sat down in my room and drew up a list of things to take with us next time we went out to Percival Island.

But tomorrow, rain, hail, or shine, (and being the Falklands it might well be all three) I must get back to my flowers. It took me some time to settle to thinking about my portfolio, such as it was, and plan out what to do next.

The morning was dour with the possibility of rain. Noni wasn't her usual jumping-cricket-self and Dora asked if she'd like to stay with her and try her hand at bread-making; Noni seemed to like the idea—or possibly she liked it better than sitting out somewhere cold and dull while I worked.

I said, very quietly, to Dora: "Would you mind keeping her with you all the time? I don't want to get paranoid—but you know how it is"; which is a euphemism of the first water.

"Sure. I'd feel the same if I had Kate and Bella here."

I think she understood I was also saying "I don't know who I can trust—but I do trust you" and perhaps that was the sort of reassurance we were all in need of.

Johnny came down to breakfast when we were nearly finished. He was a bit brusque and looked heavy-eyed though I didn't think he'd been doing anything particularly energetic; not paddling to Percival Island and back anyway. I went upstairs, leaving him to say something in slow Portuguese to Noni, and collected my gear and put on my coat and went downstairs to get a pair of old Wellingtons from the back porch which Dora kept for the use of those guests who wanted to walk in muddy places. I'd planned to go up the rivulet in the valley below the graveyard but for one of those reasons which I'm sure wouldn't cut any ice with a professional artist I changed my mind. I would take the road out past Bob Birtwhistle's experimental plots; it would be nice to see his cheery brick-red face again.

This was a mere track really which, after about forty bone-shaking miles, delivered the intrepid driver to the next settlement to our south. It wasn't that Cape Fleur was such a large farm but the track meandered through the hills to avoid the worst of the bogs and gullies and also to get round a long drowned harbour.

The soldiers had gone out riding; I could see them in the distance following the coastal track. In the ruins of the bunkhouse a middle-aged man was standing. I was curious enough to go over and see what he was doing. He was the George Butler who'd arrived overland with Bob Birtwhistle yesterday and who went round the settlements mainly doing carpentering jobs. He was, I suspect, the sort of man remote islands naturally produce: able to turn his hand to a variety of jobs—or as my father trots out summer and winter "Jack-of-all-Trades but Master-of-None".

George Butler raised a finger to his old woollen cap, a very grubby ashy finger, and I said hello. He had the watery eyes and turkey-red nose of a man who has indulged in imported Scotch whisky for the better part of a lifetime and I thought to myself he was probably the only person Nancy could get at short notice; or any notice really because the Islands have more jobs than people to tackle them. Still, I was pleased, obscurely, by knowing Nancy was planning to re-build as soon as possible.

I stood there a while watching him sort out things which Col and Reginald might like to have back and things which might be useful in re-building—and there was nothing vague about his method of working or the way he occasionally whipped out a small notebook and made a brisk note. He looked deft and competent and I could imagine a new bunkhouse sprouting in no time at all.

Bob Birtwhistle was up at his experimental plots with his back to me so I hurried on. If it wasn't raining I'd have a look on my way back. A little past the plots were the peat banks where the settlement 'cut' its fuel. Peat-cutting starts in spring and there were now only a few stacks of drying sods waiting to be carted in.

I pretended to myself this was really why I'd come in this direction: peat bogs are good places for finding interesting plants. I painted almost non-stop for around three hours and I was pleased with what I'd done, especially my *pratia repens*. These little flowers, sometimes called creeping pratias, look at first glance strangely unfinished with no petals on one side but at second glance they become like a bird in flight with two out-stretched wings with three blunter petals forming the tail. I thought, gazing at them with a kind of fatuous complacency, that I'd managed to infuse them with an unexpected delicacy; my paintings tend to sit on the paper with a sort of dob-like solidity.

Bob was still at work when I finally turned for home and Dora's hot lunch. The rain had held off so I should be able to do more this afternoon.

I detoured across the flank of the hill.

"Hi! How's it going?"

He held up a warning hand and hastily jotted something into the palm of his hand; he was counting barley heads.

"Not bad. Come and have a look."

He had strips of barley and oats and rye which he was running as fertilizer trials; and, further along, his pasture plots.

"Go and sniff my clover," he said with a grin and I walked in the direction he pointed.

"Oh pooh! What one earth have you been doing? Burying dead sheep under it?"

"No. It's just an idea but it seems to be working—on a small scale anyway. I've sprayed the clover with a solution of water and rotting meat. Because there's no bees here I'm hoping the bluebottles by crawling all over it will improve the pollination—and after a couple of days Raymond'll bring up our homemade fly trap which is baited with the same solution. First we use them to our own ends then, with a bit of luck, we drown them in ambrosia!"

He laughed energetically. I joined in. The clover was a-crawl with blowflies and the sight was rather sickening but I thought his idea was clever.

"So—if this works okay—you could use them to pollinate fruit trees and all sorts of things?"

"Spot on! Of course I'd prefer a bee—nothing beats a slice of homemade bread and clover honey—" I wondered how Noni was getting along with her bread-making and whether Bob had tried Dora's bread.

"Oh, by the way, I had a good look at your penguin last night—and I'd say he's been dead a few days but I'm surprised there's so little sign of decomposition—"

"Thanks, Bob. And now I'll go home and eat my lunch—"

"What? Oh, yes, I see what you mean!" He gave another of his boisterous laughs. "All in a day's work!"

Well, I don't know that such things *are* in my day's work. Lately they seem to have crept in without any by-your-leave. All I needed now was young Raymond inviting me for a close up view of a sheep's digestion while he got busy with some butchering.

What I got, in fact, was Nancy collecting eggs from her fowl-yard.

"I'm putting them in waterglass," she said, "and I just had room in that tin for another half dozen so I thought I'd slip up and get the job finished. How was yesterday? I s'pose you're feeling pretty tired?"

"Not too bad, thanks. But one thing I was curious about—why did you never use the wood out of the wreck?"

"Oh! Well, it's not in very useful shapes, most of it. We could use it for firewood, I s'pose, but I prefer peat and there would've been the job of getting it out and bringing it over."

"I see. So you've never really taken any of it out?"

"No. Not in my lifetime. I don't know if anyone did in the early days but I wouldn't think so. Why? Do you think it has any value?"

"I'm sure there'd be institutes in California dealing with wood technology which might like to buy it—but what I was really getting at was the question of what's under it—"

"Under it? Under the wood?"

"Yes."

Nancy looked puzzled. “Well, I can’t say I’ve ever thought about that. There might be a bit of ballast if the cargo didn’t fit properly. I believe they used to use stones sometimes—but we’re not short of stones—”

“No. I think it’s something more interesting than stones. It has a definite shape.” I made a shoe-box sort of shape with my hands.

“Does it? Well, I really don’t know what it could be. Iron? Lead?”

“I don’t know. But I can’t help wondering why Mr Pettigrew insisted on coming ashore alone. To see if his brother’s timber was still there? To see if there were any corpses requiring a decent burial? But then why insist on coming alone?”

Nancy blinked. “I never looked at it like that. But he probably had a perfectly good reason.” She sounded a little dubious. “Oh, by the way, Sir Ronald is in Stanley and he rang me to offer his condolences and to say if it would be any help to me he could probably increase his offer a little. I thought that was quite decent of him. I said we would probably be selling out—but I couldn’t make any decisions until my father’s estate was settled. He said he quite understood and so he had arranged his itinerary so he could visit some of the other settlements first—”

“The old bastard!”

Nancy looked shocked. “But Connie—”

“He’s not content with dangling a carrot, now he’s got to get out the stick and make sure you realize you’re competing against everyone else who’s interested in selling him something!”

“I—yes—well, I s’pose he might be thinking like that. I don’t s’pose you get to be a millionaire otherwise … but does it matter? We know he’s interested.”

I couldn’t see any way to implicate Sir Ronald in anything which had happened on Cape Fleur but I felt a sudden desperate urgency to stay Nancy’s hand.

“Look, Nancy—string him along, make it clear you’re interested, but don’t commit yourself to *anything!* Maybe I’m way off the mark—but I feel sure there’s *something* of value in that old ship—”

“What—what sort of thing?”

She put the bucket of eggs down as though the strength had drained out of her hand.

“I don’t know! If I knew I’d tell you. But there wasn’t a lead rush in California and there wasn’t an iron rush—”

For a moment she stared at me. Then she understood—and she began to laugh, great rolls of laughter. “No.” She wiped her eyes at last and picked up her billy. “I wish you were right—for the kids’ sake. And what a tourist attraction it would be! But, Connie, you know that couldn’t be true.”

With her free hand she seemed to include the entire sweep of her life—the lowering sky, the wind beginning to whistle up the hill, the tang of peat smoke on the air, the cluck of the hens, two sheepdog puppies wrestling on the path and trying to bite each other’s ears, the dull duns and greens of the hills around us … and I understood.

To Nancy, California was an unreal place far far beyond the horizon without any ability to change or influence her life.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

It seemed glaringly obvious, to me, that I must get back to the island as soon as possible. I didn’t like the thought of taking Noni while I poked round inside the hold (what if that timber slipped?) but neither did I want to leave her behind.

Perhaps it was best to wait and see what the weather would do. Another perfect day and we’d go.

In the peaceful hours of painting I had come to the conclusion there must be a conspiracy at work. My idea—that the person here who was not prepared to stop at anything would somehow give off vibrations of unease, an aura of evil—didn’t seem to hold up. I hadn’t felt that about anybody. Not that I’d appreciated Brett’s comments—but I felt they were probably only that English idea of being superior to anyone from a hotter climate; and, anyway, could *I* hold up my head when I’d made it obvious I wasn’t going to trust Johnny to take Noni out of my sight?

The thought made me unhappy—I don't normally go round thinking the worst of everyone—but anxiety was making me more cautious and possessive than usual. If anything was going to happen to Noni then I preferred it to be the two of us being chewed up by a killer whale en route to Percival Island; in which case I'd better organize my thoughts and write them down for Detective-Sergeant McCrae to appreciate or ignore, as he might see fit.

There was that description 'the banality of evil' which had been applied to Adolf Eichmann but it didn't seem very helpful. Weren't we all, once our surface oddities were stripped away, banal and ordinary? It didn't seem to say anything about our capacity for evil. But two people working together—or perhaps more than two—bringing out the worst and the greediest in each other but appearing normal and nice in their individual contacts …

I'd wanted to warn Nancy to take care but what could I say? Who could I warn her against? And I didn't think she would take me seriously.

Dora had lunch on and it was a relief to come into the warm house and smell roast mutton and feel that, for half-an-hour, nothing mattered but food.

"Nearly ready!" she called out as I came in.

"Good. I'm starving, Dora." I took off my coat and boots and put down all my baggage. "How's Noni?"

"She's fine. Look, I'm taking Ken up some hot lunch in a minute—he and Ray are fencing—and Johnny said he'd like to come. Would you let Noni go with us? Ken'll keep an eye on her if she wants to stay there till they finish."

"I—yes, I think that's okay—if she wants to go … I must sound as though I'm overdoing the fussy mother bit—"

"I don't know, Con—I find myself sort of looking over my shoulder and thinking crazy things about the people I thought were perfectly normal and nice a week ago. It *must* be someone who's not—" she put a finger to her forehead, "and it's a horrible feeling! Yet I'm *sure* Johnny is okay—and I *know* Ken is—"

"Yes. I feel that too. But then I find myself thinking—well, the Yorkshire Ripper had a wife, brothers and sisters, friends—did they suspect? Did they cover up for him in some way? And then I'm back where I don't want to be—"

"I know. It's awful. But you don't have to *live* with it. You'll go away and meet new people and get involved with new things—and we'll still be here and secretly thinking things we wish we needn't about each other … "

"I'm sorry—yes, I've really only been thinking of Noni and myself—and Nancy."

"Nancy?"

"Yes, I'm sure she's not safe—but what can I say to her?"

Dora was silent for quite a while and we heard Noni come and plonk herself at the table, followed a moment later by Johnny. They immediately began to chatter.

At last Dora said carefully, "Yes, I think I know what you're getting at—but I honestly think Nancy would rather live with the risk than have anyone fussing round her—so would I—I think—" She carried in the plates and I followed with a big round warm loaf.

"Hi, Mum! I made that one. Doesn't it look good? But I hated the smell of the yeast when it was frothing all over the place—"

"So the proof of the pudding is in the eating now?" I said with a grin.

Johnny helped himself to a slice and made a great show of sniffing and rolling a crumb round his tongue—which made Noni giggle—before saying it appeared to be a particularly rare and valuable vintage.

But I noticed she didn't eat much and as soon as she could she asked whether she could go up and get ready to go out with Dora. I said she could. But her manner of doing so seemed over-elaborately casual. Dora was busy in the kitchen packing a dish into foil and filling a Thermos for her husband. I found myself left sitting with Johnny.

"When will you be going home?" I said very politely.

"Very soon."

"Do you think you'll ever come here again?"

"No."

"Does your paper send you to many interesting places?"

"Yes."

I couldn't come up with a question which would lead on to real conversation—perhaps there wasn't one—so I accepted that Johnny didn't want to talk to me and I went on with my lunch as calmly as I could. Johnny did the same but I didn't think he was enjoying his food. A kind of tension grew around us and I wished Noni would come bursting back down the stairs.

"You do not want Noni to be alone with me. That is the truth, is it not? You think *now* I am not a safe man?" He emphasized the now.

I could feel myself flushing. Perhaps I could gloss over it but Johnny Vidinha was nobody's fool. Perhaps his truth and my truth belonged together.

"Johnny, I'm sorry. But try and put yourself in my place. In the space of a week two people have died violently here. All of you, except Ken and Dora, are strangers. I am responsible for Noni. I think to myself how do I know I can trust them? I know nothing about them except the way they appear to be. If Noni was your daughter—wouldn't you want to keep her with you—or with your friends?"

"You are right," he said with a sigh. "After a week I am still a stranger—and that is how you would prefer it to stay."

He put down his knife and fork, pushed back his chair, and left the table. It could not be regarded as the most successful of social occasions. I went on eating simply because there didn't seem to be anything else to do.

After Noni had gone out to the Landrover with Dora and Johnny I retrieved my things and went out too. The wind was strengthening and I had the horrible feeling it would be blowing a gale by nightfall—which would be the end of my plans to get back to Percival Island in the near future.

But I had come to a decision.

We would get to the island, by hook or by crook. I would explore that damn ship. Then we would pack up and go back to Stanley. We had friends there and there was no lack of flowers to paint within easy walking distance of the town. As Dora had pointed out, we could begin to put this place with its lurking fears and dangers out of our minds.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The wind rose steadily. By morning there was nothing but flying spume and the roar of great waves dashing against the cliffs and scurrying across the bay to fling themselves in futile anger at the hull of the 'Abra Dan'. Miserable. I stood at my window in frustration. My world had literally turned grey except where the white walls and red roofs of the farm buildings peered through the gloom.

When you've convinced yourself of the need to be up and doing, enforced inaction is very hard to cope with. I dressed and went to Noni's room to see what she'd like to do. She was a bit sniffly and cranky and I wondered if she was coming down with a cold.

But after a hot breakfast and having Dora suggest she might like to bring down some games and puzzles from the girls' rooms she seemed her usual cheerful little self again. She pottered first in Kate's room, then in Bella's, and finally chose the Monopoly set to bring downstairs. Dora said she'd play with her as soon as she'd finished the breakfast washing up. Johnny asked her to teach him how to play the game.

I seemed to be superfluous; which was probably just as well as I had work to do—and nothing to say to Johnny Vidinha.

The wind wasn't magically going to disappear so I spent several minutes rugging and buttoning myself, like a ship battening down for a storm, and fetched my camera and a measuring tape. I hadn't done a lot of close-up photography and I only hoped my end results would be worthwhile.

It was miserable work, creeping along in wind almost too strong to stand up in, pushed and buffeted while I photographed leaves along the rivulet and made careful notes on each frame. As a

back-up I picked the most perfect specimens I could find; though I've always found it harder to achieve a sense of naturalism when working from picked or pressed leaves.

I tried to stop myself thinking about other things. What was the good? By now I'd convinced myself if I could only find out the *why* then the *who* would immediately present itself to me. It was hard to make my mind go flip-flop and say if you can only find out the *who* … but it did occur to me I'd overlooked a person or persons who just might have a reason to be involved: whoever was coming from the Trust to look over 'The Skirling Dove'.

The Falkland Islands Trust cares for both the wildlife and the manmade artifacts of the Islands and I viewed it (with minimal inside knowledge) as a worthy high-minded body, peopled with large solid hard-working members, none of them a day under forty; in fact, not at all the sort of organization to be running amok, courtesy of a hired killer, upon Cape Fleur.

But even if they'd acquired a bad egg, even if someone was using them to a different end, it still didn't suggest any useful lead. No, the other way around made much more sense: someone wanted something to happen before they came.

So there I was back on the merry-go-round, round and round, buzzing away at the questions and getting precisely nowhere.

Eventually I packed up and set out to walk back, taking two steps sideways for every one forward. I had fronds of both the small fern and the tall fern (sometimes called the Fuegian hard fern), I had pig vine leaves, I had prickly burrs adhering to my trousers, whether I wanted them or not, I had several scurvy grass leaves. I had no excuse for not getting something done indoors this afternoon.

But because I was curious to see how the soldiers were coping with the gale I made a small detour. Very sensibly they'd taken down the tent and moved everything holus-bolus into the shearing shed where they were now (or three of them were) whiling away their time with cards and some serious drinking. I just said "Hi" from the doorway and departed again.

But battling his way up the track from the main house was Brett carrying a plastic bag containing a pat of butter and, in his other hand, one of Nancy's magnificent loaves. I didn't want to meet up with him but I couldn't see how to avoid it without making a very obvious detour.

"You planning to canoe out to that island when the wind goes down?" he bellowed.

I thought why should I answer? What business was it of his? But there didn't seem any point in trying to keep it a secret.

"Maybe."

I shot him the sort of look which I suspect would've annihilated the soft-hearted Johnny Vidinha but this man was unfazed.

"Then let me give you some good advice. Don't. A mate of mine went into the water off one of these bloody islands and he lasted ten minutes—and he was a bloody sight better in a boat than you and your little girl."

He seemed about to add something else then thought better of it and barged on up the slope.

Why? Why should he care what Noni and I did or where we went? Unless he wanted to frighten us into staying away from Percival Island? But then I thought of that cold cold sea and its sinister depths filled with the clinging twining unforgiving kelp which would entangle us beyond help and draw us down … down … and I shivered inside my padded jacket.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

I turned myself into a recluse and worked in my room with the door closed but Noni disregarded its message and came in not long before dinner.

"Johnny's been showing me his cartoons—"

"Where?" I was immediately suspicious.

"In his room—and you should see—"

"You're not to go into his room, Noni. If he wants to show you something he can bring it downstairs—"

"But he did! He showed them to me and Dora—and then he said I might like one—and we went upstairs because he had his paper and everything in his room—and he just did it—"

"Did what?"

I wasn't enthused about this conversation. Johnny Vidinha might be as innocent as the virgin snow with regard to the events of the past week but that didn't stop him being the sort of man who fancies little girls.

"Did a picture of me!"

"Drew a picture of you?" I'd been thinking of cartoon books as things already printed for the two of them to go and chuckle and huddle too close over.

"Yes." She looked exasperated. "Don't you want to see it?"

"We-ell—only if you want to show it?"

She treated this reservation with contempt. Racing away and returning with her precious page. It contained two drawings—one of her labelled 'Portrait', the other a version of her labelled 'Caricature'.

"Very nice," I said briskly. "how long did he take to do those?"

"He just sat down … maybe ten minutes—"

No rubbings-out, no false starts, "just sat down"; I wanted to scream and yell and bang my head on the wall. I'd laboured all day to achieve three presentable leaves, in the wind, and this man just sits down and tosses off brilliant pictures of Noni, just like that.

"I think we'll go down and have some dinner."

"But don't you like it, really like it, Mum?" She held it to her chest as though she felt I wasn't to be trusted near it.

"Of course. It's very good. You can see that, sweetheart. But did you like his other pictures?"

"Yes. Johnny does cartoon strips for all the papers—as well as his writing and his photos. That's what he's been doing this week. He goes away somewhere quiet so he can do a whole lot at once."

Coming all the way to the Falklands seemed a bit excessive even for the multi-talented Johnny Vidinha; surely he could find a bit of quiet closer to home? But I didn't say so.

I let the others talk through dinner; I didn't feel I had anything to say anyway. I hadn't achieved much today, I hadn't come up with any new or useful ideas, and I was consumed with jealousy. If Johnny wanted the world to admire and pore over his newly-revealed talent (newly-revealed to me anyway) he would have to count me out.

They tackled Chinese Checkers after dinner. I sat down with Ken and Dora in armchairs and let them tell me about their daughters and how they were doing at school and things like that. But when a little pause fell I said quietly, "Ken, if you don't mind me asking, how did you come to find Tom Kirwin?"

"I went in to put my tools away—I'd been mending a gate … " His hands seemed to tighten; yes, that's the way tragedy strikes—that complete unpreparedness. "I'd stopped to talk to that army bloke on my way down—asked him why he hadn't gone out with the others and he said horses made him sneeze—and he'd gone down to the boatshed thinking to take out a canoe but had changed his mind and come back up—and he'd been trying to fix his camera as the spool was sticking or something—I offered to have a look at it for him but he said he thought he'd got it right again … so I went on into the shed—God! I can still see poor bloody Tom—every night I sort of feel the poor bastard's staring at me … "

Dora leaned over and put an arm round his shoulders and I think for the first time I understood that Ken was a follower, not a leader; if anything Dora was the stronger and more practical one in this partnership.

Now she said quietly, "You know, if it was anyone but Tom I *could* believe in suicide—I mean, suicide is a lot more common here than murder, you have to admit that."

I agreed. The sad little notes written by men who could no longer take the isolation and the wind …

Ken seemed to pull himself together. "I hollered for that bloke to come quick—and I told him to run and get you—and that's about it."

"Mmm … "

I couldn't find anything of significance in this. I had one last try. "What do you think Tom had come up to the shed to do?"

"Dunno. He hadn't said anything to me that day. Though I noticed a peat spade lying on the floor. He might've found it lying out somewhere and brought it in—young Ray's a bit careless like that—" I thought of spades and graves but they didn't belong with Tom Kirwin's sparrow insouciance.

"Oh, by the way," Ken dropped his voice, without realizing it, "I heard from a friend in Stanley—and he says that one of those blokes who was here in the tent—the one they were calling Buggsy—Chris Bugg—went into the cops and told 'em he'd given Arthur the last of his cigarettes on Sunday afternoon—"

"Decent of him," Dora said drily.

"—and then he said Arthur had told him that he'd told Tom Kirwin only the day before that he thought it was about time he was retiring—Arthur, I mean—so's Tom could get someone younger—and Tom had offered him the job of setting up the little zoo he was planning—and Arthur told him he'd like that because he didn't particularly want to leave the farm."

"Well, of course he doesn't—didn't—" Dora sighed. "But we knew already that Tom was full of plans for the guanacos—and he was even talking of bringing reindeer from South Georgia—so it doesn't *prove* anything—and we knew Arthur thought of this as his home … "

"And Arthur probably had a soft spot for Nancy?" I put in.

"Oh—for sure. All three of 'em thought the sun shone out of Nancy—well, Col will come back eventually—and Reg's back at work—so they can go on giving her sloppy looks, the poor old devils. That's the trouble here—not enough women."

Noni and Johnny had packed up their game and put it away. Ken turned to Johnny and said in his laconic way, "You've come to the wrong place, mate. No women to choose from here."

Johnny replied, at his most formal, "I did not come here for that reason. I already have a lady friend in my life—"

"Do you, Johnny, do you really?" This was Noni who should've been thinking about bed. "Is she very pretty?"

"Yes, *aminguinhe,* she is very beautiful. She is two hundred centimetres tall and jet black and she has hair like this—" he held his hands away from his head, "and she keeps a ferocious bird-eating spider as a pet—"

"Does she let it out when you're there?" Noni was lapping up this remarkable concoction.

"Sometimes. I always take my red cape and my big sword when I go to visit her."

She pondered on this a minute or two then she said firmly, "Bull-fighting is very cruel. You don't really do it, do you?"

"No, Noninha, we are a very civilized people. We would not dream of hurting bulls." But the look he gave me seemed to say "whereas you do not mind who you hurt." Perhaps he hadn't previously considered the ferocity of maternal love; well, neither had I.

Noni reluctantly went upstairs to listen to the wind screaming against her window pane while she was getting into her nightie. There would be no island tomorrow.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Frustration. The wind whirled and whistled and whined and wailed all night and Noni and I had a subdued breakfast on our own. She looked a bit heavy-eyed and sniffly but, then, she'd looked that way on and off for a week almost. I thought of suggesting taking her temperature but unless she was feeling absolutely miserable she would shout down such a suggestion. She took a kind of pride in the fact she never got sick or had to miss school.

She ate slowly and didn't seem to get much enjoyment out of her cornflakes or her egg. She asked for a cup of coffee and I let her have one. Dora came in from the garden with a box of things for soup—silver beet, baby carrots, tree onions—and said cheerfully, "The wind's easing. I think it might be all right by this afternoon."

Noni considered this while she sipped her coffee. “But I don’t have to go with you to paint, do I?”

“Not if you don’t want to. What would you prefer to do?”

“Watch Johnny.” She sighed. “But I know you’ll say no.”

“You’d rather watch Johnny drawing funny people than me drawing flowers?”

Dora chuckled and went out to the kitchen; which was just as well because Noni squirmed in her seat and looked mildly guilty and looked at the window instead of at me. “It’s more fun to watch Johnny—and I don’t get an earache—and Johnny asks me for my ideas—”

Was *that* the trouble? “Have you been getting earaches, kidlet?”

“A bit … it goes away again—but I don’t like being out in the wind.”

“I see.” I felt a bit like an ogre and blind into the bargain. “But if you’d told me about it I could’ve given you something for it, you old sillybilly—”

“But as soon as I went out in the wind—I’d get a new one.”

Was that the real reason—or the best excuse she could think up, knowing she’d always been a bit prone to ear troubles?

“I’m sure Dora would have a spare balaclava for you to borrow.”

I got up from the table, she followed suit. Johnny was just coming down to breakfast. I wondered what time he got up when he was at home.

He said “*Bom dia*” to Noni and she said “*Bom dia*” back to him and he told her, in Portuguese, the wind was very strong and she said “*sim*” with great gravity; then we went on up the stairs leaving Johnny to his solitary bacon and eggs.

“Do you know what Johnny said to you?” I asked when we were in my bedroom.

“Something about the wind.” She sat down without complaint and I examined her ears carefully.

“I think you’ll survive but tell me any time they’re bothering you.”

I hesitated, then plunged into the subject which I felt was going to go on festering. “Sweetheart, what is it that you like about Johnny so much? Is it just that he has time to spend with you and you don’t have anyone around at the moment closer to your age?”

I’d swung between believing she saw him as a kind of father figure and that she might have a bit of a crush on him, the way she might have on a teacher; it didn’t mean she would be prepared to admit to anything.

“He’s sort of cuddly,” she said at last.

“I hope he hasn’t been cuddling you.” I tried to stay carefully non-committal.

“No. But I wouldn’t mind if he did.”

We seemed to be stepping into a minefield here. Yet I could see that Johnny, in Noni’s eyes, *would* seem cuddly, kind, placid, warm-hearted; all things she would respond to.

“My daddy used to kiss me a lot,” she said slowly, “but he never really *did* anything with me, did he? When I sat down and played Chinese Checkers with Johnny I just felt—I just felt sort of *happy*—and Johnny did too!”

“Did he tell you that?”

“Yes. He told me when he was little he had no parents and he just lived on the street under an old bridge with some other kids—”

“*Did* he?”

“Yes, he *did*. And a man took him to his house and found out he liked to draw and so he said he could work on his newspaper and he could learn things but he didn’t give him any money—”

It sounded like something out of Charles Dickens—though with millions of street kids in Brazil I accepted the story was possible. I couldn’t see any reason for Johnny to make it up; Noni would’ve felt just the same about him if he’d said his father was the richest man in Brazil or that he came from a remote tribe in Amazonia which still shrunk heads by smoking them …

“That was very mean of him.”

“Yes, I told Johnny that. And so, then, he ran away and an old English lady was there trying to help the kids start a little shop or something and she paid Johnny to do funny pictures books and the other kids helped to print them and things like that and go out and sell them on the streets—and

someone from a big newspaper came to Johnny and asked him to do a cartoon for them each week—and things like that—and he made himself up a name—"

"Did he?"

"Yes … but I didn't really understand that bit."

"Mmm … " I did some judicious pondering, "well, seeing that Johnny will be leaving soon, I think it's okay for you to spend this morning with him—and, this afternoon, we'll walk up to the cliffs and take some pictures of the rockhopper penguins—and tomorrow maybe we'll go out to the island again. But you mustn't go bothering Johnny. If he's hurrying to get some work done for a deadline he won't want you hanging over his shoulder and interrupting him—"

"I wouldn't do that!" She sounded most indignant.

But even if she went and did just that I suspected Johnny would respond with amused tolerance. I took a few sandwiches (and it was true that Dora's bread didn't make up into terribly nice sandwiches) and a Thermos and trekked out to where Faith had told me to look for the orchids.

She was right. I'd been looking too close to the gully. Up where it was drier and more open on the slope I found both the dog orchid and the lady's slipper. They don't stand out with the showiness I tend to associate with orchids but they have a sweetness and delicacy which I longed to be able to capture on paper. The dog orchids are white with tiny purple patches; the slippers are yellow with a little white bar inside the heel; and I thought I'd pick some later for Noni and she could pretend they came off a leprechaun's last. In the meantime, though, I had to find a way to get these funny little things on to paper. I took out my board with its paper already firmly clipped on all round and set to work.

Late in the afternoon I kept my promise to Noni and we walked up the slope towards the headland. The wind had fallen right away but even inside the bay a big sea was still running and it would surely be mountainous outside.

The slope was thinly covered in gorse where it had escaped from the neat hedges round the settlement and been allowed to spread itself among the rocks. A month earlier, in full flower, it must've been a glorious sight, a brave flaunting against the more somber greys and browns. We chose a sheep track which ran vaguely north-west and toiled upwards.

I wanted, if I could do it without making my interest too obvious, to find the spot from which we'd been watched on our canoe voyage; I hadn't liked to keep asking but I was still curious.

The place wasn't hard to find—for someone wanting to find it.

There were several cigarette butts and I considered picking these up and labelling them. But it was hard to see any point in doing so. Sherlock Holmes might've been able to determine whether they'd been smoked by a left-handed or a right-handed man; the police would, no doubt, be able to run saliva tests and interesting things like that; I couldn't conclude anything from them except the obvious: someone had been here for quite a while.

By standing up I could see the route we'd taken. We could also see where the kelp beds ended by the different colour of the ocean. And from up here I wondered why it had taken us so long; the island seemed a mere hop-step-and-jump away. If I sat down and raised my binoculars I still had an excellent view of us arriving on the island, pottering along by the rookery, walking up to 'The Skirling Dove'—but I doubt whether we, in turn, could've seen a seated watcher.

As we walked away I was mentally crossing off the people I knew for sure didn't smoke—Dora, Faith, Nancy—but that still left a lot of people who did smoke or who might choose to do so if they found themselves in the open air with time on their hands.

To our north the cliffs dipped and lowered and rose again in swells of small grandeur till finally they flattened out into the long beach which was the settlement's main gentoo rookery; then, far in the distance, they swelled to another impressive headland.

There were rockhopper penguins up here with fledglings, intermingled with the cone-shaped nests of black-browed albatrosses and, in each nest, waiting obediently was a big fluffy grey chick; interspersed here and there was a King cormorant; dolphin gulls and skuas watched the goings-on with beady eyes; on the highest point of the headland standing in cheeky unconcern was a 'johnny rook'.

I don't have a good head for heights and I kept fussing and telling Noni to stay back and watch where she was walking. Fortunately, there was a long sloping cleft in the cliffs and we were able to find a secure spot to sit and watch the parent rockhoppers coming in with their days' catch to be regurgitated for their hungry offspring. They would ride in on a huge wave, be lifted high, and if they were lucky find themselves safely deposited on the ledge of rock from which they could begin the arduous climb upwards, bringing both feet together like someone on a pogo stick and leaping straight up. If they were unlucky they missed the ledge altogether or were grabbed by the downwash of the wave and had to begin the process all over again.

Each time one would make it safely up Noni would give a little clap, her brown eyes sparkling with pleasure. Now and then she said "Come on! Come on! You can do it!" And it was true. I did find myself rooting for the absurd little creatures with their glaring red eyes and nodding yellow plumes.

"Do you think I could try and pat one?" she asked after a while.

"I'd rather you didn't," I said mildly. "Rockhoppers are like geese—they grab you in their beak and hold on … "

We stayed till the sun began to go down beyond Percival Island, throwing the broken masts of 'The Skirling Dove' into high relief and turning the ocean to glimmering gold.

Johnny Vidinha was down by the bay shore as we retraced our steps. He took pictures of us as we came down—or perhaps he just wanted some figures in his landscape—and asked us if we'd seen the logger duck on the rock ledge further along. He pointed but for a long while I could only see the drake, looking dumpy and grumpy on the flat ledge, then my eyes picked out his grayer mate behind him. I realised, too, that Johnny had been referring to the drake as a duck; which I suppose I find slight redress for being classed as 'mankind'.

"They're very faithful," I told Noni. "The duck and drake stay together all year round, even when they don't have chicks. You often see them standing close on a little rock looking contented and as though they're the only two birds in the world."

Johnny naturally turned round and walked back with us. But, after asking Noni how she'd liked the 'penguinos', he told us Sergeant McCrae was returning to the settlement because they'd decided the bunkhouse fire *was* arson. I felt as though a burden had been lifted from my shoulders.

But I asked Johnny if Sergeant McCrae was coming to put us through the third degree tomorrow—which would put paid to a possible trip to Percival Island tomorrow—and he said no, the day after. This struck me as being very trusting on Ronnie McCrae's part; not that there was anywhere we could run to—and even if I was the arsonist I still think I'd rather face the full force of the Falklands Police, all twelve of them, than pinch the Cape Fleur barge and try to make it across hundreds of miles of ferocious water in the hope of going to ground in Argentina.

But the news had the effect of bringing me back to stony ground with a painful thud. It had been a nice afternoon and I'd largely managed to avoid thinking about nasty things.

It didn't occur to me, though it should have, that the news might galvanize someone else into action.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

Dora wasn't enthused with our plan but she agreed it was worth getting ready in case the sea was becoming manageable. I'd packed a small screwtop jar to take a sample of the seepage and several plastic bags to take samples of soil and sand. If Bob Birtwistle hadn't been able to determine anything from the dead penguin I would bombard him with some more clues.

We'd also begged such interesting things as a chisel, more ropes, and two strong torches. I'd just told them that we wanted to take samples to find out why the penguins were poorly, to say the least, and they'd thought this was an excellent idea. Maybe a drum of sheep dip had come loose and washed up, maybe it was a build-up of DDT, maybe the current was bringing oil or something from Argentina. They were full of ideas once they'd accepted my belief that the problem had a specific cause. In fact they kept saying, "I wonder why we never thought of anything like that?" Perhaps it was their sense of familiarity with the penguins.

I didn't say anything about what I thought might be in the ship. Maybe that was a mistake. But I believed they'd be like Nancy and laugh and say "Oh come on! Pull my other leg, Connie!"

The canoe took a bit of launching and getting underway and I was full of doubts. If we couldn't get round the headland easily I would turn back. Nothing was worth risking Noni's safety for. (Or my own; but a certain kind of censorship takes over and weeds out my most selfish and cowardly sentiments when I pick up my pen.)

Once we were into rhythm we sped along and in the sudden exhilaration of actually *doing* something I forgot all about Brett's warning; I forgot about Ronnie McCrae and what new evidence he might be bringing with him; all I wanted, if it was possible, was to prove or disprove my theories, then get back to my painting with a clear mind.

But would we get round the headland? I could think of little else. So the relative ease with which we met the full force of the ocean was a surprise. Perhaps I had over-estimated the sea? Perhaps I had underestimated our skill with sea-canoeing?

We ploughed on. There was no sign of any dolphins—or anything else in the water … and I fell back upon my own musings and Noni, perhaps, did the same.

I'd asked Johnny last night what he meant by making up a name, did he mean a professional name? No, he'd said, *a* name. And he'd chosen Vidinha to mean 'a little life'; the sort of life kids live when they don't have the means or the opportunity to develop their potential. And that was what he'd called his first cartoon books about street kids—'Vidinhas'. I had just returned that very useful comment, "I see," even though, often, I don't see.

As we came closer to Percival Island I realized someone had come before us. The other canoe was already tied to the mooring post. "That's funny," I said to Noni. "I wonder who it can be?"

She said she'd noticed the other canoe was gone when we went down to launch ours. This was one in the eye for me. I hadn't noticed anything at all; my entire focus had been on the relative roughness of the sea and whether it was wise to try and go out.

"But you don't know who it is?"

"No. They must've come very early. Before we were up."

"Well, I guess we'll soon find out. Maybe Nancy sent Ray and Libby over—" But I said this more to myself. It was just possible that, with time to think it over, Nancy had decided my wild insinuations were worth checking out. I hoped so.

In the end we ran our rope up to the first canoe and made it fast. If they wanted to leave before we were ready to go we would have to move our canoe—unless they were prepared to carry theirs out or swop canoes.

We thought therefore we'd spend a little while looking at the penguins so we'd be within hailing distance if anyone turned up. We walked for quite a while, Noni snapping lots of candid pictures of the gentoo chicks while I scooped up little bits of Percival Island here and there, with a trowel, and put them in envelopes.

"But how would the baby penguins get sick?" Noni wanted to know. "Do they drink the dirty water?"

This was a facer. How indeed? "We-ell, no, penguins don't drink fresh water. But it would be in the soil, in the grass … penguins swallow little stones to use as ballast … they might get it on their feathers and then they preen their feathers … small animals lick and chew things, perhaps small penguins sort of nibble and pick at things when they've got nothing to do all day while they're waiting for their parents to bring fish back … "

"Wouldn't they get too much salt in their bodies if they don't drink fresh water? You're always telling me not to have—"

"Yes, but you're not designed to live in salt water. I've read that penguins have a gland in their nose which helps them get rid of the excess salt—it just dribbles down their beak—"

She seemed satisfied with this and I went on collecting my samples, scooping muddy water into the jar, pulling up roots, collecting moulted feathers.

"How would you like to be a penguin doctor?" I said after a while.

"Yes, I might."

Still there was no sign of anyone and I was bursting with a different kind of curiosity. Even if 'they' had walked over the hump of the island towards the old penguin boiling-down works I thought we might've heard or seen them.

Eventually we took everything back to the canoe, went through a hand-washing ritual, then got out the Esky and my bag of useful things, and walked up a penguin path. As we came closer to the wreck I thought I could hear something; as though someone (or something—a 'heffalump' perhaps, I said to Noni) was moving and bumping around inside 'The Skirling Dove'.

I put the lunchbox down behind a clump of tussac. The wind was playing with the surface of the dunes, just little rills and trills of drifting sand, but if it grew in earnest I didn't want sand in our food.

We went up closer to the wreck to determine the noise but, as we did so, we were startled to see something dark come flying out to land with a thump on the sand.

There was quite a pile there already, a little to one side of where I'd put the planks up and scattered around. Leaning up against the side of the hulk was a peat-cutting spade.

I asked Noni to stay where she was and I crept in, keeping a weather eye out for more missiles, and picked up two of the 'ingots'. They were dark grey and must've taken some muscle to throw out. Then I scuttled back to the edge of the dunes and put them beside the lunchbox, after examining them carefully. Someone had already been at them with a hammer and chisel by the look of the marks on them. Was there something different underneath. We were tempted to think so. But the plating—lead, zinc, tin or whatever—was smooth and tough and my idea of casually chipping it away wasn't going to be the picnic I'd thought.

"Just stay here quietly, kidlet," I said in a whisper. "I imagine Nancy's sent Raymond or someone over to investigate. But I'd like to check before I announce our presence."

"Okay."

She moved our things further back into the grass and in her dull green anorak seemed to fade into the landscape.

I clambered up slowly and carefully, not wanting to get clunked, and climbed on to what was left of the decking. Someone had greatly augmented my ropes with another one passed across the ship and a rope ladder fixed between them. There was a dim light coming from the hold and I walked across to peer down, my footsteps lost in the sound of wood being piled.

But as I peered down, the person busy under the light of several torches chose to look up. It was Smithy.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

"Oh, hi!" There didn't seem much point in pretending I wasn't there when I obviously was. And it was just conceivable that Nancy had mentioned her wish to get the ballast out so they could investigate it more closely and Smithy had volunteered. I didn't find this idea at all convincing. In fact if I'd followed my first instinct I would've climbed down immediately, beckoned Noni, gone straight back down to the canoes, cast off both, and headed for Cape Fleur. There are times when you should listen to your instinct, even if it's telling you something that sounds ridiculous to your logical mind.

"Is the wood still any good, do you think?" I said with what I hoped was disarming curiosity.

"Not too bad." He moved swiftly across to the rope ladder and started to climb up.

"I came over to get more samples of the dead penguins for Bob Birtwistle," I waffled on. "What do you think? Might there be something down there leaching into the soil, do you reckon?"

He didn't waste time on answering me, swarming up with an ease which must've been honed in commando courses or a childhood ambition to be a second Tarzan, and a minute later was on deck. I'd moved back towards the edge and begun to step over on to the planks. He headed for me.

"You're nothing but a snivelling interfering little bitch of a woman—that's what you are." But his voice retained a tight controlled quality.

"I may interfere—though this is *not* your ship—but I do not snivel so you just watch your language, Mister Smith!"

"Not my ship? Oh, but my stupid little bitch you soon will! You soon will!"

I don't think I'd really taken Dora's idea seriously, that there might be someone not sane on Cape Fleur, and now I felt shaken by the sudden horror of the change in him. The way he'd spoken, his choice of words—something was very definitely off.

"I think you're being very silly," I thought I heard a wobble in my school marm tones, "because everyone *knows* I was coming out here today—"

I didn't even *see* him bring a gun out. All of a sudden it was there in his hand; I don't know what kind, a small revolver of some sort. He moved towards me, his lips drawn back in a grimace, his eyes glinting, while I didn't seem to be able to move, mesmerized I think by the gun. I had read of people suffering 'gold fever'. Was this what they meant? This man, to whom the idea that he might even now be being watched from the cliffs of Cape Fleur, could no longer be checked and balanced. His face remained in that awful strange snarl. Would he wipe me out and not even care, maybe not even *know* what he'd done?

I backed away as fast as I could, then turned and fled down those shaky planks trying to think what to do and expecting at any moment to hear the bark of the gun and feel the hot searing in my flesh.

Noni! Where was she? Was she safe? Was she hidden? Would it occur to him that she must almost certainly be here too?

I couldn't see her and I blessed whatever instinct had led her to stay crouched down somewhere out of sight. I turned west and ran, pounding up the remainder of the incline to the highest part of the island. I could cut across the more open land towards the penguin pens where, with luck, I could play hide-and-seek with Smithy until he grew tired of it and returned to the wreck—or, alternatively, it grew late and Ken came to look for us. Noni had the matches. Would she think of lighting a fire? Would the green tussac burn? Would she be putting herself in more danger by doing so? I couldn't think anything through coherently.

Smithy came after me. I sped on over the rough ground, continually twisting and dodging as I tried to find the easiest way through the grass and stony outcrops. The report of the gun seemed to explode in my ear and something whistled past.

My heart was pounding, my breath was hurting me, my legs were growing heavy; the horrible feeling of having my back as a target spurred me on.

Where-oh-*where* were those tumbled walls and old sheds? I had the horrible feeling they didn't even exist and I would run and run till I was shot dead or fell into the sea.

The island on its western side rose to quite impressive cliffs and an arch of rock still actually joined this island to Rockwall Island; a thin bridge which had been cut away underneath so that the sea raced and foamed through the narrow channel. But I ignored this and crossed over the spine of the hill to drop down on to a kind of platform where the remains of stone pens and corridors could still be seen along with the bare skeleton of a shed. A long sandy slope then led down to a bay and along this too could be seen the remains of a manmade 'funnel'.

But where could I go so that Smithy couldn't look down on me?

The tussac here was luxuriant, fed by penguin bones and ash, blood and guano—and I had the horrible feeling we would both of us creep to and fro in this strange forest but the advantage would always be with Smithy and his gun, with my bellows breathing to lead him to me.

I crouched down and tried to double back on hands and feet.

Smithy fired again and I wondered if this was to flush me out or turn me into a gibbering wreck. It came close to doing both. His heavy boots pounded the ground in what seemed only inches away from me. I tried to slither backwards and knew it was a false move as he stopped and turned back, shouting—"You bitch! You bitch! Get up and run!"

He fired again and the bullet buried itself in the heart of a tussac pedestal and a tiny spiral of smoke rose up. He stopped and began to circle around. Then a tiny lick of flame appeared in the thick coronet of old dry grass. I gave up the attempt to hide, sprang to my feet, and went crashing away. If there was a choice then I would prefer to be shot rather than smoked out or burnt.

He let out a kind of war whoop, a blood-curdling thing, and came crashing after me. I stumbled over a broken-down stone wall half-hidden and grabbed for a loose stone; turning and

hurling this with all my strength at him. It missed. He let out a hyena laugh and fired again. Would he run out of ammunition? But it wouldn't matter. I was beginning to understand that my death, when it came, however it came, was meant to look natural. I tried to run again but I knew now there was nowhere to run to. I couldn't get round the coast to the canoes, not if it meant leaving Noni on the island with a madman. I couldn't swim anywhere.

The tiny smouldering fire had caught the old tussac well now and I felt the sheer desperation of being trapped with both Smithy and the fire at my heels. There was nothing to do but defy him for as long as I could hold out. I dropped to the ground again and crept through a small gap between one pen and the next.

The man behind me tripped and lost ground, swore loudly, then blundered through the same gap. He must've picked up a rock because something thudded into the grass beside me and I darted forward. There was a slight sandy washaway and I struggled into it, falling on hands and knees. The high grass virtually met overhead but I was still wearing my red beanie and he must've seen it flash between the grass spears. I pulled it off and dropped it behind me in the hope he'd think it was me.

It was a forlorn hope. I could hear his breathing growing louder behind me. Next moment he'd lunged forward in a footie tackle and grabbed me by both legs.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

I swung my legs desperately. They behaved like bags of lead, they were so terribly tired. I don't think I kicked him but he let go; perhaps because he didn't have a good grip but more likely because he had intended to frighten rather than hold me. I struggled to my feet to run again. Run! This desperate uphill toiling was like a terrifying slow-motion dream—when something is coming at you and you feel you're trying to run in a trough of treacle.

My breath was coming in great sobs and I felt as though my chest would fly open and all my vital parts would hiss out like steam from a boiling radiator.

"Go to it! Run, bitch!"

Again he loosed off his weapon but I think, this time, into the air. He knew a time would come when I could no longer run and he need only toss me like a dead sheep over the cliffs.

The demoniac laughter followed me as I struggled over another rock wall and ran towards the remains of a building up ahead. But here the vegetation was sparser and he had no trouble following me.

I scooped up a more amenable stone. Could I strike his gun hand? I doubted it. I turned, to aim at his forehead, and threw. The stone sailed with sluggish force through the intervening ten yards and he easily side-stepped it.

He was laughing, his expression wild, his scarf trailing behind him, but he didn't appear to be carrying the gun. Could he have dropped it, run out of bullets?

I scrambled over another stone wall and fell heavily. Beneath me was the rusted remains of a large iron pot. My foot had gone right through the bottom into a pit of something soft.

He was there. He had me by the hair, fists of it, and was pulling my head back until I thought my neck would break. A horrible gargling noise came out of my throat instead of a scream. Then he let go and I fell forward on to my hands and knees, the rust-riddled pot falling apart, something scraping my leg as my foot pulled free.

He vaulted the low wall with ridiculous ease and landed on my back, knocking me flat.

He was a big man, strong, fit, heavily-muscled. The gritty glassy sand was pushed into my nose and mouth so that I could only gasp and splutter. I felt the hard weight of the gun against my back and knew he still had it. My life, I felt, giving way to sudden despair, had come to its appointed end.

My hair was yanked fiercely again as he pulled me over on to my back then knelt over me, his bloodshot eyes seeming to bore into me.

"Got you! Got You! Got you!" he screeched, his high-pitched cries seeming to echo around me.

My teeth grated on sand and my throat could barely form words but I managed to splutter "So what?"

For a moment he simply stared at me—as though he'd forgotten I was another human being and therefore capable of talking—then he yanked my head up off the ground by the hair and sank his teeth into my cheek.

The pain made me scream and struggle but he hung on, making strange gurgling noises in his throat.

I brought my leg up with what little force I could muster and caught him in the groin. He let go and I pushed myself forward with desperate strength and scrambled to my feet. He grabbed for me but missed and I ran—ran with a sobbing coughing desperation—along this long 'yard' and up on to the rocky headland from which I sent down a weak fusillade of stones as he got to his feet and fumbled for his gun.

Behind him a plume of smoke rose into the sky and I knew, if only, I could hold on another half hour or so, help might come. But a half hour might as well be a year. Blood was pouring down my cheek, my hands and legs were trembling with exhaustion. I had nowhere to go—and Smithy was charging up the hill towards me.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

I have always been afraid of heights—but I realised there was still one place to go: Rockwall Island. *If* I could find the courage to try and go across that narrow arch of rock connecting the two islands. Rockwall was bigger, higher, rockier. Was it also safer—or was I simply making it easier for him to hound me to a fatal fall?

I doubled to and fro among the outcrops of rock, not even sure where the arch was from here. The wind was strengthening and away from this small shelter I would take its full force.

But there was the arch, the tiny arch, a crumbling mass of rock and earth and hardy vegetation, perhaps the width of a footpath. And I *couldn't* cross it! The blood thrummed in my ears. I felt giddy and sick at the sight of the great boiling mass of water far below. The tiny connecting strip of land seemed to whirl and tilt in front of me—

I heard Smithy behind me, laughing, an eerie sound against the thunder of the sea. A stone whistled through the air and caught me full in the back and I stumbled forward. The arch was beneath my feet. I wavered, feeling giddy—then I did what I should've done at the beginning: tried to fix my gaze with terrified firmness on a boulder on the far side—and ran.

The gun barked, soil spurted up just to the front of me; involuntarily I altered stride. The fragile ground under me trembled. The whole world beneath me seemed to slide sideways. I sprang forward trying to reach firmer ground but there was none. I was slipping into space on a disintegrating carpet of rock and soil. I was falling into that terrible cauldron of boiling sea.

My whole head seemed to have come loose from my body as I plummeted. There was a roaring in my ears. A ghastly agonizing sound came from me but I was hardly aware that it *was* me screaming. I would disappear into the maelstrom to be battered and torn to death and never found again—and there was *nothing* I could do.

I had moved from one level to a higher level, not knowing that there were these levels of terror. And now, when everything seemed utterly lost, a cold calm thing seemed to intrude like that attempt to show Smithy I *wasn't* afraid—when I was—desperately—and my mind said 'you must land feet first, it's your only hope'—and I clung to that as though it was a prayer, feet first, feet first, please let me land feet first.

If I hit the rocks—feet or head—what did it matter? But my mind seemed to go on insisting 'feet first, feet first'—and in that strange fatalistic calm of mind I thought I heard it: the chug-chug of the Cape Fleur barge.

The great streaming millrace between the islands seemed to reach up and pluck me out of the sky, so that I felt its icy dash against my legs before I struck the water and went down, unable to control my descent. But the buoyancy of my padded jacket helped a little and I came spluttering to

the surface and was swept along, numbed and utterly spent. I could not kick with my legs nor paddle with my arms.

The waves bore me along, a puny helpless thing swallowing sea-water and soon to die of cold and exhaustion. I could see nothing as the water stung my eyes and sent needles of pain through my face and especially through my savaged cheek. I was so totally disorientated that even if I'd been capable of swimming I could've had no idea where to try and swim *to*. With my arms out and my jarred legs feebly trying to tread water I could only hope and pray that the sea itself might bear me round towards the sand dunes. A forlorn hope as the bitter cold seemed to invade my limbs and my sodden clothes developed a dead-weight of their own, dragging against my pitiful attempts to stay afloat in this thundering tumultuous sea.

But I'd come this far. I was still alive. I struggled to pull off my yellow scarf and toss it into the air—to remove the drag on my neck—and, somehow, it seemed a despairing hope, to find a way for the people on the barge to see me; if indeed it was the barge coming and not the swansong of my imagination.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

To die of hypothermia. How long did I struggle? I have no idea. It seemed endless. My body grew heavy and numb and a strange seductive desire to close my eyes and sleep seemed to creep in and lodge …

But it was there somewhere, I don't know where, the sound of an engine. Then voices. Then a heavy rope smacked the water close to my face. I blinked at it and could not respond. The sound of the engine seemed to change. But I could not make my hands reach out for that lifesaving rope. It drifted against my face and I closed my chattering teeth on the frayed end below the knot.

The voices seemed to rise into a frenzy and I was being dragged through the water still with my teeth clamped on that vile-smelling rope.

Then someone was reaching down, slipping another rope under my armpits, trying to lift my sodden spent weight. More clutching arms, more voices …

I was helpless. I was being manhandled up on to the deck of the barge. Arms, faces, voices, all seemed to whirl and dance around me as though I'd been tossed into the midst of a banshee gathering and I coughed and spluttered and was laid down on the heaving deck with someone leaning over me and trying to dry me with a towel.

"Noni," I gasped and then, after what seemed minutes of desperate struggle, I tried to go on, "Smithy—with a gun … "

After rocking on the water we seemed to shudder and gather force and the old-flat-bottomed barge was underway, but where and when and with what plans I couldn't know.

The person with the towel went on working with it, after dragging a piece of tarpaulin smelling of sheep over me; gradually a face seemed to swim into focus, a blurry focus but recognizable as Johnny Vidinha.

He was obviously talking to me. I saw his mouth open and close. But beyond that I could not tell what the words might be. I tried to tell him, over and over, Noni was on the island, somewhere near the wreck, Noni needed help, but maybe it all came out as gibberish.

Eventually he put the towel under my head and went away for I don't know how long and came back with a pair of woollen mittens and another beanie which he managed to put on me.

The barge came into calmer water and all around, so it seemed, was a different noise. I thought the noise was in my head and then, gradually, realized it must be the penguin colony.

There was more talk and it came to me that the other voice belonged to Ken Porter. He said something about going up to get Noni and Johnny said no, he'd go and get her. They moved away, there was a splash of boots as someone went into the shallow inlet. It was followed by a second splash; then things grew briefly quiet.

I struggled to lift my head from the towel and look around. Ken must've tied our canoe (which, in turn, was tied to Smithy's canoe) to the barge. Now he appeared to be untying the first canoe from the mooring post. He looked up, yelled—there was a high-pitched squeal which I

recognized as Noni—then there was more yelling and the sound of someone running through water, then came the sound of the revolver and a loud yelp, another squeal from Noni, a deeper yell from Ken, more splashing … I didn't know what was happening, but a moment later the noise was round the barge and Noni had been swung on deck with such force that she landed on the deck with a thump and let go the Esky she'd been clutching which struck me on the head with an almighty bonk. I yelped. There was more yelling and shouting from somewhere behind me, then the barge shuddered and began to move slowly. There was another shot and a high-pitched noise as it went through the tiny corrugated iron wheelhouse.

The barge kept going. There was a lot of splashing and screeching, then I felt the swell of the ocean under us.

I don't know how long the barge took to return to Cape Fleur, leaving Smithy marooned on Percival Island, but as needles of feeling began slowly to return to my cold limbs so too did the most terrible pain. Every shudder of the old makeshift vessel, every rise and fall on the waves, every slight change of direction was agony. I was still shivering with cold yet my legs were on fire. I tried to tell myself we must be nearly there, nearly there—and on the barge chugged and chugged, as though we were in mid-ocean.

Tears ran down my face. I couldn't take any more. Noni was safe but I was going to die after all.

She came and sat down beside me. "Poor Mum. We're nearly home. Just coming into the bay." I blessed her for thinking of telling me. I needed that sort of reassurance.

"Wh-where did you hide?" My stiff face was making heavy weather of even the simplest words.

"In an empty penguin burrow. I was there for ages and ages and I didn't know what was happening—and then I heard Johnny calling me so I knew it was safe to come out … did you know Johnny's been shot—"

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

From the bay we were brought back to Dora's ministrations—but how and by whom and how long it took I cannot say. Someone poured some whisky down my throat, I suppose with the best of intentions, and although I hate whisky it must've sent me to sleep.

I have a confused image of people coming and going, sometimes feeling for my pulse or laying a hand on my forehead or putting something to trickle down my sore throat. Dora must've got me out of my soaking clothes because when I finally woke up properly I was in woollen pyjamas and she was sitting beside my bed knitting.

I suppose that's how Wally felt when he woke after some tough times in one of the Billabong books to find Norah sitting beside him calmly knitting: an excess of love. At that moment I adored Dora with her pink cheeks, her calm complacency, her sense of settled comfort. The world *must* be going along all right again. Now I only had to launch myself back into it.

This was easier said than done. It took me what seemed like minutes to turn my first croaks into a recognizable "What time is it?"

"It's next day, Con. You've been asleep for more than fourteen hours. How're you feeling?"

"Rotten." I didn't feel up to anything more elaborate. "And Noni?"

"She's fine. Everyone's been making a fuss of her—and she's been making a fuss of Johnny—but I couldn't let her come in here in case she woke you—"

"Johnny isn't dead?"

I don't know why I thought he should be—I had no real memory of him, just the memory of Noni's voice telling me he'd been shot …

"Heavens no!" She permitted herself the relief of a smile. "Nothing wrong with Johnny except that he's got a very sore arm—extraordinary really, the way the bullet went through his sleeve, through his arm and came out the other side—"

"It pays to have fat arms," I croaked. "I'm going to eat more."

Dora laughed a little. “Poor Johnny! But you can’t call him *fat*—and I won’t tell him you said that. I think you haven’t appreciated him, Connie. If it hadn’t been for him fussing and worrying over the two of you going out it might’ve been another hour before I asked him to go up and see if you’d lit a fire—and that would’ve been too late for you. Ken says you were all in when they got to you—”

“Yes.” I wasn’t going to argue with that. “How did they find me?”

“Ken says Johnny saw you through the binoculars—and Smithy following you—and he saw you fall—and he was in such a panic that he forgot all his English—oh, they had a wild old time out there all right!”

She put down her knitting. “But look—what say I go and get Noni—and do you think you could manage a bit of breakfast?”

“I can try. Just coffee.”

She nodded and went away and a minute later Noni came zipping down the hall and practically leapt on to my bed. Luckily she realized in time and after doing a couple of little skips on the spot she sat down on Dora’s chair.

“How’s Johnny, chiclet … ” Even with just Noni and Dora the effort of talking, of thinking coherently, was tiring me.

“He’s all right. It’d be strange to have a real bullet go right through you, wouldn’t it?”

For someone who’d narrowly escaped being turned into a sieve, not to mention burnt, dashed to bits on the rocks and drowned, Johnny’s ordeal seemed almost pleasant.

“Yes, sweetheart, and very brave—but now tell me about your adventures—” I lay back and closed my eyes and she chatted away for quite a while—but every now and then stopping to say, “Are you still awake, Mum?”

Dora brought the coffee and helped me drink it and then she gave me some pain tablets and said the doctor would be here soon, and I must’ve gone back to sleep.

People seemed to come and go through the day; I tried to get up and nearly fainted with the pain in my legs but with Dora’s help I struggled to the bathroom and back. The doctor came and went, Ronnie McCrae came to get a statement out of me but I don’t know what the end result was like.

Late (I think late) Nancy came and sat beside me. After asking the expected questions she said in a voice which sounded unlike her usual one, “Thank you for all you’ve done for us, Connie. I didn’t take you seriously—but Ken’s chipped the plating off that thing Noni brought back in the lunchbox and it really does look like gold. Ronnie will take it back to Stanley with him when he goes. But it still seems to me to be not quite real—if you know what I mean—even though it helps to explain things.”

“And Smithy?”

“Ronnie and the soldiers have gone over to get him. One of those fellows—Brett I think his name is says he warned you not to go. He says he’s had his doubts about Smithy all week. I wish he’d told us … ”

She looked distracted for a minute or two.

“Is it something to do with Sir Ronald?” I said vaguely.

“Smithy? I don’t know. Ronnie McCrae’s working on the assumption they could be related. He’s arranged to interview Sir Ronald as soon as he’s back in Stanley from his current island-buying trip—” Something caustic seemed to creep into her voice. “That’ll be a fine old kettle of fish, won’t it?”

“It would make sense though. He only really wanted this island, no other island—and the more pressure put on you, the more likely you would be to sell out—but then I came bumbling along, sticking my nose into everything—and making a link between the wreck and the things happening here … ”

“Yes, a lot of sense,” Nancy said with unaccustomed grimness. “Oh, by the way, I’ve got a message for you—it’s from Bob Birtwistle—” she unfolded a slip of paper. “Bob says both your paint and your penguin are chock-full of arsenic and not to go near the island till he can get someone out there to do some tests.”

Nancy put away the bit of paper and gave me a wry smile. “Would *that* have kept you away from the island if you’d known?”

I don’t know. I’ve never been able to decide. But it was lucky for Smithy that Noni had left our full Thermos behind on the island.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Some of the evening I thought about the men going after Smithy—would they be safe?—what would they find?—and some of the time I thought about Bob Birtwistle’s information. At first it didn’t seem to make any sense to me. Arsenic? But then, slowly, little things began to fit together … arsenic as something which is often found with gold … the wood of the ‘Fleur d’Allemagne’ riddled with the marks of insects … arsenic in compounds to kill pests and weeds … Mr Pettigrew’s precious and secret cargo which must reach France safely …

Why France? Did he plan to pay in gold for some exciting new invention? A camera, a combustion engine, a sewing machine? The secret of pastuerization? Or might it be something far stranger—given the man’s supposed nature? Might he wish to back the ‘kingdom’ of Orélie-Antoine in the far tip of South America? Might he wish to buy goodwill by putting up another monument to Napoleon? Or was France a blind, a staging-post to somewhere else? Or was it that he simply wanted to get his wealth away from California, away from greedy relatives who might be threatening to have him ‘put away’ …

But what I saw was Mr Pettigrew coating his precious ship, inside and out, with a powerful and finally a lethal covering of arsenic.

Might it be the paint itself which was the precious secret? If he could find a way of protecting the world’s shipping from the expensive attentions of teredo worms and borers and barnacles mightn’t it be a licence to print money?

I didn’t have the answer to Mr Pettigrew’s thinking but as I lay there in my room with only the faint light of the moon seeping in and nothing to do but ponder I think the full horror of ‘The Skirling Dove’ came home to me.

As it sailed down the west coast of the Americas did the burden of arsenic begin to take effect, contaminating the ship’s water supplies, tiny flakes of paint being breathed in, entering the food supplies, being absorbed through people’s skins—I realised I didn’t know very much about the nature of arsenic outside the spoonful in somebody’s dinner—until the ship’s crew started to die? Perhaps they put into somewhere like Valparaiso with dead and dying people on board and were believed to be carrying some terrible infection and were denied permission to land, instead hunted on their way as a mysterious plague ship. Until, finally, there was no one left to sail ‘The Skirling Dove’ and she fled chaotically before a southerly gale—to charge unhindered and unchecked into Percival Island?

A ghost ship. A haunted ship.

I couldn’t bear my thoughts. And all for what? For a man who already had wealth and comfort but had been caught in the grip of his own strange kind of gold madness?

I hoped the fire in the tussac had reached ‘The Skirling Dove’ and consumed her, leaving a mere pile of ash to blow away in the wind. And then I thought of Smithy’s spade leant up against the hull and I wondered if he’d succeeded in burying his treasure …

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

It might be natural that all my fears and horrors, kept at bay during the day with whisky and painkillers and visitors, should finally creep up and grab me by the hair. Yet, when I dreamed, it was of a childhood terror when the brakes on my bicycle failed and I panicked going downhill—and now I relived that half-forgotten fear which had kept me awake for nights after the actual incident …

I must've made some sort of noise—which is an embarrassing thought—because the door opened and someone came in and said, I think, "Wake up! Wake up! It's only a dream," and took my hand and said, "You're safe now."

It seemed to take me a long time to pull myself up to reasonable clarity and find Johnny Vidinha sitting beside my bed and patting my hand. I think he sat there quite a while, talking softly, until I managed to say I was all right now and he got up again and went out; at least, that was my memory of it when I woke up next morning.

I managed to get myself up and get dressed and totter downstairs. The pain in my feet and legs was only marginally less and Dora coming in and seeing me slumped in an armchair immediately said, "Con! You shouldn't be up, you crazy woman."

I agreed wholeheartedly but now that I was up I thought it was more sensible to stay up. She brought me a big soft cushion and put it on a nearby chair for me to put my feet on, then she went and brought me breakfast on a tray.

It was nice to be pampered. But the back of my mind was obsessed by the awful thought: would I be able to get my full quota of paintings done in time? Telling Circumpolar Tours I had got behind schedule because of being chased round Percival Island by a homicidal maniac might not be on their list of acceptable excuses.

Johnny started to come downstairs, saw me, and went back up for a few minutes. When he came down the second time he was carrying a folder which he brought over and handed to me, saying, "I did them for you."

They were pictures of flowers, dusty millers and teaberry flowers, done with a delicacy of touch I knew I could never hope to emulate.

I handed them back and said shortly, "Thanks. But I can do my own flowers." This, at that moment, was a lie. I was making heavy weather of drinking a cup of coffee and cutting up a slice of toast. But even understanding his wish to help me out wasn't enough. I'd banked everything on being able to support Noni and myself in ways that would use my modest skills and give us an interesting life—and if I bombed out on my first big assignment I might as well pack up my paints and go and stock supermarket shelves or something.

I felt mean and miserable. But I simply couldn't make myself accept his offering. It was very hard, I was finding, to be decent and grateful towards someone you owe such a lot to but who would like something back which is more than you can give.

"Johnny, please understand—no matter how difficult it is, I've got to do my own work—"

Jorge would not have accepted that. He always seemed to see the things I tried to do as either a pointless frittering or an undermining of his position. It had taken me a long time to dredge up enough confidence to say to myself 'I can do this—or, if I can't, it won't be from lack of trying'; and I think I was half expecting to find that Johnny shared something of this same attitude.

"Yes." He seemed to ruminate. "Yes. We each have our own work to do." He took the sketches back from me and, perversely, I immediately wished I'd accepted them.

"How do you feel now?" he said after another long silence.

"Not the best. I think I need a new pair of feet. But I guess I'll survive … Johnny, thanks for coming out to the island. I couldn't have kept going much longer … "

He sort of ducked his head. "I worried," he said simply.

After putting the sketches away in his folder again he stood up. "I am leaving today. I must go and finish my packing. My arm is still a little sore."

After Johnny had gone Dora diplomatically reappeared with fresh coffee and sat down with me and said mildly, "The girls are coming home today—and our new guests. I put them off yesterday. I was so worried about you and Johnny—though Johnny spent his evening going round interviewing us all—"

"Oh? You didn't decide to give exclusive coverage to the *Penguin News*?" Did I sound a bit sarcastic.

"Well, it wasn't *their* reporter who insisted on Ken taking the barge out," Dora said more tartly than was usual for her, "so we all felt if there's a scoop in all this we'd like Johnny to have it."

"Good-oh. So what happened about Smithy?"

"Oh, raving—bonkers—completely off his chump by the sound of it. He keeps yelling he's a descendant of Pettigrew and so the ship is his—"

"Could he be?"

"Heaven knows! The whole family seems nutty enough. But Nancy says if he tries any funny business she'll damn well take him all the way to the Privy Council! She's furious, of course, knowing now that he's responsible for killing both her father and Arthur. All the same, it is a bit difficult for her, knowing that ship may be worth a fortune and there they've let it sit for a hundred years! And Libby's in sheer misery because she reckons she's the one who told Smithy about Pettigrew and the ship in the first place—but I said she mustn't blame herself because how was she to know Smithy was a bad egg … "

Dora helped herself to coffee and I wondered if the real reason for Libby's misery was that she'd made it obvious she thought *I* was the bad egg.

"Ronnie McCrae's saying he's related to Sir Ronald—though he's only ever called himself Robert Smith here—and it certainly fits in. He came last year and a few weeks later Sir Ronald made the offer for the island—and now all this blew up just before Sir Ronald was due to come and clinch the deal—and yet, it seems so stupid, doesn't it? With him already rolling?"

"Yes." I'd thought that many times already. "Had he buried the stuff he took out of the ship?"

"Ken says so—but they didn't have much trouble finding it. I s'pose most of it'll go to the government here—but I imagine Nancy will get Salvage Rights or something like that. She's saying if there's anything in it for her she'd like you and Noni to have it."

As if magically drawn by the sound of her name Noni came trundling downstairs still looking rather mussed up. I wondered if she'd stayed up late to sit in on Johnny's interviews.

"Oh, I don't know."

She came over and sat down beside me and yawned. "What do you think, Noni?" I turned to her. "If there's some reward money what would you like to do with it? I think I'd like to clean up the island so all the birds will be safe—if that's possible—and I think I'd like to put up a little monument in the graveyard alongside Tom and Arthur and the memorial to the 'Fleur', to remember the people who died on 'The Skirling Dove' … "

"Yes … " Noni looked at us both out of owl-eyes and blinked a few times; obviously affairs of state were under consideration. "Ye-es, I think I'd like that—and a present for Johnny and a present for Mr Porter—"

I smiled at her but Dora just laughed and shook her head. "You needn't give Ken anything! He's just glad to have been in at the kill—oops! that's not a very nice way to put it—but you know what I mean. He's always saying it's too quiet here and we should go back to Stanley. I don't know if it might be possible to find out who was actually on the ship—but when things get slack in the winter I might try writing away and see what I can find out about the ship and the Pettigrews … "

She stood up to go and see about some breakfast for Noni then said in a sudden burst of curiosity, "Oh, by the way, how did Smithy come to bite you?"

"He grabbed me when I got my foot caught—I managed to kick him you-know-where and get away—"

"Oh good!" Dora chuckled. "I'm sure they'll send him back to the UK and Sir Ronald will pull strings so he ends up in some cushy private psychiatric clinic—and they'll all go round saying he wasn't responsible for his actions … "

In the end he possibly wasn't. But I refuse to believe he might not have known what he was doing to Tom Kirwin and old Arthur. I said instead, "What about the fire? Is it still burning?"

"No. The wind's round in the south-east now. The penguins are safe."

Noni followed her out to choose the cereal she wanted and I was left with my own miserable thoughts.

Of course Dora was rght. Smithy would be shipped home to the UK. But, no matter how many thousands of miles might separate us, I would always be left with the indelible memory of those hours of terror. And I understood now that other people's sympathy and kindness could never do more than coat the surface. They couldn't really understand. Not least because, even if Smithy

was now making wild assertions, he was still, to them, the Smithy who'd come for a few days' quiet leave—and there were no words with which I could create the Smithy I'd known as the real Smithy. I could keep saying words like 'terror' and 'awful' and 'frightening' but, in the end, they ceased to have much impact.

There was nothing to be done but try and get on with life: to look forward to seeing Dora's girls again (they'd only been toddlers last time I'd seen them), to meet the new guests and hope I would like them, to give Noni the opportunity to talk out her fears and excitements, to begin planning my next painting expedition …

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

"I was scared when I saw Smithy come down off the ship and I saw he had a gun—but I kept quiet and moved the lunchbox out of sight—and then I didn't know what to do but I thought if I hid really well he wouldn't know I was there and maybe you could run down to the canoe and get away … so I put that sort of brick thing in the lunchbox and then I went away and I climbed down a penguin burrow that didn't have any chicks in it … and I waited … but that was more scary in a way because I couldn't tell what had happened because I couldn't see or hear anything … I remembered about the matches and lighting a fire for Ken … but the matches were still wrapped up in the lunchbox and I didn't like to climb out in case Smithy had come back to the wreck and might see me … "

She said all this in between eating her breakfast.

"You were very brave, even so. I'm sure it would make a good movie—the only person to ever hide from a mad gunman down a penguin burrow. Did you tell Johnny all about it so he can put it in his paper?"

"Yes, I did … but I should've come out and lit a fire, shouldn't I?" That failure seemed to be preying on her mind. "It was just luck that Smithy shot a bullet into some dry grass, wasn't it?"

"Luck for me," I said with a smile. "But I thought we should've gone away in the beginning—not gone up to the ship—or got him riled up … so don't worry. People can always see that it might've been better to do something different—when it's too late." And I, unlike Noni, could think of quite a lot of things I should've had the sense to see and do. But it was hard now, when I understood who was responsible and why, to recapture that sense of paralyzing inaction produced by a pervasive and shifting distrust of the people around me; a distrust which had made the days leading up to our second island trip so unproductive.

It was a dour day, sullen and uninviting, and I thought of huddling by the fire and playing Chinese Checkers or writing home, something very undemanding. Perhaps tomorrow the idea of walking might seem a little less like torture.

Johnny came down with his bags and put them by the door. He looked his spivviest in a big fake fur coat and highly-polished two-tone shoes; perhaps it was an image he felt comfortable with; perhaps admiring women in São Paulo showered him with such things in the hope he would paint them or write about them or invite them home in his big flash car to his big flash house …

I thought of Brett and Smithy together and that sense of abrasion. They hadn't liked each other—though I'd felt the underlying dislike to be directed at me—and I wondered what subtleties might have underlain that relationship. What exactly had Brett known?

Noni had finished her breakfast and gone upstairs—to clean her teeth "extra well", or so she'd said—and now she was back down with her hair nicely done and smelling strongly of spearmint. I couldn't help a secret smile.

Johnny looked at his watch. Nancy was coming to take him out to the airstrip as Ken was out in the other Landrover. He went over to Noni and lifted her up and she clung round his neck and gave him a noisy kiss and he kissed her back.

Then he said lightly, "Be careful, my Noninha, I don't want to hear that a great big hungry seal has eaten you up."

She gave a weak giggle and as I got up off my chair and my cushion, like an old dowager with gout, and came across to them I saw the tears in Johnny's eyes. But he put her down after another kiss and said to me, "And you take care too."

"Don't worry. I don't taste very nice."

"Maybe not. But by the time the seal finds out it will be too late."

I hadn't decided whether to shake hands with Johnny or give him a kiss; I hadn't wiped the toast crumbs off my hands and I hadn't been up to clean my teeth.

I leaned forward and kissed him chastely on the cheek. It was like opening your front door in the touching belief there's a mere summer breeze blowing outside and finding instead you've let a cyclone into the house to set the pictures banging, the ornaments falling off the mantelpiece, your papers whirling everywhere.

Johnny caught me up in a crushing hug and kissed me everywhere but on my festering cheek.

"You'll come and stay with me one day?" he said huskily.

"Probably." I couldn't see how. It wasn't as though Brazil was just round the corner.

"Promise?"

"Promise."

He let me go just as Nancy came up the path to see if he was ready to go. "Well! Well!" she said loudly, "it's about time we got to see something like that! But haven't you two left it a bit late?" She gave a sort of chuckle which might've meant amusement or sympathy or both.

It didn't seem worthwhile to tell her we were merely saying goodbye. Johnny Vidinha would be sure to contradict me between now and when Nancy saw him on to the Islander.

After he'd waved and blown kisses and been driven away I wondered what the morning's acrobatics had done to his sore arm. But I seem to think Nancy and Noni and Dora between them carried all his luggage out for him.

*

For the very curious (in order of appearance):

Pale maiden — *Sisyrinchium jubatum*
Marsh daisy — *Aster vahlii*
Short rush — *Rostkovia magellanica*
Thrift — *Armeria macloviana*
Tea berry — *Myrteola nummularia*
Sea cabbage — *Senecio candicans*
Dog orchid — *Codonorchis lessonii*
Lady's slipper — *Caleolaria fothergillii*
Diddle-dee — *Empetrum rubrum*
Native violet — *Viola maculata*
Almond flower — *Luzuriaga marginata*
Antarctic eyebright — *Euphrasia Antarctica*
Orange hawkweed — *Hieracium aurantiacum*
Scurvy grass — *Oxalis enneaphylla*
Dusty miller — *Primula magellanica*
Sheep's sorrel — *Rumex acetosella*
Falkland lavender — *Perezia recurvata*
Vanilla daisy — *Leuceria suaveolens*
Tussac grass — *Poa flabellata*
Native rush — *Juncus scheuzeriodes*

Small fern — *Blechnum penna-marina*
Tall fern — *Blechnum magellanicum*
Pig vine — *Gunnera magellanica*
Prickly burr — *Acaenia magellanica*

I am indebted to ‘Wild Flowers of the Falkland Islands’ by T. H. Davies and J. H. McAdam and ‘The Falkland Islands and their natural history’ by Ian J. Strange for botanical information.

# CROOKNECK

## PART ONE

### CHAPTER ONE

The two men from Launceston CIB stood by the rail watching Crookneck Island come up on the horizon. From this distance it appeared as an indeterminate grey hill fading to a long featureless slope and disappearing again into the vigorous waves being beat up by a rising westerly.

On a map the island justified its re-naming for a vegetable but for Detective Constable Frank Pearce, with his farm dam boyhood, it came closer to an active tadpole just beginning to sprout legs.

At apparent ease at the wheel of the converted cray boat, the *Emma Lou*, was straitsman Allan Brady—hotelier, farmer, occasional fisherman, conservationist, curator and, though no one was voicing the thought, suspect in what might prove to be homicide. The close observer would have noted something tired and a little irritable about the set of his mouth; for, whatever the eventual verdict on Bruce Farnham, it wouldn’t do his resort venture any good.

The detectives found a degree of relief as the boat came into the calmer sea in the lee of the island and a few minutes later the *Emma Lou* nosed in gently until she lay alongside the pier below the house. Brady threw the first rope to his seventeen-year-old son Craig who whipped it expertly round a bollard and moved to catch the second rope.

Then the men were on land and being escorted up the paved lane to the house, Craig following behind with the rest of their bags. Mrs Brady had obviously been watching out for their arrival and now stood in the front doorway with her hair combed and her apron discarded; a tall fair women with chapped hands and a strained smile. There were introductions, and she did her best to infuse a little enthusiasm into her voice as she said, “I’ll show you up to your room.”

It was a large bedroom on the first floor at the top of an attractive mahogany staircase and she flicked it with an anxious glance, a habit perhaps, before pointing out the bathrooms at the end of the corridor and a small sitting-room half-way along which they might like to have for their private use.

When she’d left them with their bags and the entreaty that if there was anything they were needing they had only to ask, Pearce looked round and said, “Not my cup of tea for a holiday, that’s

for sure." The west-facing windows showed an increasingly angry sky between heavy mulberry curtains. The trees along the crest of the hill behind the commodious old house bent and thrashed in obedience to the strengthening wind. They looked to be in for a blow and they could only hope it wouldn't disrupt their work on this speck of a Bass Strait island.

"Nice enough in summer, I'd think. But another week and they'll be closing for the off-season—I wonder if that influenced anyone?" Detective Sergeant Kim Chadwick sat down on one patchwork-covered bed and snapped open his briefcase. They'd only planned to stay the one night. It looked a mild case.

Mr Bruce Farnham, company director and property developer, forty-five-years-old and apparently in good health, had come from Melbourne to spend a week at the resort relaxing and playing a round of golf, doing a little fishing, and—though on this they only had Allan Brady's word—engaging in preliminary discussions about the resort. The Bradys would like to move. Farnham Holdings specialized in retirement villages and nursing homes but Bruce Farnham had apparently been interested in casting his net wider.

The previous evening, at approximately 7.45 pm, Mr Farnham's body had been found in the lake to the south-west of the guest-house and Allan Brady had told the police and hospital staff in Whitemark that the man must've fallen down the small cliff at the northern end of the lake and drowned in the near-freezing water.

When Brady brought him across to Flinders Island the doctor had been a little worried by the contusion on Farnham's right shoulder blade. The injury might've been sustained in the fall—if he'd fallen backwards—but he could also have been struck or shoved, causing him to fall ten metres to the lake. The interim verdict was death by drowning.

There was a tap on the door and Pearce opened it to find Clare Brady standing there with a well-set-out tea tray. "I—well, I thought you'd be ready for a cup … and Allan said he could show you where it happened before he goes down to milk—if that would be convenient … "

She must have handled every kind of possible and impossible guest in the fourteen years she'd been here but now she stood like someone sent up to the principal's office—with her hands clasped in front of her and a sense of hoping for a quick dismissal. Why should she be nervous, Chadwick wondered, when no one was suggesting it was more than an unfortunate accident. And was it normal for guests to be served tea in their rooms or was this to give everyone extra time to decide their responses or co-ordinate their stories?

"Thanks, Mrs Brady. Are you always so kind to your guests or are we too late for normal tea?"

"Oh! No. Neither. Allan thought you might like a cup while you—while you get organized."

"Mmm—well, in that case, could you spare a minute to sit down and tell us about your other guests? How many are there?"

This would keep her out of circulation if Allan Brady was masterminding anything downstairs; and Chadwick suspected Mrs Brady would be vulnerable to pressure from her husband.

"Only four—and the four of us." She watched the fat constable busying himself with the tea tray; he appeared to bring considerable experience to the operation. Then she hastened back to the question and took refuge in detail.

"There's Maida White—from Hobart—she's doing a paper on the botany of the island, you know, a study of everything growing here? She's a university student. She's been here three weeks. We let her pay a little less in return for some help around the house. Then there's Peter Trews from Devonport. He's been here several times. He mainly comes to fish but he also says he likes the atmosphere. The other two are from the mainland, one from Geelong, the other from Sydney. Would you like me to bring up the Visitors' Book so you can see their addresses? And you can see when Mr Farnham came last year?"

Chadwick shook his head. "Thanks, Mrs Brady, but we'll come down in a minute. But if you would just briefly give us the sequence of events yesterday?"

Frank Pearce hurriedly drained his cup and took out his shorthand pad with regret; the remainder of the pikelets wouldn't stay hot for long and they could easily get her to write a statement later; but trust Chadwick not to notice …

She took a few seconds for a kind of nervous marshalling. “We-ell, Allan brought him back about three—he can probably be more specific about the time—as our other guest coming on the evening flight had cancelled, so there was no reason for him to wait around in Whitemark. I said ‘Hello’ to Mr Farnham and asked him if he’d like some tea. We don’t have a set time and some guests don’t bother to come in at all if they’re busy. But Mr Farnham said he would—so, after Craig had taken his things up to his room for him, he came down and Maida was in the dining-room having coffee and I introduced them and went out to get a tea cake I had in the oven—and when I brought it in they were sort of chatting a bit and he said the cake smelled nice and I remember he refused milk or cream and I went out again and when I came back about five minutes later to see if they needed hot water in the teapot or anything—or if anyone else had come in—I found he’d finished and Maida said he’d gone out for a walk before it got dark. It was getting quite cold by then but it wasn’t horribly windy like it is today, so I didn’t think it was strange him wanting to go out for a while … but then, when he hadn’t come in by dark, I sent Craig out to see if he was coming. Allan was still up at the cow-bail—we just keep the three housecows—and I thought he just might’ve gone up there because some city people seem to like to try a bit of hand-milking … and when Craig couldn’t find him—well, we all went out and hunted and found him in the lagoon by that big tree trunk—”

“ ‘All’ meaning the other guests as well?”

“Yes.”

“Who actually found him?”

“Allan and Mr Trews. They’d taken the dinghy and come up the lagoon from the old jetty that’s about halfway along the east bank.”

“And then?”

“They brought him back in the boat, poor man, but he seemed to have been dead for some little while, I can’t say how long, and of course the water would’ve been terribly cold so I rang Whitemark and said Allan would be bringing him across straightaway. That’s what Allan told me to say and that he’d explain more when he got there … so he did that—and then he rang me a bit after nine to say he’d be staying there overnight, you know he’s got relatives there, and I said what should we do with Mr Farnham’s things, should we have sent them across so the police could return them to his family?—though we found he’d hardly unpacked anything, they were just sitting on his bed, and then Allan rang me back this morning and told me to hold on to everything because there’d be someone coming from Launceston—so I just left everything as it was—”

“Why did he stay in Whitemark last night?”

“Oh! Because it was late—and he thought he might have to make some arrangements—or try and contact Mr Farnham’s family—”

“Did you know anything about his family?”

“No. Nothing at all really … but we—we wanted everything done properly.”

“Yes, of course.”

When Mrs Brady had excused herself, saying she had something needing to be seen to in the kitchen, and backed herself out Pearce hurriedly took a pikelet and stuffed it into his ample mouth while Chadwick drained his tea and sat back to drum his fingers softly on the bamboo tray.

“Tricky,” he said as he sat back, “when you consider it, it’s likely no one knew where anyone else was during that whole period between the time when Farnham walked out of the dining-room and when he was fished out of the lagoon—and no one would’ve had any particular reason to query anyone else’s comings and goings—or to wonder whether so-and-so really was taking a quick shower or whether he or she had nipped up the hill—”

“And even if he was dead by six o’clock according to the doc,” Pearce swallowed, “that doesn’t narrow it down to help us much.”

“No. But we’ll just have to concentrate on those two and a bit hours and see how people link up. Still, it’s interesting that Farnham came here last year as well. I wonder what it was that attracted him?”

Pearce bolted another pikelet. “Fishing,” he mumbled, “walking, rowing, golf, a taste for country life, mutton-birding—no, too late in the season—and the same’d go for the seals, I s’pose?

Mrs Brady's cooking? Mrs Brady herself? Doesn't look the type, does she? A chance to leave the phone behind for a few days? Life getting too hot to hold him back in Melbourne?"

"Yes, I might buy that last one." Chadwick tapped the folder he'd laid out close to hand. "There's two interesting things here concerning Farnham Holdings—first, a news story last year about one of his nursing homes not being up to scratch—and second, this material about him losing out on a proposal to build a retirement estate in East Gippsland because an Environmental Impact Statement recommended that development not be allowed in that particular area. He said he was going to challenge it, claiming he'd already been given Council approval—but then, for whatever reason, he backed off and sold the land at a small loss."

"Sounds a bit odd—and I don't see how it'd fit—if he was already losing out on deals why should anyone want to get rid of him?"

"If this was public knowledge they might find something worse when they start to dig. We might get a lead when we've met the two mainland guests. You never know. If your dear old mum had been fed swill in one of Farnham's homes you might've felt like giving him a bit of a shove too."

## CHAPTER TWO

To the north of the house neat vegetable beds and rows of soft fruits were sheltered by thick hedges; the nine-hole golf course meandered up over the brow of the hill to the west-northwest; and to the south, the native scrub had been augmented by introduced plants to create a wind-harried tangle of ti-trees, boobyalla, heaths, blue gums, paperbarks and dollybush, gradually giving way to tussock grass and sand dunes. Signposted paths of well-raked gravel led through the bushland, so it was unlikely even a very preoccupied guest could've got lost or wandered away from the track without noticing; and where the path skirted the head of the lake there were several signs saying 'Take Care. Small Cliff.'

"I s'pose we *should* put in a bit of a fence along there but we wanted to keep everything looking as natural as possible."

Allan Brady walked morosely beside Sergeant Chadwick, leaving Pearce to trail behind and decide it wasn't the sort of place he'd choose for a holiday—even should Alexis ever agree to holiday with him again. Then he thought of the movie he'd been planning to take her to this evening, not that she wasn't familiar with his lifestyle and its various inconveniences … oh well, another evening … he knew, he couldn't help knowing, that everyone regarded him as a running joke when it came to his ex-wife—would they get back together yet again? The trouble was—and thinking about it made him nearly as gloomy as Allan Brady—he couldn't seem to live with her and he couldn't seem to live without her.

Lexie with her wild ideas, her grand gestures, her slovenly habits—but, also, her fun and generosity. She was a person meant to be taken in small doses but when he wasn't being dosed at all he longed for an endless draught, to be drunk and disorderly with the fury of her.

He was jerked back to the matter in hand. "Beg yours?"

It was Brady who'd stopped abruptly and waved a commanding hand. "We think—though we don't know—that he left the path here, possibly to go and sit on that old log. You can see through that gap in the trees out over the lake. It's quite nice on a clear day. People like taking photos from there. We found him almost directly in front of here but sort of looped over a branch of that big trunk in the water, as though he couldn't find the strength to pull himself up. It's been there about six years I'd reckon."

"Right. Well, we'll let you get on with your milking then. It'll be dark soon. We'll find our way back."

"Okay. Fine. Let me know if there's anything else."

Allan Brady turned and walked away faster than he'd brought them out. They wouldn't find anything. There was nothing to find. Even so, he'd be damn glad when they were gone back to Launceston and he could get on with his winter maintenance.

"We're not going to be able to do much now." Chadwick stepped gingerly off the gravel and into the sparse scrub. "And if there ever was anything worth seeing—well, they've had all day to remove it."

"What did you have in mind?"

"I'd only be guessing at this stage … " Chadwick reached the pointed-out log—was there a significance in the pointing out?—and skirted it with care, bent and retrieved a dead match, then stood off to one side. "Hmm … not a bad place to sit. Flat, smooth, a good height … someone certainly sat here," he brought out his tweezers and gently lifted a tiny thread of grey superfine caught in the wood, "—then Farnham, or someone, stood up—moved forward … you can see the mark of a shoe here—and here. He might've stooped under that branch and another three steps or so would bring him to the top of the cliff … even so, it's not steep enough … he could easily have grabbed one of those bushes to save himself if he felt his footing going … no sign of the cliff face giving way … and I wouldn't think the fall itself could've rendered him unconscious? Could he swim? Must check what he did in that direction last time he came."

Pearce had been following this line of thought and agreeing. But now he stepped forward, squashing his nose with a thoughtful finger. "Just a thought. What if he wasn't feeling well? The sea trip—then tea on top of an upset stomach might've made him a bit queasy. So he's sitting there hoping it'll go away but it doesn't and he sort of gets up and lurches forward, pushing this branch out of his way, thinking he's going to chuck up—vomit—and the branch whips back and whacks him—no, he'd have to pull it back—sort of clutching and stooping at the same time—yes, you might easily do that if you were feeling a bit unsteady on the old pins … and the branch springs back and catches him a fair whack on the back and he loses his footing—"

"Could be. Interesting. We'll keep it in mind. What I had in mind as we came up was that he might've moved to the edge of the cliff and been standing there when something struck him—maybe the kid fooling round with a slingshot—or, alternatively, he slipped and struck himself on something, a root, a rock … still, I don't know that there's much we can do here now without setting up lights and it might be better if we make it look very quiet and routine until we've had a chance to talk to everyone. We'll concentrate on who saw him and when, who spoke to him, what sort of mood he seemed to be in, how did he spend his previous holiday here … see if anything doesn't ring true—or if there's anyone who couldn't stand his guts—"

They made a finicking way back to the gravel, aware of a possible value in the several identifiable footprints, and took the route saying discreetly 'To the House'.

Then they stood for several minutes looking up at the house from the back gate—it didn't seem likely that a watcher at any of the windows would've been able to see Farnham by the log—before walking round the house and in the front door. Though they entered quietly Mrs Brady came hurrying up. Perhaps she saw it as an integral part of her life: to keep a weather eye out for her guests and be ready to waylay them with offers of whatever their whims might dictate. But this time she blurted out—"*Could* it have been an accident, do you think? Could he have bumped himself or lost his footing?"

"Possibly. But if that is the final verdict then his family might decide to sue you for not fencing off that dangerous place." Kim Chadwick spoke matter-of-factly. Greedy relatives, in his experience, could turn almost anything into a court case; didn't matter whether they'd liked or known the dead relative.

Clare Brady, though, seemed to shrink back. "Oh! Could they?"

"I wouldn't start worrying about it," Pearce put in genially. "If Mr Farnham could swim—well, that'll give the business a whole different complexion—"

Since transferring to Launceston from Glenorchy CIB Chadwick had been told by several colleagues that Frank Pearce was a blunderer—and, in bitterer terms, that he got more answers with his fools-rush-in approach than anyone else in the department. If so, well and good. Chadwick felt there were times when rules were made to be bent (though he wouldn't have used the word 'bent'). But he understood now why Frank got the goat of those officers who preferred a carefully pre-determined "We'll handle it like this" and then had to watch, frustrated, as Pearce rushed away with

his own line every time a new thought occurred to him. He was safer, they said, hunched over his notebook or with his mouth full.

But this woman seemed to gain reassurance from his casual statement. “That’s been puzzling me too. Mr Farnham was a strong swimmer. He did a lot of swimming—every morning—last time he came down. I thought he must’ve bumped his head but Allan tells me he didn’t—so I’ve been wondering if he might’ve had a little blackout or something … oh, but come along in now—I mustn’t keep you standing here … it’ll be dinner from seven onwards but everyone’s already come in because it’s getting so blowy. You might like to use the lounge—or there’s the TV room or the library—or even the museum though we haven’t lit the fire in there—”

“We’ll see what seems to be the most popular. By the way, you said there were four of you?”

“Yes, you haven’t met my daughter Caitlin. The kids are home from high school in Whitemark. They board with a friend there during the term but we usually get to see them quite often—when we’re over there to pick up guests or stores … ”

“I see. When did they come home this time?”

“At the weekend.”

They thanked her and she went away to see to the guests’ evening meal, and the two men wandered along the corridor looking into various comfortable but empty rooms. At the end of the downstairs hall they came upon two men watching the evening news on TV and, in the small library next door, a girl of about twenty curled up in a large leather armchair reading Drewe’s ‘The Savage Crows’. It was the sort of chair which woman automatically leave for a man but this girl was in no way diminished by it. She put the book aside face-down and said “Hullo” in a gruff way, perhaps so they’d take the hint they were unwelcome and leave her in peace.

They went in. “Sorry to disturb you. Ms White, isn’t it?”

“Yes.” She added suspicion to her gruffness.

Chadwick showed her his identification before saying, “I’m sorry but we’re going to have to ask you a couple of questions, Ms White. Constable Pearce will take it down and give it to you later to read over—and add to if you’ve thought of anything else in the meantime. It’s nothing to worry about but it looks as though you may have been the last person to see Mr Farnham alive so we’d like to know how he appeared to you.”

She had dark eyes, straight brown hair tucked behind her ears, a strong face which had now put on a rather sulky expression. Chadwick understood (he’d seen that same expression so many times) and felt mildly sympathetic. That was the trouble with being asked to ‘assist the police’, it was usually sprung upon you—and it didn’t matter that you might be both innocent and intelligent. Unless you were fully acquainted with what the police knew and what they thought they wanted to know, you could never be sure that your tone and expression were right for the occasion.

After taking down her details he went on, “If you wouldn’t mind just telling us what happened, starting from the time you met Mr Farnham till the moment when you parted company.”

“Well—nothing much. I was having tea and going through my notes—I was only doing that at the table because I was alone, of course—and Clare brought this guy in and said she’d like to introduce Mr Farnham from Melbourne, and I suppose I said ‘Hi’ or ‘How are you’ or something—and I shut up my folder and put it aside, and Clare said to him ‘You might like to sit over here, Mr Farnham’, and she showed him to the chair nearest the fireplace and she asked him if he’d like tea or coffee or herbal tea and I think he said black tea—and I pushed a plate of biscuits over towards him—and Clare went out again and came back with a teapot and a cake—and while she was gone I said to him ‘How long are you staying for’ and he said one week and then he asked me how I liked it here and I said it was interesting and I think then I asked him what he did and he sort of started to say something, then he changed it and said ‘I run a nursing home’—”

“Do you remember what he said first?”

“No, not really. I think he said, ‘Oh, I’m a’—and then he stopped and said, ‘I run a nursing home’—and someone told me later he had a whole string of them, so I wondered if he toned it down for some reason—” she shrugged, “because when he said it I just took him to be some sort of manager.”

“Would it have bothered you to know he did it as a business?”

She did strange things with her lips while she grappled with the potential of the question. "Well, I suppose it might have. I don't know. But there was that thing in the paper a while ago—or it might've been on the TV—about the way a nursing home in Melbourne was ripping off the old people in it." She shrugged again. "Not that it matters. I've got too much work of my own to get finished to be taking much notice of the other guests."

"Mmm. And after that?"

"Well, he ate a piece of cake—and then he asked me where would be the best place to take a bit of a walk before dark and I suggested he skirt round this end of the lake so he could get a good view over the sand dunes on the western side of the island—and he thanked me and said he'd do that. I suppose if I'd suggested he go somewhere else he might still be alive but I'm not going to go round feeling guilty—" the two men said nothing and she went on more quickly, "—then he finished his tea and asked me what was the quickest way out of the house if he went upstairs first—and I said the stairs at the far end of the upstairs corridor would take him straight out on to the path—" She put out her hands, palms up in a gesture of finality. "He went out and that was the last I saw of him—at least, until they brought him in later in the evening. It all seems pretty strange to me but I suppose he must've fallen."

"Well, he almost certainly fell. But there are falls and falls, you know."

"He could swim," Pearce put in as his first contribution.

She turned her gaze to Frank as though, finally, the whole matter had claimed her intelligent attention; not as something come merely to interrupt and annoy but as an intriguing problem worthy of her time and thought.

"I see." Maida White nodded slowly. "So he might've wanted to kill himself, you think?"

When they didn't respond she went on in a musing tone, "He didn't look really healthy, I don't suppose. It's hard for me to say because I'd never seen him before but Clare said he'd lost a lot of weight since last time she saw him—so I imagine that's influenced my thinking a bit—and the fact that although he said how delicious Clare's cake looked he only took a little piece. It might've been the sea trip which had spoilt his appetite. I wouldn't know. I thought he seemed a bit on edge but that might've just been his normal manner."

"And if he'd invited you to go out for a walk with him, what would you have said?" Frank Pearce sounded cheerful rather than curious; though his cheerfulness was something he habitually wore.

She seemed to treat the question with great circumspection, like someone studying a well-embedded splinter to decide the best way to remove it. Then she shook her head. "I would've said no just then. I mean, he seemed nice enough and quite easy to talk to—but I didn't come here to get involved with anyone, I'm too busy. If he'd chosen to sit next to me at dinner or whatever I wouldn't have made a fuss—I just wouldn't have given him any encouragement, that's all."

"Fair enough. And you can't think of anything else he said or did?"

"No-o-o … no, I can't think of anything."

"Well, let us know if you do. Doesn't matter how unimportant or insignificant it seems."

"Okay." She picked her book up and the men left her to the sole occupancy of the pleasant room with its glass-fronted bookcase and small fire in the wrought-iron grate. But instead of heading for the TV room as Pearce expected, Chadwick steered him into the small office next door and said, "Anything strike you, Frank?"

"Not a bloody thing—except that if he'd been here before why go asking about paths and doors?"

"Something to say to a pretty girl maybe?"

"S'pose so, though I wouldn't call her pretty … and why is Mrs Brady so nervy? I can't see any reason for her to be pushing guests off cliffs—"

"Exactly. But it's her livelihood which is at stake."

"Guess so … that girl's a cool customer, wouldn't you say? I bet she never turned a bloody hair when they brought the body up."

Kim Chadwick grinned suddenly, one of his rare and curiously attractive grins. “You’d prefer her if she’d shrieked and fainted? More maidenly or something? But we’ve got that little bit about his weight loss, just might support the idea of a business on the slide.”

Pearce disliked conversations which brought in weight, the gaining or the loss of, so he re-opened his notebook briskly and flipped back. “Another point. The early arrival. Did that throw anything out of sequence, I wonder?”

Chadwick grimaced. “It’s possible. But if it did I hope the *why* will damn well hurry up and become obvious. We can’t stay hanging round here indefinitely.”

## CHAPTER THREE

The 6.30 news was on; the staunch old house defied the wind but there was the faint intrusive thunder of a rising sea. Chadwick tapped on the half-open door of the television room and went in. Two men at ease in tweed-covered armchairs, their feet deep in the tanned sheepskins which served as scatter rugs on the parquet floor, glanced up. Pearce slid in behind his senior.

There was a moment of waiting, of summing up, then one of the men launched himself into: “Frank Pearce! Well! Well! If it isn’t one heck of a small world!”

“It is,” Chadwick agreed drily.

Damn it. That was the problem with Tasmania. It *was* a small world. Allan Brady had already told them he was “related to half the damn Strait”; and now Frank …

“Pete.” Frank managed to look both pleased and embarrassed. “Haven’t seen you for—”

“Yeah, more years than I care to remember.” Peter Trews put an unselfconscious hand to his bald head. “So what brings you up here, mate?”

Pearce introduced Chadwick giving him his full title. Trews shook hands and introduced his companion as Matt Beddoes, saying he was his cousin from Geelong. It was convenient to meet here, he went on, away from wives and teenage kids while they got in a spot of fishing and a game or two of pool.

Chadwick experienced a spurt of irritation; he couldn’t replace Frank without good reason but neither could he grill Trews with Pearce standing there looking like a kid about to tackle Christmas dinner with all the trimmings.

“Look, I’m sorry to break up the party—but if we could just run over a few questions before dinner.”

“Sure.” Trews switched off the set and sat down again. “It’s about that poor bugger that drowned, I s’pose?”

“Yes. Did you see him when he arrived?”

“No. Matt and I had taken the dinghy over to Flat Island for the day. Got a couple of good-sized barracouta off the point there. Saw the launch coming back early so we wondered if it was because the weather was going to blow up. We discussed it and decided to pack it in and come back ourselves. Don’t know exactly when—”

“Just after four.” Beddoes spoke with a clipped assurance. “But by the time we’d secured the dinghy at the jetty in the big lagoon and walked up, it would’ve been closer to half past, I’d say.”

“You didn’t see any sign of Bruce Farnham as you came up to the house?”

“Not a peep. Didn’t see anyone as a matter of fact.”

“And the only person we saw when we came in was Clare who took our fish to the kitchen for cleaning and brought in a fresh pot of tea and some raisin toast.”

“We saw Caitlin a bit later though. She’d been out working her horse but she said it was getting too windy and he was spooking all the time.”

“Any idea how much later?”

“Hmm … ” Trews looked at Beddoes. “We were finishing up in the dining-room. A bit after five, maybe. The grandfather clock in the hall had struck.”

“And no one mentioned Bruce Farnham?”

Again the two men seemed to engage in silent communion. This time it was Beddoes who answered: “Yes. Clare did. She said something like, ‘Mr Farnham’s come. You’d remember him

from last year, wouldn't you?'—and I said, "Yes, red-headed bloke, wasn't he? Bloke they said was ripping off the old folk in one of his nursing homes'—and she said, 'I never heard that, it must've been someone different, don't you think?' and I said, 'Well, it might've been.' I was certain it *was* the same bloke but I didn't see any point in upsetting her—and I s'pose, if you run a place like this, you've got to be nice to all sorts."

Chadwick felt there was something elusive here, just beyond the words; some insight that might lay bare a whole human drama. But Clare Brady, he suspected, was not a woman who ever wholly let down her guard—even if Beddoes had taken a casual poker to Farnham's pedestal …

And why had he chosen to do so? Chadwick pictured these two big burly men walking up from the jetty on the lake, seeing Farnham take the cliff path … he dismissed the scenario with an effort.

"Hmm—so you say quite definitely that you never set eyes on Farnham yesterday."

"Quite sure, mate. The next thing that happened, I think, was overhearing Clare telling Allan he hadn't come in and what could've happened—and Allan went out while Clare served dinner—oh, and Caitlin was there too—and then Allan came back and said he was getting a bit worried and would we mind giving them a hand to look for him as we knew the island—and the whole lot of us got up and came out—and then I think it was Craig who came downstairs with a couple of flasks of brandy and gave us each one—I mean each group—and we split up. I walked round the head of the lake with Craig to the dunes on the far side—"

"Allan and I went down and took the dinghy to scout the lake—so we were the ones to find him."

But although the men from Launceston picked their way through Trews' and Beddoes' memories of the rest of the evening (Chadwick wondered if anything might surface if he were to interview them separately and without Frank but decided against it) nothing of interest came out.

Chadwick hesitated then took one last punt—"You recognized him when you saw him?"

"Uh-huh. No problems there." Trews sounded casual but firm. "He hadn't been in long enough to—well, to change colour. And his hair stuck out a mile—though I noticed he was wearing it a bit longer than last time. One of those blokes who's got to try and look younger the older they get. Don't know why."

"Mmm. Just one more thing for the time being. What was your general impression of Bruce Farnham when you met him last November?"

Peter Trews looked at his cousin then shrugged. "He was all right. One of those loudmouth types, got to tell you every big deal they've put through since the Year Dot—but seeing we were out every day we only saw him in the evenings and we didn't take all that much notice of him then—at least, I didn't."

"No," Beddoes agreed, "but it was hard not to. He was one of those pally types, wants to thump you on the back and offer you a drink. I remember noticing he had a pretty fair appetite—not that you'd call him fat exactly. Solid, maybe. The sort of bloke who falls in a flabby heap if he gives up whatever sport he plays—"

"Yeah, that'd desribe him," Trews pitched back in. "He sort of stood out because of his red hair and that kind of light brown skin, very smooth, no freckles. You don't see many redheads like that."

Yes, Chadwick thought as he watched Frank look up with pencil poised—an unusual colouring, a big mouth—and who would have had the time or the inclination to scratch away for the real Bruce Farnham, and it was too late now. But did it matter? He suddenly felt tired of the whole business. It was likely to be one of those cases which never yield up a tidy answer, always leaving niggling doubts, little smears of mud left clinging to those least able to walk away from the situation. Or was it that it'd been a long unproductive day and he was needing his dinner?

Clare Brady, with that taut edginess they'd begun to see as part of her character, had seated them at the small table by the window; perhaps believing the guests here-by-choice deserved to be able to enjoy their dinner without being reminded of the presence of the law, and more so after their interrupted meal the previous evening; perhaps doing whatever her husband had suggested.

But the table had the major disadvantage that they had their backs to the room. With the small compensation of gazing out over the stone-flagged terrace to a phosphorescent sea beneath inky scudding cloud. A nice place to sit on a sunny day. A mite spooky on a night like tonight. And now the big room with its attractive moulded ceiling, its leaping firelight, its glass-fronted cabinet of miniature teasets, its hum of conversation, seemed to mock behind their backs.

Caitlin, a tall girl with toffee-coloured hair done up in an elaborate but untidy knot, served them with a friendly unconcern they found restful. She obviously didn't understand or didn't take seriously the worry which seemed to press in upon her mother; or possibly she saw her mother's behaviour as nearly normal.

She took their orders from the limited menu and said, when she brought their soup, "You know, I thought of joining the police once—but someone told me policewomen just spend their time going round the schools warning kids about strange men and finding lost toddlers at shows and stuff like that and I thought I'd find that pretty boring."

"Heck no, it's better than that!" Frank sounded eager. "Would you like me to send some information up to you?"

She shrugged. "If you like. But I've got an idea for a different job now."

Perhaps she would've elaborated but she caught a sharp glance from her mother and followed her out to the kitchen where she may have been warned against chatting indiscreetly with the police and she may, simply, have been reminded to keep her attention on the job and not go neglecting the other guests. She brought them their veal cutlets and, a little later, she wheeled in the dessert trolley from which they could choose between pavlova, trifle, or blackberry tart and fresh cream; but she made no further attempt to talk with them.

## CHAPTER FOUR

The fourth guest was the man from Sydney; he looked no more than Pearce's guess of eighteen but said later he was twenty-five. They'd already heard Caitlin call him Rolf but he gave his name as Rodolfo Ranalli. He made no objection to joining the detectives in the library after dinner. He even seemed quite pleased to have an opportunity to talk—possibly because he'd expected a more exciting mix of people on Crookneck.

Immediately he'd chosen a chair (not the big armchair which was left in vacant splendour) and sat down in a gawky loose-limbed way, he said he hadn't seen Bruce Farnham alive "and maybe that's just as well because he sounds the sort of bastard who wants to put hotels and golf courses in World Heritage areas! You know the sort? Always stirring? Saying how it's got to be for everyone? It's a wonder they don't want a cable car and hotel stuck on top of Mount Everest to cater for this mythical 'everyone'—"

"Who told you about Mr Farnham?" This was unnecessarily ambiguous but Chadwick checked himself and let it stand.

"Umm, couldn't say for sure … Clare, I suppose. I was up the far end of the island taking pictures of the rock formations—I walked up there straight after lunch—"

"On your own?"

"Most of the time. Craig was with me for about half an hour—mainly telling me about seals he'd seen, he reckons he can recognise them just by looking at them—and then he said he'd better get back to bagging the last of the spuds or his dad would be after him … and a bit later I saw the boat come back and I looked at my watch and it was about twenty to four so I thought I might as well start back as it was getting quite cold up there and Clare'd have tea on—but I stopped to talk with Caitlin—"

He broke off his recital and looked around as though he had sudden doubts about drawing Caitlin in. The men waited.

"She'd been jumping her horse in the paddock near the cowyard where she's got six jumps made up … clever kid really, she told me she'd made them all herself … but her horse was playing up a bit and she said it was the wind but she'd just have one last go and try and get him through the treble—so I hung round to watch them and he made a mess of it, and she said she was going to try

putting metal bars on the top of some of her fences to make him pick up his back feet … and so I waited round till she'd unsaddled him and we walked back together. But when I went into the dining room it was only the two guys in there who're always raving on about fishing, so I went along and got a book from the library and when I came back they were just leaving so I had the room to myself—"

Ranalli stopped again; Frank, too, stopped with his pencil poised and his eyebrows risen over his round brown eyes.

"No, before that I ducked upstairs to put my camera away and that student was up there—at least I suppose it was her because I could hear her singing in her room—and she had her door open a bit though I didn't actually see her … I came straight down again and must've sat in the dining-room for about half an hour and then I went up and had a shower and finished a letter to my girlfriend—don't know how long I was up there—thirty, forty minutes maybe—then I came back down and talked to Allan Brady for a few minutes about going over to Flat Island one day to take some photos—it's not the nesting season but I wanted to see the geese as there's none on this island, and he says there's a couple of pairs of gannets come back to the island now … "

He seemed to have forgotten the purpose of his talking but Frank, like a waiting sheepdog, herded him back. "When was Mr Farnham mentioned?"

"Umm … " Rolf Ranalli rubbed his full bottom lip with a finger. "I think Caitlin said to me when I went in to dinner that 'the real estate guy' had come and then I think she said 'you know, he wants to buy'—no, I think it was lease—'Crookneck from us—I bet he'll make a real mess of it'—and I agreed with her and said I thought the Wilderness Society might be interested in leasing it. I'd already heard a rumour about the Bradys wanting to move to the mainland—"

"Mainland?"

"Tassie—not Victoria."

"Yes, go on."

"Well, she said she'd like that and I said, just joking, they'd take down all her jumps—and she said it wouldn't matter as she'd build a new lot and she'd have a chance to join a Pony Club and go round the shows and things—and then she went off to serve the others—and about ten minutes later she told me the Farnham guy hadn't come in and her dad had gone out to look for him—so when we'd finished dinner Clare asked would we mind joining in the search as they were starting to get worried about him—"

"Had anything been said about him during dinner?"

"No, not that I remember."

"Go on then."

"Yes, well … I got my coat and went out with Caitlin and we walked across the golf course to the cow paddocks calling out "Cooee!" and "Are you there, Mr Farnham" and stuff like that—and a bit later we heard someone blowing a whistle so we went back and found they'd fished him out of the lake—but even then I didn't see him—"

"Why not?"

"I thought it'd look a bit ghoulish to keep hanging round while they wrapped him up in blankets and took him down to the boat—and obviously there wasn't anything *I* could do anyway, so I just went along to the TV room and put in a video and those two fishing fanatics came along and said they wanted to watch something—'A Country Practice', I think—and I said they'd have to go to the TV in the other room, and they grumbled a bit but they went away again—and, well, that's about it, I'd reckon."

"Thankyou, Mr Ranalli. Later, when Detective Constable Pearce has this typed up, we'll ask you to read it through and check it. Just one more thing for now. Did you hear, or overhear, anyone saying anything, no matter how trivial, about Bruce Farnham either before or after he was found?"

Rolf Ranalli combed his beard with long brown fingers. "Well, naturally everyone was saying *something* but just the obvious things."

"Try working through the different people."

"Umm … I think Allan said something about it must've been his heart—and Clare said, 'Poor man, I felt sure he wasn't well' or 'wasn't feeling well' or something like that—and the bald guy, I

don't know his name, said it'd put him off fishing for a few days—and I think Caitlin said she'd never seen a dead person before … I don't remember noticing the other girl but I guess she was hanging round there somewhere, she doesn't look the squeamish type … "

He lapsed into silence as though he was sure he'd forgotten someone but doubted whether it was worth wracking his memory. Then he said brightly, "Can't think of anything else just offhand but I'll sleep on it. Something else might occur to me. Anyway, what's the verdict on him if I'm allowed to ask? Suicide?"

"Possibly. It's early days."

"I didn't think those sorts of characters ever did away with themselves—too cocksure, think the earth is just here for them to make money out of—" he hesitated, thinking of more he'd like to get off his chest but not sure that the moment was appropriate, and decided that Chadwick was a tunnel-vision man; the case and nothing but the case.

He stood up. "Well, if that's it for now, I'll be going along to the bar for a while."

After he'd gone out Frank said, "He seems to know a lot about a bloke he's never met."

"Hmm—and if they weren't saying overmuch last night I'll guarantee they all clacked away this morning, but I don't honestly see any of this lot hiding anything to save anyone else's skin—"

"Unless it was Clare and Caitlin?"

"Just possible."

People's comings and goings overlapped but there wasn't a person who couldn't have ducked out quickly and gone unnoticed for sufficient time. But why? That was the stumbling block. Bruce Farnham seemed totally irrelevant to their lives. Not even Ranalli had sounded angry enough or extreme enough to have sight-unseen cast Farnham as an enemy of the environment; and even if Farnham had succeeded in his bid for Crookneck they all knew he wouldn't have been given a free hand.

The Bradys' lease agreement required consultation with both the Department of Parks, Heritage and Wildlife and the National Trust before any new development could be undertaken. This was not cast-iron protection but it would seriously undermine the idea that anyone might have viewed the Melbourne developer as a threat …

## CHAPTER FIVE

Chadwick decided they would see Clare Brady and her children together; this would rule out any suggestion of pressure and it was possible Mrs Brady would be more relaxed in their presence.

But the exercise developed into a lengthy, though not unpleasant, waste of time. Both Craig and Caitlin confirmed what had been said about their afternoon activities by other people. Of course it was possible for either of them to have left off what they were doing to go and booby-trap the just-arrived guest and not be missed.

But, apart from the fact they would not have known of Maida White's suggestion of a suitable walk, Bruce Farnham seemed to both of them to be a complete non-event.

They both appeared to accept without question the idea he'd slipped and fallen. No doubt they saw this as the sort of helpless thing a middle-aged person would do. Anything else was probably far too dramatic to associate with their view of home as the place where they helped their parents while predominantly dreary overweight people came to fish or walk or sit around.

Chadwick finally relinquished his lingering suspicion of Craig up to some mischief (which was based on his own unexamined prejudices rather than any scrap of evidence); the teenager was disinterested, unexpectedly pedantic, and would have run the risk of being seen by his sister, Ranalli, and his mother, not to mention Maida White upstairs at her bedroom window.

Clare Brady answered all their questions with careful consideration; a couple of times she prefaced her reply with 'the poor man'. Eventually Chadwick told the young people they were free to go (which they did with alacrity) then he said quietly to their mother, "Would you have said Mr Farnham was a fit man?"

"I—well yes, I think quite fit. You know, I really can't accept the idea of him having a heart attack—" (Here, Frank was tempted to butt in with 'No, the man was pushed' and see her reaction.)

"He *was* putting on weight round his middle and his chin, I remember, but he did a lot of swimming and took one of the canoes out and did some walking and fishing … though I noticed this time he'd lost that weight—that's why I thought he mightn't have been well but I didn't get a chance to ask him—and he might've just been dieting, mightn't he?"

Kim Chadwick, in his cryptic way, scrawled 'chin' and circled it. "Was there anything else about Mr Farnham which struck you as being different?"

"Well, no—" she drew spirals on the tablecloth with one finger, "not that I can say for sure, you know—I just felt vaguely that he was more withdrawn, that perhaps he had something on his mind … oh, I can't bear thinking about it!" she burst out suddenly. "That poor man feeling desperate about something—if only I'd said—or—or—*asked*—"

"Please! You mustn't go blaming yourself, Mrs Brady. He chose to come back here—so if it was suicide, and that's certainly not sure, then I think it's possible that he came back here because it was a place in which he'd felt comfortable—rather than because he wanted to upset you and make things more difficult for you."

Neither Frank Pearce nor Mrs Brady herself appeared to notice the assumption contained in the word 'more'.

But was it possible Bruce Farnham had chosen to return here, Chadwick wondered, knowing how Clare Brady would respond and wanting at least one person to remember him with affection? The idea struck him as far-fetched, delicate, but not totally untenable.

"Could you tell us whether Mr Farnham smoked or drank?"

"He—he certainly went into the bar most evenings. Allan might remember what he drank. I don't think he smoked … " She closed her eyes as though to summon Bruce Farnham back. "No … I honestly don't ever remember seeing him smoke—but he might've when he was outside the house, people sometimes do … "

"I see. Thank you, Mrs Brady. One last question, and I'm sorry if it seems a bit personal—were you attracted to Mr Farnham in any way or did he show any signs of thinking that—and the reverse question, did you ever get the impression he might be attracted to you?"

"You think maybe he came back here because of me?" She looked, if anything, a little bit afraid. "Oh no! I honestly don't think—no, that really doesn't make sense—I mean I—well, I liked him, you know, but I like most of our guests. Allan didn't like him very much because he was a bit, you know, a bit apt to tell people about the deals he'd put through and the money he'd made—even if they didn't look like they wanted to hear about it … but to me he seemed like someone who'd come up the hard way and simply couldn't keep his good luck to himself—he wanted the whole world to know he'd made good. Do you know what I mean? I—I found it quite nice really. I mean it didn't bother me. It's nice having people tell you a bit about themselves instead of just treating you as the person there to make their beds and cook their meals."

One inference they could draw from this, if they wished, was that Allan Brady was in the habit of seeing his wife as the person who made the beds and cooked the meals; essential to the smooth running of the business but otherwise of little account.

"What did your husband say when he heard Mr Farnham wanted to come here again?"

"Oh! Nothing much." She looked a little embarrassed. "Just that we couldn't pick and choose—and that we'd had worse ones than Mr Farnham—"

"How did he book his holiday?"

"I—I think it was his secretary who rang—yes, I'm nearly sure it was … about a month ago, I think—but I could look it up to be sure—would you like me to check?"

They said they would, but the neat impersonal booking suggested nothing but a busy man and an efficient secretary.

## CHAPTER SIX

In the bar with its rack of postcards of Crookneck and its timid little case of 'Bass Strait souvenirs' Chadwick spoke briefly with Allan Brady who couldn't call to mind Farnham's preferences but had a vague image of the man drinking gin-and-tonics and giving another guest (he

couldn't remember who—not Trews or Beddoes) some tips on playing pool; he wouldn't want to swear to it, it might've been someone else.

Certainly he couldn't remember him ever being drunk, nor could he remember whether Farnham had been a smoker. He didn't think so.

Chadwick then left him to his three customers and went upstairs to go through Farnham's room again while Frank Pearce worked away industriously turning his shorthand notes into neat typed pages. It was said, probably with some truth, that Frank would never rise through the ranks yet would always be in demand because of his skills as a shorthand-typist. He'd learnt them as a teenager, hoping his uncle would take him into his ship-chandlering business. But the romantic and well-off uncle had died and Frank had taken his skills elsewhere, finding them to be as useful as any benevolent relative.

They'd been through Farnham's room briefly already: the suitcase still open on the bed, the things on the attractive old-fashioned dressing-table—brush and comb, electric razor, empty writing-pad, (which Chadwick held up at an angle; it remained virgin of any impress) and biro, deodorant, a small pile of silver, a wallet containing five hundred dollars in cash but no cards of any kind except a library card, and a novel called 'The Ancestor Game' by Alex Miller. There was nothing to suggest a smoker. Nor, in fact, did the room reflect a moderately high-powered businessman as its occupant. Perhaps the underlying modesty and simplicity the possessions suggested had been seen and appreciated by Clare Brady but not by any of the others who'd taken Bruce Farnham at face value.

Now, as Chadwick observed the few things again, their relationship to each other, their apparent lack of individuality, he puzzled over the cash and lack of identification. Had there been a deliberate decision to come here unencumbered? If so, it certainly gave a boost to the suggestion of suicide.

He turned his attention to the suitcase: slacks, shirts, pullover, scarf, socks, underwear. The footwear hadn't been unpacked and consisted of one pair of brown suede pull-ons, size 10½. The guest house supplied waders and walking boots for anyone who had come unprepared. The puzzle though was that the body when brought in had been wearing plain black lace-ups, size 9. Brands did vary of course but surely not to that extent and Frank's practical suggestion—that he'd bought a larger size for outdoor wear so he could use thick woollen socks—was probably the truth.

There were three plastic vials of tablets, all made up for Bruce Farnham by the same Melbourne chemist; allegedly for sleeping, for combating depression, and for motion sickness, all to be taken 'as required'; two were small white tablets, the sea-sickness remedy came in the form of dark-red capsules and was not identified by brand name. Possibly Farnham had had them 'tailor-made' which might suggest a chemical allergy. Chadwick noted down his thoughts and packed everything up to go to the laboratory tomorrow for testing.

But, for now, Kim Chadwick sat in a brown study; trying to will himself into the shoes of the man who'd come in, put down his luggage (or watched Craig put it down), unpacked a couple of things, and immediately gone out again. The action suggested an eagerness to be out exploring his surroundings. But if he hadn't been feeling well it was more likely that he would stay and rest in his room for a while—or did he belong to the legion who believed 'a nice cup of tea' could fix just about any small seediness?

Eventually Chadwick went out again, locked the door, and walked (still deep in thought) to his own room. Mrs Brady was coming along the corridor towards the bathrooms carrying a pile of handtowels.

"Mr Chadwick—" she lifted a weatherbeaten hand as though to detain him, then dropped it again, "is the room all right? I mean, would you prefer to have a room of your own? Allan just told me the police would be coming and to prepare a room—and I didn't think of—well, of seniority or privacy or—or anything like that, you know—but it wouldn't take me a minute to get a second room ready—"

It was a temptation. He'd never shared a room with anybody since Kath had walked out; and he had the horrible suspicion Frank would prove to be a snorer.

"No, don't worry. It's fine as it is. We can talk if the wind keeps us awake."

He smiled as he said it and she smiled back diffidently; but she seemed to have no idea how to terminate a conversation gracefully and move on.

"Yes—I didn't think of that—I hope the wind won't get too bad, I didn't hear the forecast … but you'll tell me if you change your mind?"

"Of course."

He went on to his bedroom. One of those unfortunate people, he mused, whose sincerity has a transparent embarrassing quality and whose response to each situation never seems completely appropriate.

Frank looked up as he came in. "Nearly finished."

"Sorry to interrupt, Frank, but I'd like to float a couple of queries I think we should fax off tonight."

"Okay. Shoot."

## CHAPTER SEVEN

"Where would you say is the hardest place to lose weight from—waist, arms, legs, chin, chest, and so on?"

Pearce looked startled; naturally his mind had not been running in that direction. "We-ell, I've never tried—" he offered a weak grin to suggest he wouldn't dream of taking the question as a personal dig, "but I guess places like chin, elbows, knees … " He shrugged. "How does that fit in, though?"

"It's only a very long shot and maybe I'm grabbing at shadows—but we've heard that Farnham was putting on weight round his chin last November—yes, in the intervening months, this has melted away—"

"Hmm, suggestive. Go on." Frank had put on the look of a begging dog as it sees the tidbit dip closer.

"He didn't smoke last time apparently—yet was possibly carrying matches this time. Did that mean that under stress he sometimes smoked—or had he begun to smoke as a way to keep his weight down? We haven't come across a packet of smokes but somebody might've helped themselves. Then the shoes he was wearing were a size and a half smaller than those in his luggage. The only card in his wallet was the kind which is virtually useless as an identifying tool as it doesn't include a signature or a photo. We have the information that he was very quiet, didn't appear to know his way around, checked himself when about to give his occupation, and appeared to be unwell. All very small things but I'd like to ask them to run a dental check as soon as possible. Also, I'd like to know which of those medications actually *was* in his stomach—there's always the possibility that if he'd taken two different things together they may have reacted adversely."

"But you're thinking Bruce Farnham might not be Bruce Farnham?"

"Sounds far-fetched but I'd like to be absolutely sure now—not run the risk of wiping the egg off my face later … and if he's been up to some caper with the firm's liquid assets then there's the slight, very slight, possibility he'd planned to lay a blind trail—come here and sow just a shade of doubt in everyone's mind as to whether he was the real Bruce Farnham—hard to see exactly how he was going to work it but if that was his beginning then I think he was handling it with considerable skill. By the end of the week he might well have convinced the Bradys he wasn't who he said he was—or at least make them prepared to admit to doubts … I don't know, Frank, it sounds a bit like drumming up problems where none exist—but if Farnham, somewhere along the line, had pulled a fast one on someone staying here—"

"Yeah, that's the bit that sticks, isn't it? None of 'em, except Clare Brady, are acting as though Farnham really existed. We're a bloody nuisance but they're quite prepared to be nice to us because it'll be a bit of a yarn to tell everyone when they get back home. Mysterious death of businessman—and I was right *there*!" Frank grinned.

"That's about it. And to Clare Brady he is real. She's the one who showed him to his room, poured him his tea, introduced him to the girl, was pleased when he liked the cake—or said he liked

it—worried that he didn't look well—and three hours later saw him carried in dead. I don't know how much of it is a sort of misplaced guilt and how much of it is because she genuinely liked him … anyway, that leads on to the next question—what, if anything, should we suggest be made public at this stage? A man found drowned—identity won't be released till next-of-kin notified … or … Melbourne businessman, Bruce Farnham, found drowned?" Pearce gave the question the consideration it deserved, saying eventually, "I s'pose the final decision isn't up to us—but I'd be inclined to go for the second format. We know Farnham's not married and doesn't have any children—or hasn't publicly admitted to any—and that his mother died last year … so next-of-kin doesn't exactly suggest someone who's going to be knocked flat by reading it in the paper or hearing it on the news. And you never know—if this isn't Farnham it just might flush something out … "

"Yes. I'm in agreement with that." Chadwick showed his list. "Is there anything else you can think of which should go off tonight?"

Pearce said no; then, apologetically and irrelevantly, that he wished he hadn't had that second helping of trifle because he'd forgotten to bring his antacids with him.

"Never mind, Frank, I'll ask Mrs Brady for some. Perhaps we'll find she keeps suspicious substances in her first aid cabinet."

"Very funny. In that case she'll be so terribly sorry but she's right out tonight and will be ordering some tomorrow without fail!"

After Chadwick had gone downstairs to fax off his requests (the fax machine probably having been put in at considerable expense as an inducement to people like Bruce Farnham), Pearce finished typing up the last of his notes and put everything neatly aside for the morning. There were some obvious discrepancies in people's reports of their evening activities but as they came in the period when Farnham was almost certainly already dead and as they appeared to be the natural confusion which can occur in any household around dinnertime he couldn't see them as being significant even though he'd taken the time to draw up a graph to show the different statements about the evening.

The wind was strengthening outside and he turned up the heater before getting his pyjamas out of his bag. Chadwick wasn't a person he would ever choose for a room mate, he'd already decided; too reserved and enigmatic and introspective but probably bearable in small doses.

When he'd prepared himself for bed and left his half of the room tidy he hunted out a sailing magazine and switched on his bedside lamp.

Chadwick came back to fetch a sponge-bag and a towel then went out again. The hall led both to the bathrooms and to a small enclosed verandah whose outer door gave on to steps leading down into what might be termed a shrubbery. The path then came to a gate opening out near the crest of the hill and giving the visitor a choice of going in four directions—to the lake, through the scrub, up to the golf course, or back along the kitchen garden fence and down towards the part of the island which the Bradys farmed.

For several minutes he stood at the bank of windows, looking out and listening to the wind pound the old stone house even here in the relative shelter of the hill; a pouring banshee of sound clutching at the windows and guttering, scrabbling on the slate roof, tumbling off with uncouth cries. A wild and primitive sound which, nonetheless, had the useful effect of distancing him from all that had been said and done throughout the day. When he returned to the business which had brought him here there might be an infinitesimal but vital growth in perspective.

A faint ring glowed round the three-quarter moon and was almost immediately enveloped by black and rushing cloud. 'Rain coming,' he thought. Possibly he should've insisted on returning to the cliff tonight with torches and ropes instead of leaving it till the morning.

But, right this moment, a failed investigation, superintendental displeasure, even the sort of brutal things Kath had tossed off in their last six months together (things she never would've said in their early days—'bent coppers, 'dirty tricks', 'it's nothing but a frame-up') had the feeling of belonging to another less important world.

He thought instead of the veiled sadness in Clare Brady's eyes. She would never say more than a discreet "I like most of our guests," even though it was possible she wove dreams round the

unattached men who came; an exercise which quite likely left her feeling more lonely and taken-for-granted each time she said goodbye to someone. But he thought he understood. Clare Brady would always have to keep her real grief hidden away inside; convention would never allow her more than the exclamation "Oh, the poor man!" …

## CHAPTER EIGHT

The morning was unprepossessing but not actually raining. Chadwick and Pearce, pressured by the weather, were up and dressed and out early to find the whole island closed in under a canopy of flying spume, sand and leaves. The dampness on their exposed skins had an abrasive quality. They envied the other guests staying wisely and warmly in bed until breakfast should send its tempting aroma up the stairs.

Pearce carried the rope supplied by Allan Brady. Chadwick had the bag with their photographic equipment.

"I've been wondering if we could be jumping to conclusions, Kim? It seems to me that he could've bumped himself before he came out for a walk—or he could've climbed down to get something he'd dropped—or even that he took out a canoe and overturned and the canoe drifted back to the jetty later and someone secured it without seeing any importance in the fact because they were told Farnham *fell* down the cliff?"

"Oh heck, yes! Anything's still possible. Though we have no evidence that anyone was *told* that he fell down the cliff. They all appear to have come to that conclusion because of where he was found. Then, of course, there's the evidence that someone sat on that log and I'd give you two-to-one-on it was Farnham. It makes me wish we could call on the services of an experienced tracker."

"Yeah. I just read this book called 'Tracks'—about a bloke up round Renmark who used three Aborigines—incredible the stuff they could do."

This surprised Chadwick a little. He'd taped his colleague, maybe over-hastily, as the sort of man who would read 'The Examiner' and 'Yachting' at his desk and old Superman comics when he was home and undisturbed.

They turned off into the scrub, glad for the small degree of protection it gave from the wind, and came to the log and the cliff-face; where, with care, they photographed the three identifiable footprints they could see on the leaf-strewn ground and took measurements. There was an erratic quality to the prints which seemed to bear out the image of someone not fully in control of himself.

"I think if you'd sit down there, Frank, and try to imagine yourself sitting deep in thought—but feeling worse and worse—"

"And then I think I'm going to spew, eh?"

"Well, yes, all right."

Frank was quite enjoying himself; much better to be up and doing something than theorizing. Doing reports was the price he was willing to pay for chances such as this—to be more than part of a routine. The frustration his superior felt as he boxed with the shadows his mind presented, seeking that essential piece of evidence, was not something which would ever trouble Frank. He saw people's motivations as clear and simple once you used whatever physical evidence you'd dug out to point you in the right direction.

But if Farnham by some clever sleight of hand wasn't Farnham, Chadwick thought for the dozenth time, then he would eventually have to face the knowledge that all, or most, of their questions had been slanted wrongly … and someone would ask why they hadn't immediately seen … seen what …

Frank Pearce, with unsuspected dramatic ability, stood up abruptly with his hand going to his mouth, staggered forward, reached blindly and thrust up the branch which was too high to be leant upon and too low to step under—then, before Chadwick could move, the offending branch had swung back in a dipping rotating motion and whipped him smartly across the back. Pearce lost his footing on the sloping ground, clutched wildly at a bush, and found himself hanging precariously while his shoes scrabbled for a toe-hold among the rocks.

Chadwick passed him the looped rope and fastened the other end firmly. “Hang in there, Frank, and I’ll pass you the camera.”

“Phew! Yeah! Don’t forget I’m not a bloody mountain goat!” Frank had only half-heartedly believed his theory and its vindication had left him a little shaken.

He took the camera gingerly and when he had himself organized he began moving down the rocks, searching and photographing. If there was something worth seeing then he only hoped the camera would pick it up because he could pinpoint nothing; no broken bushes, no chipped rock, no scraps of clothing or scrape of scrabbling shoe. If Farnham had gone down here it looked as though he must’ve pitched right over—and Frank could now picture that happening. It gave him a queasy feeling.

Within twenty minutes he’d reached to just above the water which slapped and hissed in agitation, even up this sheltered end of the lake. It had a milky green look and he wondered how deep it was. But, more pertinently, there was no sign of any obstruction except for the dead tree some ten metres away—from which the searchers had apparently pried away Farnham’s last bone-chilled hold. Frank had seen his share of bodies, mutilated in cars, crushed in logging accidents, dead from overdoses, stabbed or shot—but there was something strangely disturbing in the idea of someone dying alone and desperate in this chill and eerie place.

He made his way slowly upwards again, aware of a profound relief. “Poor bugger. I don’t know, but I think I’d rather be shot or bashed on the head.”

“Could be. But with a bit of luck you’ll die safe and snug in your sleep in your nineties.”

Chadwick took the camera and put it away, along with his notes on each frame—and the realization he should’ve told Frank to work from the bottom of the cliff upwards. He was annoyed with himself but it was too late now.

“So now we know it *could* have happened that way. But did it? To tell the truth, Frank, I don’t like this case. I can’t get rid of the feeling we’ve been set up in some way. Still, I suppose it’s a waste of time to keep speculating so let’s get a spot of breakfast, talk to Allan Brady, get everyone to go over what they’ve told us—then we can get back home and see if they’ve turned up anything useful.”

## CHAPTER NINE

The other guests had almost finished eating when the two men walked into the dining-room. Clare Brady came hurrying over as they seated themselves at the table of the night before.

“It’s awfully cold, isn’t it,” she said immediately, sympathetic to their red-nosed wind-blown look. “There’s porridge if you’d care for it—or hot milk to put on cereal—then bacon and eggs, or scrambled eggs on toast, or toad-in-the-hole—” she hurried through the menu as though their late appearance could be ascribed to some slowness on her part. And she looked, this morning, pale with a waxy paleness; while the steadiness of her hands, Chadwick felt, had more to do with will power.

Pearce went for a large bacon and eggs, plus coffee. Chadwick chose porridge to be followed by toad-in-the-hole; both had a comforting old-fashioned sound and he believed that whatever they chose it would come in large quantities and be well-cooked. That was the pity, one pity, of his profession. If his first reason for coming here had been pleasanter he might’ve been tempted to return next summer for a longer stay but no one here would care to be reminded of this time of anxiety.

It was Caitlin who brought their food and she just grinned and said, “Horrible day, isn’t it?”

Had a man died here in tragic circumstances only thirty-six hours ago? It became increasingly hard to believe so. And yet, commonsense asked, why should this girl wear a long face for a man she’d never met?

As they ate their way through the substantial breakfast they discussed their morning’s work and Frank grew expansive with warm and plentiful food inside him, saying cheerfully, “What if the boy came up behind Farnham with a bull-roarer or an old cow bell or a stockwhip and scared him

enough to make him leap forward. Would that make it murder or manslaughter?" To which Chadwick replied soberly, "I think you'd have your work cut out proving intent."

They watched Allan Brady cross the lawn and go down the hill, disappearing from sight where the road dipped to the pier. As he hadn't returned by the time they'd finished breakfast they decided to walk down and chat with him at the boat.

Here, sheltered by the big white house and its encircling trees, the wind was less in evidence but the view in front of them was of a swirling grey-white world where flying foam and disastrously low cloud seemed to intermingle in a no-man's-land of near invisibility and no discernible horizon; Flinders Island with its jagged outline might have ceased to exist and even its near neighbour, Big Green Island, was lost to sight.

They met Allan Brady returning slowly uphill, with a greasy felt hat crammed over his ears and an orange-striped scarf wound round his neck and buttoned into his japara. He looked tired and despondent but put a slight white smile across his weatherbeaten face as they came up to him.

"Hope you fellas have got bloody strong stomachs if you're wanting to get off today."

"Quite good," Chadwick said mildly. "Would you care to talk here or would you prefer to get in out of the wind?"

"Doesn't bother me. What do you want to know?" He obviously thought his unwanted guests would hasten through their questions if he kept them out here.

"Bruce Farnham was interested in leasing this place from you?"

"I've got a twenty-five year lease. I said I'd be interested in sub-leasing it for five years so we can get the kids educated on the mainland and get them settled into whatever careers they fancy. Too hard to keep an eye on them from here and the school in Whitemark isn't all that ruddy marvellous. Craig wants to go into computers. Cate wants to get somewhere with her riding. And I s'pose Clare'd be glad to have a bit more female company … " He seemed to realise his family was leading him off the track. "Farnham said he'd like to talk it over with me—but we never got to do any talking."

"How did he know you wanted to sub-lease?"

"I wrote and told him—seeing he'd liked the place. He rang and said he'd like to come down for another week, you know, to discuss it. Though I didn't speak to him then. Clare took the call."

"I see. Do you have anyone else interested?"

"The Aboriginal Land Council asked me a bit about it a while back. There's the middens up the northern end of this island. We had an archeologist bloke excavating them at one stage. But he reckoned they were about seven hundred years old—and all the academic bigwigs and half the whites on Flinders jumped down his neck and said he didn't know what he was talking about—because they'd always been told there were no blacks in the strait till Robinson brought them up to Wybalenna—"

He talked in short bursts with gaps between, like lottery numbers falling down. "Then, of course, Flat Island has the muttonbird colony. The government says its protected but they've never been to see it in all the years I've been here—so what the heck would they know about it? You go over there in the nesting season and there's eggs all over the ground as well as in the burrows. And the gulls take the exposed ones—the blacks used to take the surface eggs, called it 'the glut'—and so far's I can see, why not? The last thing we need is an increase in gull numbers—" Brady shrugged. "Poor buggers. I reckon they got a pretty rough deal. Still do, I s'pose. You heard about that business over there at the cemetery? After they'd got those scientific blokes to identify all the graves and put markers in and a plinth or whatever you call it—and some yobbo sneaked in and broke the plinth thing and pinched all the markers—and then the Council blokes have the hide to tell 'em it must've been wombats! Well, I don't s'pose you blokes are interested in that—"

Chadwick had first thought Brady was referring to the muttonbirds, then realised he was talking about the local Aboriginal community. Now, the thought came to him Brady was a bit like Princess Anne saying you don't have to like kids to want the best for them; but, more to the point, it would be interesting to know whether Brady numbered any Cape Barren Islanders among his relatives. He suggested a man who didn't particularly like people (had he chosen Crookneck because it would give him minimal contact with his fellow creatures except in the mellow ambience

of the small bar?) but it might be that he was drawn in an unsentimental way to the unfortunate, the underdog.

Easy to understand that he wouldn't be drawn to a man like Farnham; less easy to understand his detachment from his wife. Something to do with her gentle ineffectual manner maybe?

"Could you run over the sequence of events from the time you picked Farnham up to the time you found him in the water."

"Well, nothing much. I met him at the airport and took him—"

"No. Give the details of what you both said if you can remember them."

"If you want. He came off the plane and picked up his suitcase and I waved and went up to him. He didn't seem to remember me, I s'pose because I'd had a beard last time he came over, and I said, 'Hullo, I'm Allan Brady'—or something like that—and he said, 'Oh hullo, Mr Brady, nice to see you' or maybe it was 'nice to see you again'—and I said 'is that all your luggage' and he said it was and then I told him my other guest had cancelled so we could leave straight away unless he'd like to have a bit of a look round Whitemark or have a drink or whatever—and he said he was happy to go now … I s'pose I made a few other remarks about the weather and so on but I don't remember him saying anything special. We went down to the jetty and he undid his bag and said he thought he'd take a pill as the water was looking a bit choppy, and I got him a glass of water and told him to help himself to the lunchbox if he found he was okay—and he took a seat and I left him to it—sometimes people like to come and talk to me or take photos on the way over but he just stayed sitting there all the time."

"Was he the same back in November?"

"Well, to tell the truth, I don't remember. I had a couple of other passengers then I reckon—and they probably talked to each other—but I'm only guessing … "

He took out a packet of smokes and offered them but when he received no takers he took one himself and shielded a match. Had it been Brady sitting, pondering, on that log sometime in the recent past, his interviewers wondered.

"Farnham wasn't looking brilliant when I brought her in, so I thought I'd just take him straight up to the house and hand him over to Clare."

"When you say he wasn't looking brilliant—what struck you about him?"

"Well … a bit pale for one thing—and sweating—even though it was getting pretty nippy. I didn't say anything about it to him. Some people feel embarrassed about admitting they can't handle the crossing."

"The tablets he took—did you see how many he took?"

"I thought he took one but I didn't see him take it—he said something about taking 'a pill', that's all."

"It didn't strike you as strange that he took it then? I thought most of those sorts of remedies need to be taken a while beforehand."

"He didn't know till then he'd be coming straight on over. So I s'pose he thought he'd take pot-luck."

"Did he say anything about them—for instance, that he was trying a new brand."

"No. He hardly spoke at all. I s'pose if I'd given it any thought I would've said the bloke had something big on his mind but I just assumed he was thinking about his business—and then, when he was looking so seedy, I thought he might be suffering from a bit of a wog and the trip over had made him feel worse." Brady took a long draw and let smoke spiral out his thin beak of a nose. "I thought whatever it was Clare'd probably handle it better than me."

"What did you do after your wife had taken Farnham inside?"

"I did a bit of work down on the boat. Nothing important. Vacuumed the cabin, tidied up. Then I brought the lunchbox up to the house and had a cup of tea … before that, I'd seen Pete Trews bringing the dinghy back so I'd told Clare they'd be in soon—then I went out to see how Craig was getting along with the spuds and I wheeled a couple of bags down on the wheelbarrow and put them in the small shed by the back door. Then I would've gone and switched on the generator and gone on up to milk the cows and brought the milk back to the house—"

'Did you see anyone during that time?"

"Apart from Craig, I spoke for a minute or two with Cate and that Italian bloke when they were walking back to the house. When I came back with the milk Clare and Cate were in the kitchen. I took off my boots and had a bit of a wash up and stoked the kitchen fire, then I went round and did the fires in the other rooms, and Clare and Cate went in and served dinner—and Clare came out and told me Farnham wasn't there, so I sent Craig to check upstairs, and when he couldn't find him I said I'd go and see if there was any sign of him outside … and then I came back and told Craig to hunt out a rope and the old canvas stretcher and a couple of blankets—and Trews and his mate asked what the trouble was so Clare told them Farnham hadn't come in—and they offered to come with us and the other two came out and said they wouldn't mind helping if we needed more people—so I gave everyone a torch and paired them off—and I asked Trews if he'd come with me to search the lake. I didn't want anyone else having an accident so I told Craig to take the cliff area. I thought everywhere else should be safe even for people who didn't know the island—"

"But in fact everyone *did* know the island reasonably well?"

"S'pose so. Only that young bloke—can never think of his name."

"Ranalli?"

"That's right. Anyhow, the two of us came up the lake and couldn't see a sign of him but we thought we'd better go right up and check behind that big log—and that's where he was. Poor bugger. Clare thinks it was suicide but I reckon he slipped and the cold water gave him enough of a shock for his heart to give out. I've heard some of those sorts of pills make you a bit dozy and sleepy—dunno if that was his trouble … but you'll be able to say it was an accident, won't you? A suicide wouldn't look good just when I'm trying to do a deal for the place."

"You don't seem to realize, Mr Brady, that there's a third option." With those words—'You'll be able to say—' Chadwick put aside any small feelings of sympathy and his voice acquired a chilly edge. "Murder."

The effect of this on Allan Brady was startling. His jaw dropped. He took a step back. Eventually he managed a querulous "You've got to be kidding!"

(Later, when he found himself in front of a mirror, Pearce tried dropping his jaw. Each attempt looked ridiculously theatrical. The exercise inclined him to believe Allan Brady genuinely hadn't thought beyond suicide.)

"Are you seriously suggesting one of us here wanted to get rid of Farnham—because if you are I reckon you've got the wrong bull by the horns! No one here had any reason to get rid of the bloody fellow—and certainly not me!"

"Probably not, Mr Brady, but the fact remains that Bruce Farnham was struck on the back shortly before drowning."

For a moment anger and defeat warred in Allan Brady's face then his brusque commonsense came to his rescue. "The bloke struck himself as he fell—that'd explain it."

"Possibly. But it doesn't prove it. There's an important difference. And we understand that quite a number of people may have had good reason to dislike Bruce Farnham. So you will appreciate that nothing can be ruled out at this stage, Mr Brady. That's why we'd like you to give the matter your most careful consideration. If you remember anything, doesn't matter how trivial it seems to you—or overhear or come across anything which doesn't seem quite as normal to you, I'd like you to contact us."

"Even if you feel you're dobbing in a friend or a guest—" Pearce chipped in, "someone here may have seen or heard something that's more important than they realize—"

"Yeah. Okay." Brady raised a hand with grease embedded round the blunt nails. "I get the message. Well, if that's all, just let me know when you blokes want to leave." His tone said 'and it can't be too soon for me'.

They went inside; Brady, seeming so ready to chat earlier, now tight-lipped.

They understood. At the moment Allan Brady didn't care whether the situation was ever resolved. He was fully taken up with what he saw as unwarranted aspersions and insinuations. But with time to muse he would come round to seeing the advantages of a clear-cut answer. It was a pity—in terms of time—but the diffuse way in which Farnham would continue to be discussed on

Crookneck might well have its own usefulness. They must now make certain that everyone on the island knew how to get in touch.

"Frank, if you'd type up Brady's answers while I take the others through their interviews—in the library, I think … "

But although the process was conducted with quiet methodical care, no one volunteered anything new. He asked them about the following morning; had anyone visited the cliff face? No one had. And most of them had acquired a subdued cautiousness, given time to regret any expansiveness the previous evening and time to wonder if there wasn't something more serious behind the various innocuous-sounding questions.

He left Clare Brady till last; for reasons without obvious grounding he felt she was the one, if there was to be one on Crookneck, who would take them a step further.

After she'd read through and thought over what she'd told them yesterday, he went on quietly, "Mrs Brady, if anything occurs to you—about Bruce Farnham's identity, his luggage, his mood, his behaviour, anything he said—in fact, anything at all—will you contact me on this number? Reverse charges if you wish. If I'm not in, you could ask for Detective Constable Pearce or leave a message for me to call you back."

"Ye-es … would you mind repeating the first part of what you said—about the things which might occur to me."

He did so.

"Identity. Yes, that's why I wasn't sure if I'd understood correctly, you know. But surely you're not saying Mr Farnham wasn't Mr Farnham? Who else could he be?"

"There are a number of interesting discrepancies between the way he appeared to people last time and this time."

She appeared to be puzzled by that. "It was only that he obviously wasn't feeling very well," she said at last. "He was really a distinctive-looking man—you know, with that dark-red curly hair and sort of coffee-coloured skin—I'm sure *I've* never seen anyone else who looked in the least like him—"

"So if you saw someone of the right height and that colouring you would naturally assume it was Bruce Farnham?"

"I—well, yes, I'm sure I would … but why? I can't think of any reason for anyone else to want to pretend to be him … "

Chadwick felt like saying "neither can I"; he was also aware of the dangers of encouraging people to think along a particular 'line' but he felt in Clare Brady a shy and unintrusive interest in people.

"You'd be surprised at the odd things people do—and the odd reasons they give you for doing them—but everything here will get sorted out and I don't think you need worry about any adverse publicity. We'll see Mr Farnham's things get back safely to his family."

"That'll be a relief. Allan has been worrying."

Chadwick treated this to a slight smile and told her she would be reimbursed for their stay as soon as the paperwork went through. Then he took Farnham's luggage downstairs, leaving Pearce and Craig to follow with everything else, and they walked down through the miserable day to the *Emma Lou*.

As the gap between the boat and the island widened, the substantial white house with its forest of chimneys was gradually hidden in a pelter of rain.

After a brief stopover in Whitemark they flew to Launceston where the first evidence to support Chadwick's tentative theory was handed to them.

Bruce Farnham, it seemed, had had all his wisdom teeth removed five years ago. The man who had drowned on Crookneck had all four teeth impacted but present.

# PART TWO
## CHAPTER TEN

The department was short-staffed and harried; and the statements by the Police Minister that police numbers for the state would soon be back up to the magical number of one thousand and forty meant little on a cold rushed night. So the request that Chadwick and Pearce, if they could be spared, should go to Melbourne to assist with the strange case of the dead man who was not Bruce Farnham was greeted with mixed feelings.

Frank Pearce was openly delighted. The only small cloud on his pleasure was the fact that Lexie was hovering on the brink of saying she would move in again. Her first reaction was to be angry. Who came first? Herself or the Department? Frank had to say with a kind of gleeful contrition that, today, the Department did. It was something which came his way all too rarely: recognition of his ability to do something more than a neat report. He felt kindly towards Chadwick, he felt kindly towards Melbourne … and Lexie, understanding this, finally consented to send him off with what she called her 'blessing'.

They had some more information to go on. The match was too weathered to have been dropped by Farnham, or anyone else, that afternoon. The thread belonged in Farnham's trousers. The capsules he had taken for sea-sickness were, in fact, potentially lethal doses of morphine. But, intriguingly, the two in his stomach had barely begun to dissolve. (He had also taken, but earlier in the day, two of his anti-depressants.) The assumption was that he had suffered a queasy stomach on the way over and his choice had been a walk in the fresh air. The log, probably, had appealed to him as a quiet private place to sit while he waited for the feeling of discomfort to pass off …

Melbourne had also provided them with the information that Bruce Farnham's car was in the long-term carpark at the airport. It contained little but registration and insurance papers and Farnham's licence in the glove-box, a street-guide to Melbourne on the front passenger seat, and in the boot a small toolbox, car vacuum-cleaner, spare tyre, and a box filled with clean rags. The keys found clipped into Farnham's pocket fitted the car and the front door of his home. The car was very clean but they were running a fingerprint check.

The hostess who had served Farnham on the flight recognized him from the photo his office staff had provided and said she thought he'd spent the whole trip reading, though he'd been pleasant and polite when she'd poured his coffee.

There was no one at his house. His right-hand neighbour said she'd seen him drive away at about 9 am on Tuesday; she had also said she understood his girlfriend was overseas but due back this week sometimes.

Police had called on his half-brother Owen Farnham but found that he too was away. His rent had been paid for a fortnight and he'd told his landlady he would only be gone for a few days. The woman had then volunteered the information that his brother visited him regularly, the most recent visit she knew of was last Saturday.

"The question," Chadwick said quietly as he closed his briefcase, preparatory to catching the plane to Melbourne, "is who do we maintain is dead when we talk to people? Bruce Farnham?"

Detective Inspector McGuinness had been pondering this same question. "I think so—unless Melbourne wants to take a different line. It begins to look very much as though Farnham had got himself into some sort of financial hole and decided to do a bunk. Melbourne'll subpoena the company's records but they want you to do the rounds. They're ninety-nine per cent sure the dead man is Owen Farnham—so you'll be aiming at building up a profile of both men, their relationship, whether Owen was the sort of man to take his own life—that side of it."

'That side of it' appealed to Frank. In an uncomplicated way he liked people, rarely found them difficult to talk to, and gravitated towards the assumption that everyone (once you stripped away the surface differences) thought and felt much as he did. It gave him an easygoing tolerance which needed something of particular repugnance to ruffle it.

Chadwick, after only a month in Launceston, was still something of a dark horse; but Frank's philosophy allowed him to believe that sooner or later he would cease regarding him as cold and stiff-necked and would start seeing him as a friend.

During the flight to Melbourne Chadwick wrote notes and passed them across for comment, then made further cryptic entries in a notebook. This seemed to Frank to be taking discretion a bit far; he would've preferred to relax and talk TFL or sailing or fishing—but if this was what

Chadwick wanted—well, he could be as single-minded as the most single-minded cop in the department.

They spent an hour closeted in Melbourne at the St Kilda Road complex being briefed on the case as it looked at that end; of particular interest was the new information that Bruce Farnham had left his entire fortune (investments, house and contents, car) to the Brotherhood of St Lawrence after the payment of all debts and the winding up of his company Farnham Holdings.

It struck them all as an odd will, though everyone present remarked that they'd come across far odder, and it was Chadwick who voiced the collective thought, saying mildly, "Does it strike you as the will of a guilty man?" The answer, in general, was "Yes". Bruce Farnham had chosen this way to make amends, sooner or later, for something.

But if Bruce Farnham was still alive, as seemed likely, then the Brotherhood might have to wait years to receive this 'conscience money'.

Chadwick and Pearce went first to the tenth floor office of Farnham Holdings in Collins Street; there was no one there but a young woman occupied with some typing. She apologized for the fact that "Kristina" and "Mr Blackburn" were out, but said they'd both be back soon and certainly by lunchtime if they'd care to call back. She'd demonstrated no apparent interest in their reason for coming; nor did she appear to be dedicated to her work. A half-full coffee cup, a cigarette in an ashtray, and a folded-back copy of a glossy women's magazine, all bore witness to an untroubled morning.

They thanked her and returned to the foyer where they made a call from a red phone. As Owen Farnham's literary agent had his office only a half-block away it made sense to see if he was in and could see them now. Chadwick said they were trying to contact Mr Farnham as the next-of-kin in a matter which concerned his half-brother and they would be grateful for a few minutes of Mr Bauermeister's time. The agent said genially he'd be pleased to help, they could drop in any time, he always lunched at his desk. As neither detective was familiar with the popular idea of an agent wining and dining his best-selling authors at considerable length they simply accepted this as the natural thing for an agent to do. They often lunched at their desks themselves.

They found their way to a much less comfortable office in an old building where sub-divisions for small entrepreneurs had created an incomplete directory board and a sense of bustle in the shabby corridors. A door said 'Leo Bauermeister. Literary Services.' And 'Ring then Enter'. They did so.

The place contained a tiny waiting-room ringed with photographs of people holding books and large sheaves of flowers; people attending dinners; people speaking at lecterns and podiums; people sitting at tables signing books. They assumed these were all Bauermeister clients but, though they scrutinized each picture as carefully as time permitted, they could see no one who suggested Bruce Farnham's double. Did this mean Owen Farnham was one of the agency's less successful clients?

The inner door opened and a big bulky man came out. He looked determinedly unfit yet also managed to suggest a man of great energy and enthusiasm. He shook hands. He ushered them into a small office crowded with bookshelves, filing cabinets (in three different colours), and immense piles of paper segregated into lumps by rubber bands. He offered them the two uncomfortable chairs in front of his desk and asked what he could do for them.

Pearce led off by saying it was a complicated financial and legal matter (his manner suggested no one had yet come to grips with it) and they'd both be most grateful if he could tell them all he could about Owen Farnham: his career, his personality, his financial background.

"I really can't imagine Owen being involved in any complicated financial *or* legal dealings," Leo Bauermeister said with a slightly ingratiating smile. "He is an extremely quiet and modest man—"

"No. The dealings involve his brother—but unfortunately they will also end up involving him whether he wants them to or not," Frank broke in cheerfully.

"Ah! His brother. Yes, that doesn't surprise me at all. Not that I ever met Bruce—no, I tell a lie. I did meet him at a function once—just to say hello but I couldn't help thinking it was a pity Owen didn't have his brother's push, he might've gone further if he'd had that sort of confidence in

himself … still, it doesn't surprise me to hear old Brucie's got himself into a bit of a pickle—though it won't do Owen any good to be mixed up in that sort of thing—not at all the sort of guy who can take criticism. Too thin-skinned."

"Yes. Well, if you could give us a bit of an outline of Owen's career that should give us a better idea of the man himself which would be a help."

Mr Bauermeister fitted two lots of plump fingers together and considered the matter.

"You probably know he wrote a little book called 'Worn Ratchet'—" Mr Bauermeister shuffled piles on his untidy desk, then turned with a creak of his swivel chair to the shelf behind him and took down a slim volume, "which gained something of a cult following—you know, young lad comes to the big city, gets caught up and carried along in the dying throes of Flower Power and so on … an attractive little book—very fresh and honest … but, of course, the trouble is—what do you do next—after such a successful debut?"

The agent cocked his head on one side, as though he'd like to have his ears scratched, and looked at them out of very bright brown eyes.

Chadwick shrugged. "You tell us."

Mr Bauermeister looked disappointed and turned to rummage again in his shelf before holding up two more books.

"I would've advised him to follow through with his same characters—you know, showing them getting older, wiser, richer, more cynical—of course he hadn't approached me then to represent him—but his publisher suggested he try a new direction. A mistake, yes, most definitely a mistake … so he did this—" a well-manicured nail tapped the top book, "a comedy of manners you might call it. Quite a sophisticated little thing. But no market. His early fans were disappointed and it didn't capture the more highbrow market … so he tried another direction—a pseudo-thriller. A break-in at ASIO. You know the sort of thing? But his style was all wrong … "

The agent sat back with a sigh. "A pity. A terrible pity. He did some reviewing, churned out the occasional article or short story. Of course, by then, I was acting for him and I managed to sell 'Worn Ratchet' to the North American market, then the translation rights in Dutch and Japanese … and a nibble for a mini-series—but that was only Wednesday—no, Tuesday—and when I couldn't contact him, I went round to his flat—"

"That seems very kind of you—or were you in urgent need of his response?"

"No-o, no, I had his permission to make any decision as I thought best. He trusted my judgement … no, it was because I knew he was pretty depressed by the way his career didn't seem to be going anywhere and I wanted to put to him the idea of using a possible television debut as a way of generating interest in the ongoing lives of that lot of characters. Soapie stuff, you might say, but not to be sneered at when you're practically living a hand-to-mouth existence and convinced you're washed up at thirty-nine. Good money, good publicity."

Kim Chadwick wrote '39' in his notebook and circled it. "So exactly what happened when you went to his flat?"

"Ah-hum. I went up and knocked and there was no reply so I wrote a little note for him to contact me a.s.a.p. and slipped it under his door. I was just turning to leave when an old dame came out into the corridor and saw me and said, 'Oh, Mr Farnham's gone away for a few days', so I said, 'Do you know where he's gone?' and she said, 'No, I don't and I think it's very strange that he didn't tell me—I saw him going down the stairs as I was coming back from the bathroom so I called out to him but he didn't seem to hear me and I didn't want to go downstairs in my dressing-gown', and I said, 'Are you sure he was going away?' and she said, 'Oh yes, he was wearing his big overcoat and carrying two suitcases', and she sort of looked at me and said, 'And they were very smart suitcases—so he must've had good luck with one of his books, mustn't he?' … " Mr Bauermeister pinned the CIB men with a significant glance.

"Good luck with one of his books, eh?" Frank Pearce said slowly. "And you knew for certain that hadn't happened?"

"It was nearly a year since I'd been able to do anything big for him—though I can imagine him putting a bit of that aside—you know, with the idea of taking a trip away somewhere—"

"And he never mentioned any plans—or even any wish to go anywhere—to you?"

"No. As a matter of fact I was getting quite worried about his reclusive tendencies. It was getting harder and harder to get him to attend any sort of function at all—or even to come into my office! If I had any news for him—or anything for him to sign, for instance, he'd just say, maybe, that he didn't feel he could take the time, something like that." A disapproving tone had crept into Leo Bauermesiter's voice.

"I see." Chadwick glanced across at Pearce, then rose. "Thank you for your time, Mr Bauermeister. One more thing. When did you last actually *see* Owen Farnham?"

"Ah—now … more than a month, I'd think—" The agent flipped open an engagement diary and pursed generous lips. "Ah-hum, here we are. First of May."

"Thankyou. We may be back to trouble you again—"

"That's fine by me, Mr Chadwick. Any time. Only too glad to help."

"Could be he's planning his what-d'you-call-'em—his memoirs," Pearce said as they went down in the rattling lift.

"Don't know." Chadwick put a finger to his bottom lip and rubbed it thoughtfully. "Don't know that I'd especially want him guiding my career either—but, to be fair, he seems to have been willing to take an interest in Farnham beyond the bit of commission he was getting out of him … well, how about a sandwich while we chew this over? It seems a heck of a long time since breakfast."

"Just what I was thinking, as a matter of fact." Though Frank had been thinking more in terms of roast something-or-other and veg or a pie at the least.

They went into the first pub they came to and ordered a counter lunch of roast pork with the trimmings (after some adroit hinting on Frank's part) and washed down with Carlton Draught.

"This is the way I see it at the moment." Chadwick laid out his notebook with the heel of his hand when the waitress had departed. "Bruce Farnham offered an all-expenses-paid holiday to his half-brother Owen—doesn't matter what excuse he gave: pressure of business, health worries, something just come up—and Owen, nearly broke and feeling pretty down, grabbed it. Bruce's secretary had booked it and no doubt understood it to be for business reasons—as Crookneck was up for lease and he was interested, at least in a mild way … then what? Bruce stays in Owen's flat, keeping a low profile for a day or two, then packs up and leaves without a word to anyone, and was only glimpsed by a tenant who saw his back as he went downstairs—"

"If you're right—and it all fits—then I'd say it was most likely that Bruce's skipped the country, maybe using Owen's passport—if he had one—though there's nothing to stop Bruce using his own at this stage. No one's blown the whistle on anything—and we're still only guessing that his company's in trouble—"

"They're running a check on both of them. But I think we mustn't overlook the possibility of Bruce quietly going to ground as Owen somewhere closer to home. He was known to be a quiet reclusive man—though we must check that that's the general view, not just friend Leo's—and Bruce would probably have the background knowledge and the ability to step into Owen's shoes quite successfully."

"But—how long could he keep it up for, I wonder? Bruce, from all we've heard, was no shrinking violet."

"No—and that's what puzzles me about him choosing Crookneck in the first place. We know he went there last year—unless that was also Owen taking his place? But if he'd begun to plan an 'out' this year, then I think we've got to go back to last November at the very least and start looking for money transferred, a change in his attitude, a change in company policy—"

Pearce hurriedly chased a last potato round his plate and speared it, smothered it in gravy, and swallowed it. Any minute, he was learning by experience, Chadwick would push away his plate with a businesslike, "Well, we'd better get back on the trail instead of feeding our faces," and if he didn't sit firm he would find himself being bustled out, still chewing.

But Chadwick was nibbling absently on his bottom lip as he turned a page in his notebook. "Something went wrong, didn't it?" Pearce, following his own track of thought, gulped and reached for his beer. "Owen Farnham was meant to die quietly that night after taking a slow-acting capsule for sea-sickness, a capsule which contained enough morphine to put him to sleep for good. As well,

he had with him a new anti-depressant which came on the market about six months ago and his sleeping tablets which he'd been prescribed for the last five years but apparently only took occasionally—at least, we know Bruce had been prescribed both of those and the sea-sickness pills can be bought over the counter—though he'd also got those on prescription. But his chemist has said that what he provided was completely different to what was actually in the bottle—and in fact of the ten capsules left in the bottle only three contained morphine—and each of those was marked by a small scratch, though whether intentionally or not we can't be sure at this stage."

Frank sat there frowning at this unwanted complexity.

"Owen seems to have fought shy of both doctors and dentists—so far no one has been identified as 'his' practitioner, so it's quite possible he got stuff off Bruce now and then … nor do we know who doctored the capsules for who … but given Bruce's connection with a number of nursing homes he'd be our best bet for getting hold of morphine … but one interesting point we do know is that the time for the run out from Flinders was changed because the other person coming had cancelled—so they came out three hours or so earlier than expected."

"So, instead of the slow-release pull taking effect in the late evening, it started in the late afternoon?"

"Well, that's the tricky question. They're saying he didn't yet have enough morphine in his system to kill him. But he'd also taken the anti-depressants and was possibly upset by the crossing—"

"Plus a piece of cake and a cup of tea—quite a cocktail in there. I wonder what the poor bugger'd had for lunch?"

"Mmm … we'll probably never know whether he was feeling sick, dizzy, sleepy, or just generally groggy … but he was undoubtedly feeling worse by the minute—so he probably stood up with the idea of going back to the house and lying down—but he tripped or lost his balance or was disorientated—and grabbed at that branch the way you did—and it whipped back and caught him, causing him to pitch forward. He drowned probably because by then he was getting beyond making the effort to get back to shore or he tried to find a handhold on the bottom of the cliff-face and couldn't and tried to make for the tree trunk instead—or he was getting so bloody cold he wasn't thinking clearly any more—and of course we still don't know whether *Owen* Farnham could swim."

He pushed away his plate and reached for his wallet. "But no point sitting here speculating. What we need now are some hard facts."

"You'll get ulcers." Pearce got up reluctantly. He could've found room for a bowl of the pub's apple pie and icecream quite comfortably.

They paid and went out.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

With two officers from the Fraud Squad they returned to the compact pleasant suite occupied by Farnham Holdings. It seemed to the two men from Launceston that something had changed in the interim; been moved, hidden, altered … but though they both pondered on the thought they could come up with no instant answer.

They were on tricky legal ground—if Bruce Farnham should come back with some perfectly reasonable and verifiable story—but they decided to stay with Bruce Farnham dead and themselves searching for a possible suicide motive, should it be required.

The two girls in the outer office watched them curiously. It was obvious there was something in the wind; the police hard on the small piece in this morning's paper; their boss "found drowned". Yet they both knew Mr Farnham had liked swimming; he often talked of his early morning dips at St Kilda, bragged almost. So if he'd had a heart attack or something while he was taking a dip—why should it become a police matter?

After the inner door had closed on the visitors, Michele turned to Kristina. "It's the company, isn't it? There's something wrong with the books?"

"I don't know. But I don't see how there *could* be anything wrong. I'd know about it."

Kristina had been with the company for six years; she'd liked being with it—Mr Farnham was easy to work for, easy to talk to, always gave everyone a Christmas present. And now, suddenly, the vaguest of worries were beginning to take shape, to become something dreadful and distraught. She saw a prison door closing upon herself. A lifetime of struggled-for efficiency put on the scrap-heap. But she didn't want to talk about it with Michele who simply saw her job as a way to make enough money to set up her own freelance computing business at home and have a baby.

Mr Farnham couldn't have done anything wrong, she told herself with conviction, so it must be someone out in one of his Homes who'd been up to something.

"The trouble is," she willed her voice to stay calm, "he accepts everything they tell him. He trusts people too much. I mean—" she stopped in dismay "he accepted everything—and you *know* that woman running the office at Wyldesyde was cheating the company—her and that manager George put on—treating those poor old people like dirt—but you know as well as I do that it wasn't Mr Farnham's fault. He wouldn't even have known about it if that team from Channel Seven hadn't gone there and talked to some of the old people about the awful food and the bed-linen only being changed once a fortnight."

Michele shrugged. "Yes, but don't you think it was his business to know? Several of those old people said they'd written to him to complain and he hadn't even answered their letters."

"It's George. I bet it's George." Kristina nodded her head towards the closed door, where George Blackburn was now in earnest if disarming discussion with his four visitors. "I'm sure he never even told Mr Farnham about the complaints."

"No. Maybe not. George sometimes behaves like he owns this place."

Michele sat back—it didn't seem worth the effort to go on with this pile of work if the police were going to demand to see everything, even cart it away maybe—and rummaged in her bag for a nail file.

George Blackburn, deep in conversation, might have won a prize for Mr Affability. He was a good-looking man in his early thirties, dressed with style though without drawing attention to an excellent physique, and his even white teeth and perfectly-proportioned lips made his visitors wonder why he hadn't been snapped up for toothpaste advertisements.

Yet there was something about him which intrigued Kim Chadwick (for one) but which remained hard to pin down; perhaps because George Blackburn suggested a man whose lifelong ambition had been to assist the police even though it was only this morning that he'd learnt of his employer's death and only a few minutes ago that he'd discovered someone might be interested in the company's financial status.

So what had been his feelings about that employer?

"A very easy man to work for." His words came without apparent effort or consideration. "Good-tempered, easygoing—too easygoing really. He simpy didn't take it as seriously as it deserved when he heard things apparently weren't up to scratch in one of his Homes. Wyldesyde. He sent me to look into it—but only after the damage was done and that unpleasant little segment had gone to air. I had to sack a couple of people but of course people remembered *his* name in connection with it. I believe he stayed away from his Club for several weeks afterwards to avoid any embarrassment."

There had been a discreet tap on the door. Now Kristina asked politely if she could bring anyone a coffee. "Not now," was the response and she withdrew as quietly as she'd come in.

"So you can say for certain," Chadwick went on, "that he was distressed by the allegations?"

"Oh yes, definitely. He felt it was his fault for not taking the complaints more seriously. Then there was the matter of LazyDays having to have its facilities upgraded. You may know about that?"

"Yes. We'd like to see the original correspondence from the Health Department." This was Tony Nichols from the Fraud Squad. His manner was an uneasy mix of the erratic and the dynamic but it had shown no sign of fazing George Blackburn.

"It would be in Mr Farnham's files, I would think."

Blackburn took them through to Farnham's office. It, by comparison, seemed strangely bare. A desk (with a telephone, a pile of directories, a near-empty basket, a pocket calculator, and a small

tray of pens and clips), several chairs, a small liquor cabinet, a filing cabinet. Blackburn crossed to this and hunted for a couple of minutes.

"Mmm … here it is—no, this's the Notice of Inspection. I wonder where he put it—I don't remember him—still, he must've put it in my office." He escorted them out of his employer's office again.

"I imagine you'll want to go through all this at your leisure?" He laid a small sheaf of documents on the desk. "We were surprised that so much needed doing as Mr Farnham was often there and would go round and check things … a matter of over-familiarity, I would imagine."

They worked on through the afternoon, asking questions about the various problems Farnham Holdings was known to have had, as well as day-to-day routine; and it struck Chadwick as strange that Blackburn never demonstrated what would've been a natural curiosity about the direction of all these questions. Did he have his own suspicions about Farnham and hoped the answers would gradually reveal themselves?

They moved on to possible changes in Bruce Farnham's outlook and demeanour over the last few months.

"Rather hard to tell really," George Blackburn's own pleasant professional manner showed no sign of slipping. "Bruce Farnham was a—well, I'm not sure quite how to describe him. He always struck me as an amateur in some ways. He had the luck of the Irish in the early years of the business. Every little deal he did would seem to turn into gold. He'd buy a bush block for a song and then it'd be re-zoned as residential so he could sub-divide. He'd buy an old Federation house in poor condition and someone with more money than sense would immediately want to restore it. He'd buy a block of flats which should've been condemned years ago and they'd decide to put a freeway through. People naturally thought he was getting inside information so they started taking more interest than most of his purchases warranted. I've heard people say you have to be born with a nose for it—but I think Bruce was just extraordinarily lucky—and then his luck started to run out. Maybe you could say he got too cocky because, really, none of his decisions were based on a sound knowledge of the real estate business. But I'm inclined to think it was just one of those things and it was hard to tell whether things were getting him down. He was one of those men who try to project a sort of larger-than-life image. So it's possible the effort of keeping up that sort of façade when he was feeling less confident was starting to take its toll … but I must admit I just took him as he was, and didn't give him a great deal of thought, personally speaking I mean. Anyway, I was pretty snowed under getting everything back on an even keel."

"Damage control?"

"Yes, you could call it that." George Blackburn produced another slight but charming smile.

"But you were sure the company was on a generally sound footing?"

"Oh definitely. Mr Farnham did discuss the possibility of selling Wyldesyde with me, but I recommended against it. I felt that in six months time the public would've forgotten completely—and we had transferred a couple of patients from LazyDays to the beds left vacant by the removal of a couple of patients from Wyldesyde. We had a waiting list for LazyDays."

"The two Homes were never connected in the media?"

"No. And they would've had a job stirring up anything there, so soon after the Health Department giving it a clean bill."

It was becoming more difficult, they all realized, to hold on to the idea that Bruce Farnham had hatched an elaborate plot to disappear because of financial troubles. Blackburn was suggesting, and they had no reason to disbelieve, that Farnham had weathered his bad publicity both financially and emotionally.

The two Launceston men left the others, first to pay a call on Farnham Holdings' auditor then, time permitting, on his personal solicitor. They passed through Farnham's outer office saying something brief and polite to both young women before closing the outer door.

But they had only gone as far as the end of the hall when they heard soft hurrying steps on the corridor carpet. It was the tall fair girl from the office. Kristina.

"I can't stop—I just said I was going to the loo—but would I be able to see you for a minute sometime—about Mr Farnham—if it wouldn't be a nuisance?"

"Certainly. Some time this evening?"

"I'm afraid I live in Clayton South. Would that be too far out of your way?"

Neither man knew where this might be, without time-consuming recourse to the guide in Chadwick's briefcase, but as their evening remained free of engagements after they'd seen the solicitor they agreed to eight o'clock.

"Does she want to tell us something—or is she hoping to find out what we know?"

"Both, I'd think."

Chadwick felt a glimmer of excitement. There was something there, he was certain. But in Blackburn, if his was the guiding mind, they were dealing with a clever polished young professional. He would've left nothing to luck or chance. Tony Nichols might search all week and uncover no reason for suspicion. But in the outer office was a woman who'd shed tears for Bruce Farnham and hadn't quite managed to disguise the fact despite the heavy application of mascara and eye-liner.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Charles Allcott was a tall spare man whose spareness tended to make better-covered people feel lumpy. His hair had obligingly turned silver. Gold-rimmed glasses perched on an imposing nose. In his presence, Frank Pearce felt out-at-elbows, wind-blown and bumpkinish. Kim Chadwick's response remained hidden behind his cool impassive exterior. He was rarely ruffled because he'd ceased to care as much about anyone or anything as he felt he should.

Allcott's Financial Services had gone for an open-plan office with a lot of plastic plants; only Allcott had semi-privacy.

He expressed himself deeply regretful at the sad news about Bruce Farnham and said he had known him, though not closely, for a number of years.

"When you say 'not closely'—could you elaborate a little?"

"Certainly. My firm has acted in a variety of ways for Farnham Holdings over the years—auditing—taxation—arranging several loans. I even found his accountant for him. And I advised him in a more personal capacity after that problem in one of his Homes last year when he had several offers for it—you know the way the vultures move in?"

"And what did you advise him to do?"

"Oh. To hold tight. I think, if he'd been left to himself, he would've decided to sell out. I gained the impression he was a little fed-up with the whole business … I don't know if it was a sort of middle-age restlessness—you know, 'If I'm ever going to do something adventurous with my life, be a Dick Smith, I'd better go and do it now, before it's too late'—or whether it was something more specific. I didn't see him often enough to be able to judge."

"You would've seen him how often?"

"Oh, maybe three or four times a year. George Blackburn would come if it was merely routine work for us—and even the whole of Bruce's business was only a very small item in our overall turnover."

"You yourself would've handled his work—or someone in your office?"

"Oh, he didn't expect me to handle his work personally. Would you like to speak to—I think it would be Graham Kent you'd need to see—"

"He would've done the last audit for Farnham Holdings?"

"Graham? Hmmm … no, offhand I think it would've been Anne Downie. She's not with us now but I could give you her address if you think it would be a help?"

"Thank you. It would."

"If you don't mind my asking—is there something wrong with Bruce's books? He always seemed to me to be a man of integrity."

"It's early days yet, Mr Allcott, but money troubles very often feature when a middle-aged man suicides."

This explanation struck Frank Pearce as having exactly the sort of damping discretion he longed to achieve in his own questions and answers.

"Dear me." Charles Allcott rose and went to an antique wall cabinet and poured himself a discreet tot of brandy. "I was under the impression that Bruce had met with an accident. Poor man. I had no idea."

"But you feel certain he didn't have money worries?"

"Well no. No, I honestly don't think he did. His business was on a very sound footing. If you are correct in what you're saying I think you will more likely find he'd had bad news from his doctor or something like that."

They seemed to have come to a dead-end. There was nothing here to support the faint idea which had impelled the direction of their questions. It had been unlikely that they would find any loose ends trailing. Even so, Pearce felt a vague sense of disappointment; he would rather like to see what shape Charles Allcott would acquire after six months of prison food.

As they went out into the street, Kim Chadwick said in an undertone, "How many people did you count working there?"

"Seven—including Allcott and the cashier."

"Mmm, so did I. Did Allcott remind you of anyone?"

Frank, to his dismay, could only look blank. "Spencer Tracy, at a pinch."

"No. Closer to home I would imagine. I can't pinpoint it but it just seemed to come to me when he turned away to get his brandy—"

"Yes, that seemed a bit theatrical. Or do you think he was just wanting an excuse?"

"Could be … and I wonder if we'll find Anne Downie is now doing audits in the Upper Amazon? I don't know. This business is bothering me. It's a bit too much like boxing with shadows … anyway, if we hurry, we should be able to catch Mr Grant before he goes home to his dinner."

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Adrian Grant was also silver-haired but there the likeness to Charles Allcott ended. He was pink-cheeked and plump with very small bright-blue eyes which only escaped being 'piggy' by the luxuriance of his eyebrows. He had chosen, or perhaps retained, mahogany for his office, and brass urns of autumn leaves here and there added to the image of prosperous but gentlemanly rectitude. If he'd begun by saying he was the fourth generation of Grants to head the firm no one would've found it hard to believe.

Chadwick asked in what ways he had acted for Bruce Farnham. Adrian Grant said he'd drawn up a will for him only last March, and that he'd handled his mother's estate. He was asked to expand on both points.

"Well, so far as his mother was concerned, there really wasn't much to be done. She was receiving the old age pension. I believe she also suffered some form of mental illness—schizophrenia or delusions or something—I really couldn't say definitely—but I understand she managed quite well. Once Bruce and his brother had arranged her funeral and divided up her personal belongings there wasn't anything much else to do. She had a little bit put by but after her funeral expenses it would only have given them a couple of hundred dollars each and I believe Bruce persuaded his brother to take his share as well. I understand Owen lives pretty close to the breadline."

"Did you act for Owen as well as Bruce?"

"No. I imagine he would be eligible for Legal Aid if he ever had a problem. His agent might be able to tell you."

"You had contact with Mr Bauermeister at some stage?"

"Oh no, definitely not. But Bruce expressed concern about Owen's relationship with him at one time. It only came up very briefly and Bruce wasn't asking for my advice or anything like that."

"I see. Did Bruce say why he'd decided to get a will done now? It was his first will, I take it?"

"Yes. He was always a hearty cheerful sort of chap, but I felt he wasn't quite himself since his mother's death. They'd always been very close. So I suppose his mind was running along those particular grooves. I've seen it happen in other cases—a death in the family and immediately, or

soon after, several members start thinking maybe it's time *they* also put their affairs in order, just in case. I wouldn't be surprised if Owen had also made a will."

"Thank you. We'll look into that."

"But, if you don't mind me being nosy, you don't suspect any funny business, do you?"

"That's a very elastic term, Mr Grant. At the moment, we are in the process of trying to eliminate all elements of suspicion."

"Yes, of course. I quite understand." But the solicitor continued to wear a small puzzled frown.

"Had you ever met Owen Farnham?"

"No. Although Bruce often mentioned him when we met. I think he worried about him a good deal—not as the feckless younger brother, no, but I think he felt Owen was too unworldly and trusting to manage his affairs as well as they might've been managed. That's only an impression and I might be quite wrong."

"It helps though. Could you now tell us just what Bruce said to you when he came about his will—as far as you can recollect."

"Yes." Mr Grant laid his podgy hands neatly on his desk as though that was a help in arranging his thoughts equally tidily. A large garnet ring gleamed up at them, providing the only discrepancy in an otherwise drab old-fashioned appearance.

"His secretary, Miss Pargiter, made an appointment for 4 pm. Mr Farnham came in and said he felt it was time he drew up his will and he handed me a sheet of paper on which he'd already written down what he wanted. He had it numbered one, two and three. One was that any outstanding debts were to be paid out of his estate. Two was that *all* his possessions—and he was most emphatic about the all—were to go to the Brotherhood of St Lawrence. I asked him why he'd chosen them and he just said with a bit of a smile, 'Well, there but for the Grace of God—' I believe this was a reference to his early life which must've been quite difficult—no money and his mother's problems and so on … "

Mr Grant removed his hands from his desk and clasped them neatly over his ample stomach.

"And Three was the funeral arrangements. I asked if he wanted anything to go to Owen and he said, no, Owen was a little bit like St Francis of Assisi and he'd probably give it all away."

"Meaning—Owen preferred to have as few belongings as possible?"

"That's the way I took it. Neither of them were churchgoers, so far as I know."

"Did you feel it was an odd will—from what you knew of Bruce Farnham?"

"Well," Mr Grant steepled his fingers and admired them for a moment, "no—no, I can't say I did. I knew there was no close family except Owen—and, although I knew there was a woman living with Bruce, he may have felt the relationship wasn't going to last. He paid attention to his fitness and his diet, I know, so he had every reason to think he was in for a good long innings. It's possible he might even have believed he would outlive Owen."

"Did the suggestion of suicide surprise you from what you knew of him?"

"Yes, I'd have to say it did. Of course he may have inherited a bit of instability from his mother, I wouldn't like to say, and I suppose you can never say you really know another person, can you? When all's said and done you're seeing them through your own eyes."

"True. Just a few more small points. Briefly, how would you describe your relationship with Bruce Farnham?"

"Oh, very pleasant, very amicable. I always felt he trusted my judgement in the few times he asked for my advice."

"Then you might know," Frank put in suddenly, "why he chose to go to Crookneck in the first place?"

"There was a degree of unpleasantness after a television program on one of his Homes went to air. I understand he received several threatening letters—and then of course there'd been his mother's death. I assumed he wanted a few days peace and quiet. Who wouldn't? When he mentioned it next time I saw him he just said it had been very restful and they were nice people running the guest house. I don't think he said anything more than that though. I have been a little

curious about that aspect of it myself but I can't recall him saying anything else about it which might be significant."

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Chadwick and Pearce talked over the afternoon with Tony Nichols and Detective Sergeant Ron O'Dowd from Homicide before going for an overdue meal; overdue, anyway, in Pearce's estimation.

On the surface, Nichols came across as a man of fastidious habits and general taciturnity; probably derived from his profession and concealing, as they had already discovered, a sly sense of humour. O'Dowd, on the other hand, sat quietly and jotted an occasional note and left little impact on them. Chadwick, thinking back to him later, had the impression of a shy man who would prefer to solve crimes with a microsope.

"I think you've given us a downy little bird there," Nichols said, taking off his glasses and slipping them into a leather case. "I'm going to look into the Health Department end tomorrow—though it won't surprise me in the least if a few relevant letters have gone missing in the interim."

"So you think we're not simply flying wild kites?"

"No. I'll bet my boots there's something there but pinning it down'll be another matter. You sort of develop a nose for it, I guess. Hard to go into a place where there aren't a few little fiddles going on—and no matter what took you in there in the first place people immediately start thinking about the expense account they've padded or the stuff they've filched from the stock room or whatever. But our Mr Blackburn *knows* he'll be pronounced clean. It suggests, to me, something which is big enough to be worth taking meticulous care over."

"So—do you think Farnham *knew*?" Frank put in.

"And did an elaborate disappearing stunt to ensure someone came and poked around? A bit hard to swallow. The alternative is that he knew and approved which suggests either he was some sort of masochist, he was being blackmailed, or there was something worthwhile in it for him. It seems most likely, to me, that he didn't know but was getting worried by the way everything seemed to be going sour on him … oh, by the way, we've learned that his house and contents were insured but not his life. He was a member of Medibank Private but had never made a claim on them. We haven't been able to dig up any kind of insurance for Owen. Bruce's GP was Ian Holloway in St Kilda but Dr Holloway hadn't seen him since December when he renewed a prescription for sleeping tablets and anti-depressants—he'd got the sea-sickness remedy before his first visit to Crookneck. Holloway said a bottle would normally last Farnham about a year—that's fifty tablets—so he wasn't addicted to anything unless he was getting them from someone else as well."

"Have you got the prescription details?"

Nichols passed a sheet across.

"Mmm, this tallies with what we found in his room. It looks, doesn't it, as though Owen simply took Bruce's luggage—lock, stock and barrel—except maybe for the reading matter and the writing pad which he may have bought at the airport."

"Yes, it intrigues me. If they were younger men I could imagine them doing something like that for the fun of it—or for a bet. Which would now suggest our Brucie is masquerading somewhere as a writer?"

"Yes. Whatever their original reasons for swopping, I'd say it's our best bet—to look into writers' get-togethers, festivals, seminars—whatever they have."

They went on to the avenues which should be discreetly followed up; prompted by the need to find 'Owen Farnham' with as little publicity as possible. There was still the chance that Owen Farnham had gone to Crookneck of his own choice, and taken his life of his own volition. They would therefore retain the position of needing to contact 'Owen' simply because he was next-of-kin to 'Bruce'.

Tony Nichols brought out his last interesting snippet for the day: Owen Farnham had prepared his own will using a form bought from a newsagent's, had it vetted and signed by a neighbour and

the neighbour's daughter, and then lodged it with the Public Trustee. It was virtually identical to his brother's will—except that he left several of his belongings, including two paintings, an antique ink-well, an eiderdown, and the remaining pieces of a Spode coffee set, to a Miss Polly Eyre—and it had been drawn up a fortnight after Bruce had visited Adrian Grant on a similar errand. It appeared to remove any money angle from Owen's death, unless Miss Eyre had particularly covetted any of Owen's things; and if his reported character was accurate she probably need only have mentioned her liking for the ink-well to receive it.

The neighbour, Mrs Emmeline Wilson, could only say that Owen had asked her to take "a quick look" and sign it. Her daughter had done the same. They had both assumed Owen had decided to act in a businesslike way for once but hadn't asked him any questions at the time.

Tony Nichols eventually went home to his wife and three adopted children; O'Dowd went wherever he went of an evening; and Chadwick and Pearce opted for a solid but unexciting meal and looked up their Morgan directory.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The men from Tasmania took a train; not to discover how long it took the conscientious Ms Pargiter to reach work each morning, nor to gain a sympathetic overview of Melbourne's public transport system, but because Frank had an unappeased fondness for trains and had never forgiven TasRail for eliminating its passenger services.

Clayton South—what they could see of it—appeared to be a brick juxtaposition of industrial and residential; nearly flat, predominantly featureless, with highway noise, and uninspiring except for its suburban gardens. This was a natural reaction on the part of men used to looking out at hills and river. But they made no comment, merely putting their energies to finding the address of the small block of flats which housed Kristina Pargiter and her mother.

Old Mrs Pargiter was not an unexpected bonus. She was knitting up strips of breadbags to be used in covering coat-hangers and her demeanour suggested someone who fully intended to be present, physically and mentally, throughout the interview. But Kristina showed great presence of mind by saying, "Come on through to the balcony so we won't disturb Mum," and ushering them past the old woman's chair and round an ironing-board. It was cold outside but reasonably quiet, and the balcony contained a wrought-iron table and three chairs.

"Would you care for coffee?"

"Just eaten, thanks," Frank responded.

"Now—there was something you were wanting to tell us about Mr Farnham?" Chadwick surmised she'd been agonizing for the last couple of hours over the wisdom of her impulse.

"It—yes, I s'pose it'll seem a very trivial thing—but I overheard George telling you that Mr Farnham had asked him to look into the situation at Wyldesyde—but, really, it was the other way around. George said he would go out."

"Was that usual—for him to offer to go?"

"Oh yes. He really runs the place. Mr Farnham was more like a figurehead. I remember one time when Mr Farnham was going out to one of his businesses, Michele—you know Michele who's in the office with me?—well, she said 'There goes the King to review the parade' and I realized that it *was* like that. But it had happened so slowly I hadn't really noticed how George had gradually taken everything over. Another time, Mr Farnham said he was going out to see someone at one of his Homes, I forget which one, and just after he'd left George made a phone call to someone and said 'he'll be arriving about ten-thirty' and then he said, 'Oh, and don't forget to send me the Lapton account' and hung up. I don't *know*—" she glanced up with the look of someone who would like to clench their fists, "and maybe I'm imagining things—but I've often wondered if that's why Mr Farnham didn't really know what was going on—because they always had warning he was coming. If there were people there who might complain or insist on speaking to him—well, they had plenty of time to slip something into their morning tea, or take them away for a bath or something, didn't they? Oh, I know it sounds crazy when I say it like that—and it probably is … "

She took a packet of cigarettes out of her cardigan pocket and offered them. When they both declined she lit one and took a quick draw. Then she seemed to notice the lack of an ashtray because she lifted an unhappy-looking African violet and removed its saucer.

This kind of situation always presented a problem: to what extent should a member of the public be taken into confidence? Kristina Pargiter might prove to be an excellent and discreet eye upon that office; on the other hand she might merely have a private bone to pick with George Blackburn.

"We're not entirely happy with the situation ourselves." Chadwick looked and sounded cautious; his whole manner seemed to say 'investigations are continuing', "so we'd appreciate hearing about anything else in the office which gave you reason for concern—even if it does sound very trivial."

"Yes—but, please, won't you tell me first what really happened to Mr Farnham? I can't believe he drowned. I truly can't."

"You were personally aware that he was a good swimmer?"

"Yes." Her very fair skin showed her sudden blush. "I know it will sound really stupid—but you won't tell anyone, will you?"

"Not unless it ever becomes relevant to a court case, no."

She didn't appear to find this very reassuring but after a minute of smoking in silence and darting looks between the two men she said, "I liked Mr Farnham, I just thought he was really nice, and I thought, perhaps, if we could meet outside the office—well, something might just happen … and I knew he went swimming at St Kilda every morning, even in winter, and so, one time, I arranged to go and stay a few days with a cousin of mine who lives there and I said I'd take her dog out each morning for a walk. She didn't mind—and I, well, I took him to the beach and I saw Mr Farnham there on his own and he seemed pleased to see me and we were chatting a bit—but then a woman came barging up and said how dare I bring a dog on to the beach and didn't I know I might be giving kids worms by doing that—and I felt so terribly embarrassed that I just said I must be getting back to my cousin's for breakfast and I went off home—"

"How did Mr Farnham take it?"

"Oh, he just smiled next time he saw me and said not to worry about it. He said he'd never kept a dog himself but he was sure it was a nice healthy dog. It made me feel a bit better."

"Did that seem in character for him?"

"Oh yes! He sort of talked a bit too loud—as though he thought everyone around him was deaf—but underneath he was a very kind person."

"Can you give us a specific instance?"

"Ummm … yes, I know he was very good to his brother. Have you met his brother?"

"No. Not yet. He's away."

"Well, one day Owen came into the office and said could he see Bruce, so I buzzed Mr Farnham and told him his brother was here and he said 'Oh good!' or something like that and he said he'd be out in two ticks—and when he came through they both seemed really pleased to see each other—but just as they were about to go out the door Owen said something about hating to hit him for another small loan and Bruce said, no worries, he'd be glad to help … and another time when Owen had had a small success—you know he's a writer?—Bruce said he was going to take him out to celebrate and he asked me to book a table for two at the Hong Kong Palace which, you know, is pretty fancy—and it was only for something quite small, a short story in a magazine I'd never even heard of … but I think he worried quite a lot about Owen, that he took things too much to heart and got depressed when he hadn't sold anything for a while."

"His relations with George Blackburn and Michele Ryan—how did they strike you?"

Kristina had gained confidence from their apparent absorbed interest in everything she had to say and her voice, likewise, had grown in firmness and decision.

"Michele was hired by George. He said we needed someone full-time. It was about last August when he said that, I think. We had a woman of about fifty coming in three days a week, Dorothy Gotz, and she was excellent. I really believe she got through more work in three days than

Michele gets through in five. But no one asked me for my opinion and I s'pose it sounded sensible if the firm was going to grow at all."

"Had anything been said about expansion?"

"Not specifically, but George had said something about needing a bigger office."

"He does seem pretty crowded," Frank ventured.

"That's only because he wants to have everything in *his* office! Still, I s'pose it was handy for him to have it all there around him. He wanted to make himself indispensable and that's what he's achieved." She didn't try to hide a faintly bitter note. "I felt I was only there to do the donkey work—even though I'd been there longer than George and Mr Farnham had confidence in me. But George has a degree in Business Studies and Mr Farnham was self-taught, and I think he felt a bit inferior once George really got stuck into things. I think he *respected* George's qualifications and he couldn't see that George was only out for himself, he really didn't care about the business or the old people—"

"And you felt that Mr Farnham did?"

"Yes, I really did. I know he used to go and see an old lady who'd been moved from one of his Homes, I forget which one, because she needed an operation for a tumour on her brain. I s'pose there were too many people in the Homes for him to know each one personally, but I think his mother would always tell him if someone had a serious problem—"

"Did you ever meet his mother?"

"No. But he had a photo of her on his desk. She looked rather nice. But a couple of months ago I noticed the photo had gone. I s'pose he must've taken it home with him but I didn't like to ask."

And with the mention of this little incident it came at last to Kim Chadwick what had been missing on their second visit. "That reminds me—there was a picture on the wall in your office the first time we went in. What happened to it?"

"I took it down," she said simply.

"Why?"

"Because I hated it."

She ground out her cigarette.

"His girlfriend, Connie, put it there. She came in one day. She said to us she'd been meaning to pop in one day to see him—but I'm sure she came to see us, to see what the competition was like maybe. She hardly spoke to him but she sort of wandered round like someone who is planning to re-decorate and she said the office was really dull and she'd loan us a couple of wall-hangings from her shop to liven it up, and then George came in and she was all over him like a rash and she went and sat in his office and had a cup of coffee with him, and Bruce dictated a couple of letters to me but he kept making silly mistakes … anyway, then Connie brought back the two things for the office. I didn't mind the beach scene but the other one was really horrible and I had to look at it every time I looked up from my work … and when I—I heard about Bruce this morning—well, I just took it down. I don't know if he really liked it but I wasn't going to hurt his feelings—and now he wouldn't be hurt … "

She looked efficient and attractive at the office in her charcoal-grey suit and crisp white blouse but now, in an old cardigan and jeans with her eyes red-rimmed, she had retreated to a non-entity; the sort of woman who must do something drastic to be noticed.

Kristina sighed and took out another cigarette. "I s'pose I sound mean and nasty—but I'm sure he was unhappy because he cared about her and he'd finally realized she didn't care about him. You didn't tell me the truth about him drowning, did you? He committed suicide, didn't he?"

Chadwick looked at Pearce who nodded without being entirely sure whether he was being asked for his opinion—or whether Chadwick was only using the moment to consider his response. He hoped the former.

"The man who died on Crookneck certainly drowned but he also had a potentially lethal dose of morphine in his stomach—"

"You cut him open?" She shivered involuntarily.

"Not personally, no."

Chadwick's response made Frank long to snicker. He compressed his lips instead.

After writing their temporary Melbourne address on the back Chadwick handed her his card. "In case you should need to contact us at any time—but Tony Nichols will be visiting your office again and we will have briefed him on what you've told us—so feel free to tell him anything. Now—there are two small things we'd appreciate some help with. The first is—how long have you had your current photocopier?"

"I'd have to check but it would be at least three years. Why?"

"Good. What I'd like you to do is photocopy this letter on it tomorrow if you have a chance when you're alone in the office—and when you've got it on the best setting for the letter to also run a blank piece of paper through. Then seal everything up and give it to Tony Nichols. Would you mind doing that?"

She studied the letter he handed over. It was a typed letter but someone had cut out a letterhead and pasted it on top and cut out a signature and also pasted that in. When she glanced up, her eyes were bright with something which suggested a leap in understanding.

"I don't think that's the way he did it—but I'll certainly run it through for you."

"You are thinking of—what?"

Chadwick was pleased he had acted on his hunch about her. But, for the first time, he found himself wondering—how long would she survive in that office with Farnham not there? Long enough for Nichols to complete his investigation? It wasn't that Blackburn constituted a danger but that he was clever enough to ease her out of the office with any one of a dozen plausible excuses.

"Lots of things," Kristina said quickly. "Oh, maybe they're only a lot of crazy assumptions — I need to think some more—" She lit another cigarette. "Mum complains if I smoke in the house, she says it collects in the curtains, but I really couldn't sit calmly and not smoke—and I can't talk about George Blackburn and not feel upset—but maybe I'm letting my personal feelings run away with me … "

"Maybe."

She wanted them to say she wasn't and they couldn't say that.

"Just let me finish this smoke and I'll get Dorothy's address for you. She couldn't find such a good job when George put her off, it's hard when you're over fifty—"

"Did George give her the option of working full-time?"

"I—don't think so. I'm not absolutely sure."

When the cigarette had been smoked and Mrs Gotz's address noted, they took their leave of mother and daughter, and took a taxi from the shopping centre; expensive, but even Frank no longer hankered to wait around on a station platform in the chill wind.

"I wonder," Chadwick mused quietly behind their Vietnamese driver, "how much of that was from not liking George for what he is or for what he does."

"Hard to say. Maybe she went for George first and got the cold shoulder?"

"No. I think her feelings for Bruce are genuine—though, no doubt, she could see the advantages in taking up with the boss."

"Mmm … " The warmth, the chance to sit back without concentrating, was making Frank sleepy. "Still, I'm looking forward to seeing this 'Connie' bird tomorrow. I hope her plane isn't delayed."

Connie Lopez, they had established, was due back from North America early tomorrow morning. Her business partner had given them her flight number and volunteered the information that Connie wouldn't be coming in to the shop but that she would be going out to see her …

Another thought seemed to strike Frank. "I wouldn't fancy old Mrs P as a mother-in-law, would you?"

"Oh, I don't know … your shirts wouldn't slip off their hangers any more." Kim Chadwick gave himself up to a grin in the dim interior of the taxi.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Pearce came down to breakfast yawning. Chadwick was already there, briskly tackling a bowl of muesli.

"'morning." Frank sat down heavily, deciding he would rather face a messy-looking Lexie over the breakfast table than an urbane and businesslike Chadwick. The teenage girl who'd been prowling round the near-empty dining-room, as though her vigilance might entice more customers, scurried over and stood poised.

"Oh—er—the bacon and eggs and lambs' fry—plenty of toast—coffee—that'll do for a start, thanks."

She nodded, glad of an order which was an order, and went through to the kitchen. Kim Chadwick, who often kept his mouth compressed into a thin uncompromising line, was now smiling. The sight cheered Frank a little.

"What's the program for today, Kim?"

"Either Bruce's house then Owen's flat, or vice versa. I'll check that Connie's flight has come in on time. If not, we'll go out to Collingwood first."

But Ms Lopez's flight was obliging and they were waiting at the St Kilda house when she drove up in a white hatchback.

The name, Constancia Lopez, had suggested flashing dark eyes, emotional storms, seductively broken English. But the woman who swung a shapely pair of legs out of the car looked at them with undisguised irritation and spoke in everyday Australian.

They apologized for bothering her at such a time and explained that they needed to talk to her about Bruce Farnham. To this she shrugged, said she'd only just come back from Mexico, and what had Bruce been up to?

"Well, in that case, I'm very sorry to be the one to break the bad news to you. A body which we believe is Bruce Farnham was found drowned on Crookneck Island on Tuesday evening. It was in the papers yesterday. We're trying to determine the circumstances leading up to his death."

"Are you *sure?* I mean, are you sure it was Bruce? I haven't had a chance to see the papers but I can't imagine him either drowning himself or getting drowned. He used to go out and swim here in the winter—"

They noticed she'd shifted, without obvious difficulty, into seeing Bruce as past history; or did she merely mean he'd already given up the swimming? Either way, Connie Lopez showed amazingly little interest in them or their news. Jet lag possibly.

"You knew he was planning to go to Crookneck for a few days?"

"No. I've been away for a month. My partner and I run a shop—she runs it, I do the buying—mainly Mexican stuff but some Hopi and Navajo crafts as well … I knew Bruce went down last year and quite liked it, so I suppose he must've decided to go again. Anyway, what exactly has happened?"

"He flew to Flinders Island on Tuesday, went across to Crookneck, had tea, went out for a walk, and was found drowned in the lagoon that evening. He was brought back to Flinders and because of slightly suspicious circumstances we were called in. He was then brought back to Melbourne—but, so far, attempts to contact his next-of-kin have failed—"

"You mean Owen?"

"Yes."

"Well, he probably wouldn't be much use if you *did* contact him. He's a bit of a wet mess, you know."

"No. We don't know. Perhaps you could explain that a little."

She gave a shred of a laugh. They had carried her bags in for her and were now seated in the front room. There was a very faint film of dust on the polished surfaces.

"Poor Owen, I shouldn't be hard on him—after all, I hardly know him. But he just seemed so pathetic and gloomy and limp-wristed the couple of times I saw him. Still, a family crisis might be just the thing to make him pull himself together and stop feeling sorry for himself."

"Why did he feel sorry for himself?"

"Oh, I don't know if he did really but that's the way he always struck me. He was one of those infant prodigies who never manage to live up to their early promise. Bruce was a bit like that

too. When he was young, every deal he touched just seemed to pour money into his lap. Just luck, I think. It didn't matter whether it looked good or terrible on paper, it just seemed to work for him. I think that's why he couldn't handle it when his last few projects didn't pan out. He'd sort of got into the habit of thinking the world owed it to him. I suspect Owen had something of the same attitude."

"So how did you feel about Bruce?" Pearce wasn't sure whether to admire or dislike her for her cool objectivity.

"Oh, I quite liked him. He was a cheerful old sod most of the time. A bit like a kid who's never quite grown up. All noise and boasting and didn't really take all that much notice of anyone else's finer feelings. But he was quite kind and generous in an offhand sort of way, and he was good to Owen and their mother. That's why I couldn't understand it when those troubles blew up in a couple of his Homes. He really had gone over them with a fine tooth comb to make sure everything was okay. But he wasn't a good judge of people. He couldn't see past the gloss on the outside."

"I understand his mother died?"

"Yes, about a year ago—no, a bit less—say ten months. He was very cut up about it. He blamed himself but I can't honesty see how it could've been his fault and, anyway, she was in her seventies."

"I see. And what sort of arrangement did you have with Bruce—about this house I mean."

She shrugged gracefully. "Bruce asked me to move in—and seeing that I liked the house and it was convenient for me, I said why not? But if you want to know what it was beyond that—well, I occasionally went to bed with him—but not for the fun of it. Poor guy. I felt sorry for him sometimes. He sort of tried too hard to be attractive to women—and he couldn't seem to see that being noisy and 'boyish' and playing practical jokes at forty-five is rather a turn-off. He'd sort of never properly developed beyond the slap-and-tickle mentality. So I just made it clear I wasn't going to be his live-in lover—I had my own life to lead—but I didn't mind going out with him occasionally and running the house—" she spread her slim brown hands with their profusion of curious rings, "—and he accepted that and didn't make a nuisance of himself."

"Thank you for that, Ms Lopez. So you would've known if he had become involved with another woman? Or if he was still seeing someone from the period before he met you?"

"Oh, I would think so. There was never any reason for him to keep anything like that a secret. I think he was a bit of a workaholic in the days when he was getting his business up and running."

"I see. Do you know if he normally took sleeping tablets or anti-depressants?"

"Bruce?" She seemed surprised. "No—or only very rarely, I should say—not to make a song and dance about it, anyway. But you're welcome to look through his bedroom—and I can give you the name of his GP."

"Fine. One more thing. Do you have any ideas where Owen would be likely to go if he wasn't at his flat and hadn't been here?"

"Oh, something to do with writers, I would imagine. A conference or a workshop or a retreat or a festival or something. He's quite shy but also convinced he's a writer with a capital W—so those are about the only things he'd find the courage to go to. He wrote a new book this year and gave it to Bruce to read and Bruce asked me to show the manuscript to a friend of mine who does a lot of reviewing—not telling him who it was by, just asking him for his frank opinion—so I did that."

"And?"

"Oh, Chris said he thought it was a load of crap—some poor sod looking back at the 'innocence' of the sixties through the cynical eyes of the nineties … I toned *that* down a bit when I gave it back to Bruce and I don't know what he told Owen. He liked it himself—but then Bruce was the sort to think Biggles was great literature so I don't know that his views would've been all that much help to poor old Owen."

Frank Pearce rested his notebook while Connie Lopez uncrossed her provocative knees and asked if they would care for coffee. He thought of Lexie's plump knees, her big slow-moving Earth Mother body which belied the quickness of her temper … and he thought back to his boyhood

bookshelf with a kind of nostalgia: Biggles of the Camel Squadron, Biggles in Spain, Biggles and the Cruise of the Condor … and besides Biggles he'd liked the Hardy Boys … and his collection of sea books … he wondered what sort of arty-farty books Connie Lopez liked …

Kim Chadwick declined her offer. "So you didn't care for 'Worn Ratchet'?" he went on cautiously; possibly he'd been reviewing his own bookshelf.

"Oh, but I did! He wrote it straight from his heart, straight from first-hand experience—and it had a wonderful sort of freshness you couldn't help liking. But he couldn't understand it was a one-off thing. I think that was half his trouble."

"Or was it that people wouldn't let him develop in his own way and at his own pace?"

Ms Lopez tossed off a very attractive smile. "You're probably right. It's the same sort of thing you find with people like Helen Garner—a big fuss with their first book—and what do you do as an encore?—oh well, some people never get that one big book, do they?"

This didn't strike Frank Pearce as a very productive conversation; what use would Connie Lopez's opinions on books be to them? But if Bruce really had managed to step into Owen's shoes then he supposed there'd be a lot more bookish conversations lying in wait.

Or was it that Chadwick believed Bruce would eventually come home, in one guise or another, and attempt to resurrect his domestic life; in which case an understanding of Connie and her likely response was useful to have.

It was a nice house. He wouldn't mind living in it himself. Bruce would probably be sorry to give it up; and how would he feel about Connie becoming the virtual de facto owner? While they continued to maintain the fiction that Bruce was dead and stall on the inquest Connie could do pretty well what she liked …

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

They searched Bruce Farnham's bedroom carefully; it had the same bare spruceness his office had exhibited, possibly because he was a naturally tidy person (though, so far, no one had suggested he was) but more likely because he'd known he wouldn't be coming back. At the office his tidying up would've been accepted as a natural corollary to going on holiday (if George Blackburn had left him anything to tidy up) and Connie hadn't been here to ask questions.

There was nothing overt to suggest Owen had spent a couple of days here. The bed was neatly made. There was the faintest film of dust on the bedroom furniture. The pot plants on the upstairs patio were in good heart. There was milk and butter in the frig and a variety of things in the freezer. The house suggested only the briefest hiatus in a normally smooth life.

But if Owen had been the last person to sleep here, his prints should be superimposed on those of Bruce. It would be useful corroboration of their theory but not absolute proof of something premeditated.

There was nothing to suggest either a trip to Crookneck or a trip to anywhere else. There was a wallet with cash and several credit cards in a bedroom drawer. There was a variety of luggage on top of the wardrobe. It was doubtful if Connie could identify which of Bruce's clothes were missing though they would try her on what Owen had been wearing and what had been in his luggage. The memo pad by the bedside phone was brand new. There was nothing beside the phone downstairs. The teledex was full of names and numbers (including the Bradys'). Connie Lopez said they could take it if they wished. She had her own book not yet unpacked.

Bruce's bathroom cabinet yielded nothing but the mildest of medications—Disprin, calamine lotion, Band Aids, throat lozenges.

The study downstairs had looked more hopeful when Connie unlocked it, with the dust more in evidence. But it took them only a few minutes to ascertain that Bruce came here to relax and listen to music, not to work. There was no safe or filing cabinet; the desk drawers offered only a small collection of stationery and some household bills and receipts. It might be that, as well as playing at being grown up, Bruce also played at running a business.

But at the bottom of a cupboard of cassettes and CDs they came upon something more interesting: a flat polished wooden box which opened up to show a neatly-fitted-out blue velvet

interior and dozens of small glass bottles. It looked the sort of thing an old-fashioned chemist might have. Some of the bottles contained liquid, some powder, some only dried brown rings.

"Well, well, well!" Frank hovered over the box with an excitement all the keener for the sedate boredom of the last half hour.

"Yes. We'll take this. It's possible our Bruce has some morphine in here—which would save us the problem of proving possession. And I think we'll seal up this room, his bedroom and his bathroom, till they can do all three. I don't imagine that'll put Ms Lopez to too much inconvenience."

"I don't believe she came in too often when he *was* here," Frank responded with the touchiness of the middle-aged man who sees the collective signs of ageing and wonders when the bell will begin to toll for him; from that moment on, he knows his chief weapons will be his bank balance and the seductiveness of his reminiscing.

Connie met them in a silk dressing-gown and exotic slippers with curved-up toes. "Is there anything more I can do for you before I go and take a snort nap? I didn't get much sleep last night."

They told her what they wanted left untouched and she smiled slightly. "No problem. Is there to be a funeral or an inquest or something for Bruce?"

"There'll be an inquest, probably next week, but I doubt if you'll be required to appear. There's no need for you to worry about it."

"I see. Bruce left a will, didn't he?"

"Yes."

"Do you know if I get the house?"

"Were you expecting to?"

"We-ell, it's not as though *Owen* would want it. Not at all his scene. And there's no one else."

"He left the house to charity." Then he realised he should not have said so.

"Oh shit! Does that mean I'll have to move?"

"Probably not. It'll be months before everything is tidied up. And it's quite possible you could come to some arrangement to buy or lease the house … "

"Fine." She yawned rather ostentatiously. "If you say so. I suppose it *was* suicide—from the cautious way you're talking."

"Does that strike you as unlikely?"

She shrugged. "Not really. His mother committed suicide though he insisted it wasn't. He got a bit morbid afterwards, poor old Bruce."

When they eventually walked out the garden gate into the tree-lined street, Frank said through tight lips, "Pity he didn't murder her."

"Come, come, Frank. That is one beautiful sexy woman. Bruce Farnham just let her walk all over him and, of course, she ended up treating him like dirt—"

Frank looked unconvinced. "Well, if you say so."

"No. That's half the trouble. We're only dealing in probabilities. Though I must admit I was tempted to tell her it might be murder—and watch her reaction. After all, she had more opportunities than anybody else, except Bruce, to tamper with those capsules—"

"Cripes yes! I didn't think of that."

"Hard to see a reason though—unless she could be sure of getting the house. Anyway, let's grab a coffee, then go and see if Owen's harem are a more sympathetic lot."

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The 'Parkview' was elderly brick, a little stained on the facings but neatly kept. Unfortunately, the park had been subsumed under an orgy of brick and concrete since the building had been named in raised letters over the front entrance.

It contained nine serviced flats and the owner, Mrs Priscilla Broome, lived in a couple of large pleasant rooms on the ground floor.

She said she was very sorry but she didn't think she could help them; the police had already asked her about Owen's possible whereabouts and she hadn't been able to tell them much, only that

he'd mentioned at lunchtime on Saturday that he'd probably be away for a few days during the week, but she hadn't asked for any details because she was just getting ready to go to the races.

"He doesn't go out a lot," she went on, when she'd placed them in large engulfing armchairs and hemmed in with several plates of sweet biscuits. "He's a very quiet shy man, you know. But he enjoys going to literary functions—" she said 'literary' with great care as though it was a troublesome foreign word but the only thing to fit this occasion, "and now and then he goes off to somewhere he's thinking of writing about to get some information and things like that. He went up to Mt Buffalo one time for that reason, I remember."

"So he might have gone anywhere?"

"Oh, I don't think he would've gone far, not unless he borrowed some money from Bruce. Bruce was here on Saturday so he might of … this is all very sad about Bruce, you know, and I really don't know how Owen'll handle it. He isn't what you'd call a strong man, by any means."

"Could you tell us when you saw him since Saturday?" Frank was at his most friendly and sympathetic. He had warmed to Mrs Broome; she was a little like Lexie, or as Lexie might be with another twenty mellowing years on the clock. Not a woman to be taken lightly but a fundamental goodness of heart.

"Well, the funny thing was, you know—I didn't see him. I do the rooms on a Thursday—change the bed-linen and vacuum—but normally he'd pop in and say hullo through the week, almost every day in fact, and we'd have a bit of a chat. But he had his sign on his door 'Do Not Disturb' so I thought he must be wanting to get some work done on a book before he went away."

"Did he talk much about his writing?"

"Oh yes, quite a lot. And if he didn't say anything I'd ask him." Mrs Broome leant forward. "That man is a genius, you know, and I'm not exaggerating. Sometimes he'd bring down something he was working on and he'd read it to Polly and me—and sometimes he'd have us in tears and sometimes we'd be laughing that much we'd just about be falling off our chairs—I just don't know how he did it … but his publishers didn't seem to appreciate him … maybe it was him reading his stuff that made the difference, I wouldn't know … they'd usually end up taking his books but they didn't pay him hardly anything at all. I know he only made two thousand dollars from his last book and that's not much for a year's work, is it now?"

"How did he manage to live then?" They had slipped naturally into the past tense but Mrs Broome didn't seem to notice the shift.

She pursed her generous lips. "He does a few articles for the magazines, not popular magazines like you and I'd read, but fancy ones—and sometimes he gets paid for reading in public but he doesn't like doing it, he gets that scared when he's up in front of a lot of people—and, as I say, Bruce'd give him money to see him through … I really don't know how he'll manage now with Bruce gone, I honestly don't."

"How well did you know Bruce?"

"Oh, he'd come in and have a cuppa sometimes. I liked him. He reminded me a bit of Lennie—" she pointed to a photo in a silver frame on a small nest of tables, "though I'd say he worked harder than Lennie ever did. You know, Lennie bought this place for us to live off—but *I* ended up doing all the work and *he* ended up spending everything I made."

Mrs Broome was well-built and solid but Mr Broome appeared to have been better-built and solider; and Mrs Broome had grown up in an era when husbands didn't automatically take kindly to a wife's desire for financial independence.

She stood up suddenly and with surprisingly little effort. "There's Polly now! Would you like to talk to her?"

They agreed and she bustled out, to return a minute later with a small woman whose hennaed hair showed grey at the roots. Polly Eyre, however, had that rare quality which makes physical appearance a thing of little importance. Her dress was of red and grey stripes; over it she wore a brown cardigan done up in the wrong buttonholes; her legs were bare and showed varicose veins; on her feet were fluffy pink slippers. She had an attractive husky voice which carried effortlessly.

After she'd been introduced she perched on a small tapestry-covered chair, probably because she'd be lost in one of her landlady's substantial armchairs.

"Have you heard from Owen?" she said immediately.

"No. We're hoping you can give us a lead to his whereabouts?"

For the first time in this investigation Chadwick felt he was being mean and underhand. These two old ladies deserved to know the truth about Owen. But he repressed the desire to tell them. Owen had been given a bottle of lethal tablets.

"It's very mysterious," Polly clasped small hands together. "I can't remember him ever going off without telling me *where* he was going or *when* he'd be back—and I can't remember him ever going without saying goodbye—and he would always send me a letter or a postcard. It's very strange. You don't think something can have happened to him, do you?"

"It's a possibility we can't rule out, I'm afraid, Miss Eyre." Chadwick felt this was the only preparation he could give them. "The news about Bruce has been in the Victorian papers and we've put out a 'please contact' message. It'll be extended to the other states tomorrow."

"But Owen *is* rather vague, Mr Chadwick. You don't know him the way I do. When he's working on a book he just goes round in a dream. He mightn't even think of eating—and he *certainly* wouldn't buy a paper or listen to the radio. Anyway, he didn't normally get a paper. I would give him mine when I'd read it—or he might go to the library if he wanted to read a different paper … "

"I see. Then we must hope someone will draw it to his attention."

"Yes—but *they* might think he knew already and so they wouldn't bother to mention it—"

Polly seemed determined to convince them (and probably herself) that Owen was safe and well and merely out of circulation for a short while.

"Well, there's no point in rushing to meet trouble, that's what I always say," Mrs Broome remarked as she passed the biscuits to Polly; but the small woman waved them away and kept her anxious eyes on Chadwick.

"Could you tell us if you saw Mr Farnham between Saturday and when you saw him going downstairs on Tuesday morning?"

"I didn't see him. That's what I can't understand. Even when he was very busy with a book I'd still see him every day. Even if it was quite late he'd pop across and just tap to see if I was still awake, and if I was, which I usually was, he'd come in for a little while … I should've called out when I saw him going down the stairs on Tuesday morning but I thought he was just taking his things down and then he'd come back up to say goodbye—I suppose he found his taxi already waiting, though he didn't normally take taxis, and so he felt he shouldn't take the time to come back up. I went and looked out my window but he'd already gone … "

"Did you ever go into his room—I mean to chat or have a cup of tea?"

"Oh yes! Lots of times. And sometimes he'd come down here and sit with us—and maybe Emmy Wilson might come in too. She's at work now, she helps her daughter in her little business."

"And did you like Owen's books?"

"Oh yes, I did. I've got signed copies of all of them. So has Prissie—"

"Yes." Mrs Broome helped herself to another biscuit, "but now that I think about it, love, I wasn't all that fussed on that one about the spies. I don't like to think there's people like that wandering about out there—"

"No-o … no, I didn't either. But it *was* very cleverly written, didn't you think?"

Chadwick intervened without fuss. "Thank you. Now, if you can let us see his room—and we'd appreciate it if you'd both come up and tell us what you think he's taken with him."

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

Owen Farnham's room was big and airy with a desk and divan-bed, a tiny kitchenette, and a view over the 'Parkview's' backyard with its communal hoists and row of rubbish bins. The five upstairs flats shared two bathrooms at the end of a corridor carpeted in worn ecclesiastical red.

"Was this his normal tidiness?"

"He was *reasonably* tidy," Mrs Broome said judicially. "He appears to have taken both his finished book and the one he'd just started on a few weeks ago. He mightn't have taken the other

one though. He might've given it to Mr Bauermeister when he came a few days ago. I only saw him leaving, mind you—and I wouldn't be sure now if it was Monday or Tuesday he came … "

"He says it was Tuesday."

"Then it must be, mustn't it?"

"Probably. Now what about clothes?"

"He was wearing his fawn suit," Polly said. "I think it was his only suit. Usually he wore jeans and a shirt or maybe a pullover. He liked wearing fawns and browns." She went over to the cupboard and began working methodically through the hangers and drawers. "I'm not perfectly sure, but I think he's taken two pairs of slacks and his cream pullover."

"Fine. Any idea about shoes?"

She rummaged in the bottom of his cupboard. "He doesn't seem to have taken anything, only his black shoes—and I'm fairly sure he was wearing them."

This made sense. If Bruce took a 10½ he wouldn't have wanted Owen's shoes.

"Do you know if he took any medication?"

"His brother used to give him things sometimes. He'd been a chemist before he went into real estate. But I can't tell you what it was he used to give him, just sleeping tablets."

"I see. What about bathers and things? Did Owen ever go swimming with Bruce?"

The two women looked at each other. "No." Mrs Broome sounded quite definite. "He thought Bruce was crazy the way he used to go swimming in the cold water. I never remember his saying he was going swimming, he'd just go for a bit of a walk maybe, round the block or down to the shops or something … "

There was a telephone on the desk, along with a large manual typewriter and an unopened packet of typing paper. But Owen, it appeared from his top drawer, had taken his messages on scraps of paper, the backs of envelopes and suchlike, and if he owned anything more businesslike it must have gone with him. Or with Bruce. On top of the typewriter Mrs Broome had placed Mr Bauermeister's message which said simply: 'Ring me. Good news. LB.'

"Did he do all his work on this typewriter?"

"Up until this year. Then Bruce got him a little sort of computer, just a little thing you could easily carry round with you. He must've taken it with him."

Frank went through the kitchenette which was tidy and almost bare of food except for a few spices and condiments; possibly Owen ate as simply as he lived; possibly the women in his life made sure he didn't starve himself; possibly he nipped along to the take-away on the corner.

The bottom drawer of his bureau revealed folders of manuscripts, rather than clothes, and his bookshelf contained mostly modern Australian fiction in paperback. There was no television, radio, hi-fi, or video.

"How did he amuse himself when he wasn't writing?"

"He'd come and watch TV with me sometimes." Polly had followed their movements with a kind of touching hope; as though, sooner or later, they must give her a clue to Owen's whereabouts. "But he had a little transistor, he must've taken it with him."

They could find nothing of obvious help, but slipped Owen's jotted notes and phone numbers into an envelope for checking and explained to Mrs Broome that the room would need to be left locked and untouched for another week. By that time, with luck and hard work, Owen Farnham could be laid to rest with all due respects.

Polly Eyre showed them her room—which was an exotic dazzle of wall-hangings, cushions, watercolours, theatre posters, unusual candles, and soft toys—and pointed to a comfortable chair. "He would wander in any old time and sit down there, when he wasn't writing, just as though this was his second home … I used to be on the stage," she added wistfully, "and he never tired of hearing me talk about it. Do you know, they were still asking me to play child characters when I was *forty!* Just fancy! He was going to put me in a book."

"Were you pleased with the idea?"

"Of course! Wouldn't you like to be in a book? I said if I died before it was finished, he was to go through all my things and take whatever he could use, or that he would like to have. I've got

lots and lots of old photos and theatre programs and reviews of plays that everyone's forgotten about now—"

In fact, in a few more years, she might be crowded out of her rooms by the accumulation of things; yet, undoubtedly, she would rather have Owen than his antique ink-well, which they'd seen wrapped in tissue-paper in one of his drawers.

They refused a cup of tea and went downstairs with Mrs Broome, leaving Polly watching after them with a sad expression. Would the police come twice and ask so many questions if it was *only* a matter of contacting Owen? No, they must believe that something had happened to him. She shut her door and took out her one bottle of sherry and poured a glass but even that failed to raise her spirits.

"What do you reckon was going on between Owen and Polly?" Frank speculated as they went out into the increasingly dour day.

"Oh, he went to bed with her. You could see it in her face."

"But—surely not! She must be twenty years older than him."

"More, probably. But, speaking personally, I think it shows his good sense … I imagine the trouble was—he was afraid people and especially Bruce would react as you just did—and so he went to pains to keep it a secret. It probably never occurred to Bruce to give the old dear a wave or pop a note under her door or whatever. And I wonder if Owen was planning to send her a postcard from Crookneck? You know the ones of the lake they had for sale in the bar?"

"I s'pose he would've. If he'd lived long enough."

The brief silence which fell had a slightly grim quality to it.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

Chadwick and Pearce had a canteen lunch with Tony Nichols and two of his colleagues and brought them up to date with their morning before going to Nichols' office where they were joined by O'Dowd and two other detectives. Frustrating as it might be, Kim Chadwick knew he couldn't justify them staying any longer in Melbourne.

Nichols, by reason of his seniority, took charge and moved smoothly through his agenda. Dorothy Gotz was away in Wodonga till Sunday. He would talk to her early next week. He would check the meaning of 'Lapton'. He agreed with Chadwick that all deaths at the Homes should be checked both for the nature of the deaths themselves and in regard to the beneficiaries. He put the death of Mrs Farnham at the top of a potential list and marked it 'Query—Suicide?'

"I agree with what you're saying about her. It's quite possible she was seen by someone as a nuisance, a spy. But, in general, I suspect it's not how people died but whether they left their money to Farnham Holdings, or the individual Home, or to someone in the company—Farnham or Blackburn or staff at one of the Homes. I've seen it happen and while I don't object in principle—if you've been happy and well-cared-for in a particular place there's no reason why the management or staff shouldn't be mentioned in your will—it's very open to abuse. It's only a small step for it to start preying on old people who're lonely and perhaps feeling neglected by their families. Or they may not know how to go about making a will or they may not be able to decide how to leave their possessions … or it may be done in a less obvious way—say they don't want their family to benefit, or only in a minor way, the Home may suggest they tack on a little to their normal fees so as to provide a weekly outing or some special food … I was involved in a case like that not long ago—the old woman concerned was visited regularly by her daughter but ten minutes after she'd been the old woman would've forgotten all about it and would complain that no one ever came to see her. The manager suggested putting up what she was paying so he could arrange for her to have an outing each week. Of course she forgot all about the promised outings—and the whole thing would never have come out if he hadn't got more greedy … you know, there's times when I feel more sympathy with the young yobs we pull in off the street—no jobs, no skills, no experience, no self-esteem—I'd like to see every kid guaranteed at least two years work when they come out of school—"

He caught O'Dowd's eye. "Sorry, Ron, getting carried away on my latest hobbyhorse. Comes of having teenagers at home. But, you know, I'd say about ninety per cent of the people we see in our line of work are already doing very nicely, thankyou! They could've done without a Porsche or a Club Med holiday or a bigger house or a racehorse or whatever—but they had to keep up with the Joneses—and the bloody Joneses are doing the same to keep up with them—"

"You're thinking of Blackburn?"

"For starters, yes. I think the girl was right when she suggested to you that Blackburn was gradually working Farnham into the position of figurehead—and I suspect Farnham had finally realized what was happening and either didn't know how to get control back into his own hands—without admitting he'd been played for a dummy—or he'd simply stopped caring about the company. But I think the point is, or at least it was, that Blackburn wanted to be the power behind the throne, not sit in the throne himself."

"I agree." Chadwick leafed back through his notebook. "But I'd suggest you look for a connection between Blackburn and Charles Allcott. I'm sorry, I can only call it a hunch at this stage, but I think it might be worth finding out whether they're related."

"Right. Thanks for that. Another thing I want to follow up is that television exposé last year—who tipped them off, exactly who did they interview, what happened to the sacked manager. My feeling is that, if the Homes were seen by Blackburn as things to be milked, then it may have been a blind. Make Farnham feel embarrassed, isolated, that he's losing touch with everything—and at the same time you put in a new man, the food appears to be better, there's a general feeling of a new broom at work, people's suspicions are laid to rest—but the real issue has never been touched and now it's far less likely to be with everyone convinced the place is squeaky-clean and above-board."

"But you think Blackburn wasn't content with what he could siphon off—that he started to want the company?"

"It's possible—given the way Bruce appeared to cave in as soon as things started going wrong last year. If he could keep walking that very careful line between keeping the company healthy and convincing Bruce it was only time before it went down the gurgler—I think he would've made it eventually." Tony Nichols put on a sardonic grin. "But not even Blackburn could've forseen Bruce and Owen swopping places. Our George may be in for a nasty shock one day—but I still don't see us ever pinning anything on him, to be quite frank."

"The Health Department business—how would that fit in?" Pearce was used to a slightly disparaging attitude towards himself by some of his colleagues; he therefore liked Tony Nichols for his cool impartiality and he suspected the grudging liking he had developed for Kim Chadwick had a similar motivation.

"We may find Blackburn just got greedy. Wanted a better car. Found himself an expensive girlfriend. On the other hand it might be a clever way of moving assets round inside the company. I talked to John Rowe there this morning and he said it's true they're coming down like a ton of bricks now, but he couldn't remember any of Farnham's places being bad—an extra fire extinguisher, some non-slip material on a staircase, small things—but he's going to haul out everything he can find ready for me tomorrow—oh, by the way, the girl in Farnham's office gave us the photocopies you asked for. Thanks. It's probably too unsophisticated for a Blackburn but it's been done successfully before now."

They finally came to the vexed question of the inquest on Owen Farnham. How long could they hope to hold off?

"It's a tricky one, isn't it?" Nichols sat back. "So many ifs and buts and maybes and precious little solid evidence. I'm damn glad the final decision isn't mine. Still with luck we'll have Bruce by the heels before the coroner gets restive or someone smells a rat and starts publicly demanding to know why we're going round calling Owen, Bruce—or Bruce, Owen."

The wooden box of bottles had yielded only one person's prints—which didn't completely rule out Connie removing something, cleaning it, and Bruce opening it later—and had now gone to the laboratory to have its contents tested.

To all intents and purposes the case had become Melbourne's—and probably a case of weeks of patient mundane work at that—but both Chadwick and Pearce felt the sense of anti-climax which comes from having to take a back seat after spending days thinking of little but a particular case.

They took the late afternoon flight to Launceston for a chilly homecoming. The wind sighed off the early snow on Ben Lomond and Chadwick shivered as he stood beside the luggage and waited for Frank to bring his car from the carpark.

The first buds on the gorse were almost ready to burst but the day remained dour and grey as they took the ten minute run into Launceston.

It was strange, Frank mused as he drove, that a middle-aged man like Chadwick should still be riding an ex-police-BMW … he couldn't imagine himself asking Lexie to ride pillion …

"I'll be bloody glad to be home—"

"With Lexie waiting?" Chadwick smiled slightly.

Frank looked sheepish. "She said she'd pop in. Don't knock it, mate. Almost anything beats coming home to an empty house—"

"Maybe."

# PART THREE
## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

On the flight home Chadwick and Pearce had made notes of the areas which they felt would warrant further investigation, checking, and cross-checking. Even so, they were left with the kind of frustrated feeling a driver experiences when a road shown on a map proves to be a mere track and peters out into mud and ruts.

Not that there was time to bemoan their lack of action in regard to Bruce Farnham; they found themselves busy with an arson case and could only ponder on the man's whereabouts at odd times.

"Unless, of course, the bloke decides to come south rather than north," Frank said in one of these moments, though without conviction.

"Give him time." Chadwick looked up from a couple of insurance forms; there was nothing about him to suggest facetiousness.

"You mean, you think he *will?*"

"Well, he's been north. Now it's time for him to come south." Chadwick gave his rare and unexpected grin. "Sorry, Frank—didn't mean to hold out on you. This came in a few minutes ago while you were out. Their New South Wales message has finally brought forward two people who say they had contact with Owen. It seems he arrived in Sydney late Tuesday morning, went out to visit a publisher Owen had met about a year before—dropped a manuscript on his desk and said he was going on up to a place in Katoomba called 'Varuna' which I've just learnt is a writers' centre run by a thing called the Eleanor Dark Foundation where you can pay to go and have some peace and quiet while you work on your book—"

"So you were right—on where to look."

Chadwick pulled a face. "The devil of it is—Bruce had it right there in his damn teledex under E.D. Varuna—but because he hadn't put in an area code I assumed it must be a Melbourne number and couldn't fit it to anyone by the name of Varuna! Then I realized the number was too short to be a metropolitan number so I whipped through all the country directories just in case."

Frank grinned. "Can't win 'em all. So what did Bruce do there?"

"He arrived there Tuesday evening, had dinner but apparently made no effort to talk to the other guests, all next day he kept to himself, the following morning he said he needed to go into Sydney to see someone. One of the other guests was leaving and offered to drive him down. He took all his stuff and asked to be dropped at the North Annandale pub as they drove through. The guest then went on to Ultimo and thought no more about it except to wonder why Farnham had brought all his luggage with him despite the fact he'd said he only wanted to spend a couple of hours there."

Frank sat down. "Didn't trust the people at Varuna maybe?"

"It sounds more as though Varuna was a false trail. Sydney made enquiries at both places but haven't got anything much. Farnham had paid for a week at Varuna but took everything and left no forwarding address—nor did he ask for a refund. He slept one night at the pub, walked in the direction of Parramatta Road next morning, and hasn't been seen since."

"So what makes you think he's coming south? He could be heading for Cooktown or Perth."

"He could. He could be heading for the moon with NASA for that matter. But as we've worked our way through this business I've had the feeling more and more strongly that it was a spur-of-the-moment crime despite the appearance of careful organization—that *Bruce* was planning to suicide on Crookneck—and after a conversation with Owen he suddenly changed his mind—what if Owen were to take his place and die? Maybe he thought 'I'll be safe enough as Owen and even if the company's in a mess it doesn't matter, we can have the fun of playing each other for a little while' … though it doesn't really make sense, not if he was genuinely fond of Owen, but I doubt whether he'd ever thought through the implications. I think something happened to push him to the brink. All he wanted was to get those sharks off his back somehow. Most likely he'd found out they were diddling him but had no hard evidence, all he could see was the possibility of his name being dragged further into the mud. But he couldn't make sense of what was happening because he went on trusting Charles Allcott—"

"Of course! Allcott!" Pearce exclaimed as though a shower of solutions had fallen at his feet. "You really think Allcott's the snake in the grass?"

"Allcott and Blackburn. Maybe others. But I haven't got any hard evidence either. But it never rang true, you know, that statement by Allcott when he implied Farnham Holdings was small beer. Small beer to Price Waterhouse maybe but not to Allcott and company. Strange really, when you think about it. You and me, we'd say Farnham had made it, so would most people, but he chose the wrong people to judge his achievement … maybe you could say the same thing for Owen … "

"Those wills struck me as pretty odd."

"Hmm. I wonder if Bruce trusted Bauermeister to do the right thing by his brother?"

"Dunno. Did Bruce transfer anything to Owen since last year, did Nichols find out?"

"Yes. They've dug up a portfolio of shares in Owen's name. Bruce had been quietly buying them in Owen's name for about five years through a small company, Warne and Harker, whose services he apparently used for that and nothing else. Not enough to live on but quite a nice little nest egg. I guess he hoped to make Owen independent of him eventually, without making it look too much like charity."

"So the Brotherhood will get that but they'll have to wait for Bruce's house? Or will they have to wait for Owen's money until we find Bruce?"

"Or Bruce finds us."

This took a bit of digesting.

"I know people *do* walk in—not often enough to make life simple—but you really think Farnham's the sort?"

"I do. And I've made damn sure the two women who genuinely liked him know how to contact us—"

"Not that Connie bird surely? She struck me as being about as sympathetic as a devil in a bloody chookyard!"

"No, not Connie. Think, Frank."

"Clare Brady for one? Not that botany student, what was her name?"

"No, she never met Bruce. The only other woman who was upset at the idea of Bruce being dead was the girl in his office—"

"Kristina? Yeah, I was forgetting her … so now we wait and see what turns up, eh?"

"Yes, mate," Chadwick returned drily, "with our thumbs twiddled and our feet up on our desks—"

Frank treated this levity to his throaty chuckle.

But Chadwick, as he rode home to the house he was renting for six months in Trevallyn (while its owner was away on long service leave), felt nothing but doubts. It was easy enough to express confidence in his hunch to Frank, he thought somberly as he put the bike inside the front

gate, removed his helmet, and unlocked the front door, but who was he to claim he understood Bruce Farnham better than anyone else?

The house was silent—'coming home to an empty house'—though there was noise from the highway and he liked his view of the Tamar. He poured himself a glass of juice and put some vegetables by the chopping board but he couldn't summon up any enthusiasm to cook and eat a solitary meal. Later perhaps. He took down an old overcoat and went out again, locking the door behind him. He would walk back and take the Gorge path for a short stroll.

The water foaming down was flurried and brown; the strange rocky dry side of the Gorge was grim and unattractive this evening with low cloud almost touching the hilltop. It would rain soon—again—he thought morosely as he made his way up the deserted path. At the top, when he reached it, the golden ash was leafless, the tearooms closed, but he stood a while. He felt no pleasure in his own company though he wasn't a gregarious person and could think of no one he wished to be with.

The previous evening he'd accepted an invitation to have dinner with Frank and Lexie. A strange couple, a strange relationship, he mused now. The dinner had not been well-cooked, the house looked as though a small cyclone had been through recently, yet he hadn't been bothered by it—which surprised him.

Frank, he felt, should be peacefully married with the sort of sensible kids who choose to be hotel cooks or refrigeration mechanics—and, instead, there was this uneasy vibrating *thing* he shared with that big noisy engulfing opinionated overwhelming woman.

Perhaps, after all, he was wise. Life would never go stale for Frank.

Chadwick turned and began to retrace his steps beneath the damp overhanging ferns. Whether he wanted to or not he found himself remembering the last miserable months he'd spent with Kath when their abuse, for all its apparent control, had gained the ability to depress him utterly.

He blamed the time when she'd begun doing a social work course; suddenly, or so it seemed, cops were enemies of society, enemies of the poor, the unfortunate, the down-trodden—and events had played into her hands: the Gilewicz enquiry, harassment of a Hmong family, Black Deaths, rumours about corruption in the Northern Drug Bureau … he was on the side of the devil …

There weren't any simple responses. If all that seven years together had meant was this then it didn't seem worth trying to patch things up. The cracks were too big.

Kath had walked out of their Rosetta home and moved in with someone else. It was possible she had been trying to subvert an inconvenient sense of guilt. But he realized now he no longer cared what her reasons had been.

The delicacy of the fine drizzle on his face had gradually changed to something more definite. He was reluctant to hurry home but, imperceptibly, his strides lengthened.

Was Bruce Farnham feeling this particular kind of loneliness? Did he feel he'd blocked off the avenues which might have allowed him to return to normal life? Was he regretting the choices he'd made, possibly disastrously impulsive choices? Did he know Owen was dead? Was he burdened by the feeling of failure and despair?

If his assessment of Bruce Farnham was even partly correct than he suspected that a time would come when Bruce would see no other choice than to walk in and give himself up.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Chadwick had only been at his desk ten minutes the next morning when a fax labeled 'urgent' was handed to him. He read it carefully, then handed it to Pearce.

"A good hunch," Frank said as he laid it down again. "You linked those two."

"More than a hunch. They both had very small low-set ears. Still, this doesn't tell us whether Charlie Allcott felt responsible for his illegitimate son—or whether Blackburn might also have been putting the squeeze on his respectable papa—not that that's very likely these days—"

"Maybe it was a case of 'great minds think alike'?"

"Possible. I imagine they both knew Bruce well enough to see that he would be genuinely distressed by any suggestion of malpractice in his Homes—and that he wasn't devious enough to see how he was being manipulated and milked—that's if our suppositions are borne out … "

"Anything more from Nichols?"

"A meeting with Dorothy Gotz. She told him she was sure Blackburn's campaign of fault-finding was deliberate. At the time she says she believed it was a case of personality clashes or possibly that Blackburn was simply looking for someone younger and prettier—and that she wasn't offered the chance to work full-time because Blackburn was keen to get her out of the office. But as she can't prove any of this your guess as to his reason is as good as mine." Chadwick shrugged. "But Nichols is going to ask Blackburn for his version."

That was the trouble. More guesses. No proof. And the knowledge that the bulk of white collar crimes get dumped for lack of evidence. Chadwick reluctantly set the case aside again; and there it remained for several more days.

Then he had an unexpected phone call from Clare Brady who said she'd just received a call from a man who said he was Owen Farnham. She had given him Chadwick's number and said he should contact him for the latest on Bruce Farnham. He had said he would do that.

"Could you repeat the conversation as you remember it, Mrs Brady?"

"Yes. Sort of. He just said he was Bruce's brother, Owen, and that he was sorry I'd had all that worry over Bruce's accident—"

Chadwick was scribbling as she spoke. "He referred specifically to you rather than your family?"

"Well, I *think* that's what he meant. He said you and I felt it referred to me personally."

"Yes. Go on."

"He said it must've been a nasty shock for me and I said yes, it had been, and then he asked whether Bruce's things were still there and I said, 'No, the police had taken everything' and he said he thought that might've happened—and then I asked him if he knew what had happened to Bruce for him to—you know—and he said he didn't know for sure but he knew Bruce had been pretty upset, you know, because some people had been slandering him and he couldn't see how to clear his name—and then he asked whether we'd been left out of pocket and I said, no, because he'd paid for the week when he booked to come to us—"

"Did that strike you as unusual at the time?"

"A little bit. But it's what he did before he came down in November and he just said then it was easier to get the girl in his office to do it all so he needn't be thinking of such details himself."

"I see. Did he say anything else?"

"Not really. He just sort of apologized again—and that was when I said he should talk to you—and he said he would and he thanked me and hung up."

"Did he sound normal, do you think? Not rushed or as though he'd been drinking?"

"Not—no, not in that way. There was rather a lot of traffic noise but he didn't say where he was ringing from. It was obviously a public phone as I could hear him dropping coins … and I *think* the sound in the background might've been something on the river, a boat, a tug maybe … But part of the reason why I wanted to contact you was that I feel sure now that the man who came here and drowned wasn't Bruce. It was Bruce on the phone just now. I know that must sound crazy—but I can see now why I thought Bruce must've been ill—I thought it was the weight loss which had made me think that—but now I can see it was because his voice wasn't strong enough—it was sort of lighter, less firm, you know, sort of lacking in resonance. As soon as I heard him on the phone it struck me—then I started thinking of other little things … "

Her confidence seemed to fade and her voice trail off; as though she felt sure he couldn't take kindly to seeing a nearly-wrapped up case being unravelled again.

He could see no reason for keeping her in the dark. "You're quite right, Mrs Brady. It was Owen Farnham who drowned in the lake."

She sighed audibly. "And—do you know why?"

"At the moment that's still the sixty-four dollar question, so we would appreciate it if you would maintain the view, for the time being, that Bruce drowned and Owen rang you up, if you wouldn't mind."

"Yes. Yes, of course."

He felt there was something more on her mind, something she'd like to say; and he suddenly felt a warmth towards her which, in the public bustle surrounding him, had to be suppressed.

In a slightly different voice she said, "I mustn't keep you. I'm sure you must be busy."

"Yes, I'm afraid so. But your call is the best news I've had all day. Thank you."

She rang off but he sat there for a minute or two simply staring at his notes. The moment of foolishness passed. Though he still felt he would've liked to offer some kind of reassurance, he wasn't sure what.

He returned to the business in hand. It sounded very much as though Farnham was ringing from Devonport. Did that mean he'd just arrived on the 'Abel Tasman'? It seemed a strong possibility. They knew he had flown to Sydney as Owen. Was he still using his brother's name? If not, it shouldn't be too hard to find what name he'd used to book his ticket over; given that the booking must've been a last-minute-one and paid for in cash.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Kim Chadwick had divested himself of his leather jacket next morning when Constable Jarvis came up to him with a message. Though he'd convinced himself that Launceston had more sun and less bustle than Hobart, riding through the cold rain this morning had made him seriously consider exchanging the bike for a car; less intimate, less exciting, and cars reminded him of wives … no, he thought he'd rather ride through three months of non-stop rain …

"What is it?"

"There's a man just come in asking for you. He says his name's Owen Farnham. I've put him in the interview room."

The information acted on Chadwick like an electric prod on a reluctant beast.

"Is Pearce in? If he is, ask him to join me."

Chadwick, now that the goose plump or not had come to the fox, found himself feeling an odd sense of regret. Whatever Farnham had or hadn't done it was still the end of the line for him.

He went in quietly and said to the man sitting slumped in a chair: "Mr Farnham? Mr Owen Farnham?"

"Yes."

"No. I think you'll find Owen Farnham is dead and waiting to be buried. So what information you can give us about that death will help determine your future. Still, don't get me wrong. We appreciate you coming in here of your own free will."

The man made no response to this. Chadwick thought 'No harm to let him stew a minute—though he wouldn't be here if he hadn't done a fair bit of stewing already', as he turned back to the door to see if there was any sign of Frank coming.

He caught the movement out of the corner of his eye: the furtive hand to the coat pocket, something into his mouth, a sideways glance towards the door. Chadwick reacted without stopping to think. "Get a doctor! Fast!" he bellowed down the corridor. Then he was beside Farnham in two strides. The man had dropped his head back into his hands as though he felt it was safer there.

Chadwick grabbed him by the hair, the incongruous black-dyed hair, and yanked his head up and thrust two fingers into the man's open mouth. Farnham's eyes bulged in a complexity of horror and astonishment and outrage.

Then he leant sideways and vonitted on the floor. Pearce, arriving at the door, was met by the startling sight of his austere senior grasping an unknown man by the hair and dispassionately watching him retch.

Chadwick looked up and shot him a rueful look. "Take a seat, Frank. This is Mr Bruce Farnham. I'll just get him a glass of water."

Pearce sat down obediently and gazed at the stranger with undisguised curiosity. Farnham closed his eyes under the close scrutiny then he opened them again and began, with pathetic dignity, to wipe his mouth with a handkerchief and smooth his hair down.

"It wasn't what that bloke thought it was," he said wearily. "I didn't come all the way down here to kark it, you know."

"Didn't you?" Frank showed no sympathy. "But you can't expect us to know that when you wanted everyone to think you'd gone to kark it on Crookneck."

"If you say so." Farnham sat and looked at his knees in the fawn suit.

Chadwick came back with the water and handed it over, saying, "You might care to move your chair along, Mr Farnham. Someone will be in in a minute to clean up. Constable Pearce will check your pockets. Do you have any objection to being taped, Mr Farnham?"

"No."

While Chadwick fiddled, unnecessarily, with the machine and someone came with a mop and bucket, Pearce went through Farnham's pockets; all the while fascinated by Farnham's dyed hair, dyed eyebrows, dyed eyelashes. The effect of the black against the creamy brown skin was definitely theatrical, he decided, yet not entirely unnatural; with the right clothes and the right background it might even have gone without comment.

But Bruce Farnham looked like a businessman gone to seed and his disguise, far from giving him the confidence of anonymity, seemed to have fuelled a sense of uneasy self-consciousness. He reminded Frank of other men he'd met who boasted of running their business 'by the seat of their pants' but were proud of running an independent and successful small business, proud of belonging to the Chamber of Commerce and rubbing shoulders with the big boys—yet were ill-at-ease when faced with bright young computer-literate professionals.

"What did you take?" Pearce removed a screw of foil from Farnham's pocket, along with an old envelope on which had been jotted Chadwick's name and number.

"Only a soluble headache tablet. I had two beers in my room. I shouldn't have."

"All right then." Chadwick sounded crisp and unfriendly. "We'll begin at the beginning. Your name?"

There was a brief hesitation. "Bruce Robertson Farnham."

Once they had that essential admission they had no difficulty leading him through address, age, occupation, name of solicitor, and whether he wanted them to call someone local in lieu of Adrian Grant.

Farnham shook his head. "No, it doesn't matter. However you say Owen died, I still killed him. There's no point in trying to make excuses."

No. And it would probably come down to the simple but possibly unresolvable question of whether Owen had been given those tablets on purpose or by accident.

"Then it would be best if you went right back to where the idea of suicide began."

"That's not easy, you know."

Farnham sat in gloomy silence for a minute or two as though running a lifetime through in 'fast forward'.

"It began with our mother, I suppose. She was diagnosed as being manic depressive when I was about ten and Owen was only a little boy. Her first husband, my father, died. Her second husband left her. But her neighbours, our neighbours, were good to her. We lived in Omeo then. She had no near relatives and her parents were dead but she managed quite well. When she was 'up' she was sweet and a bit sort of fey, you might say, and it was impossible not to love her—and when she was 'down' she was always morbidly obsessed with suicide—what it would be like, whether it was true God got angry with suicides, things like that … " He took a sip of water.

"Of course, people assumed she was planning suicide because of this sort of fascination but now I think the thing which always held her back was the fact she had two young children dependent on her—and, as we grew up, I think we started to believe that the only thing which was sure to bring her back from the brink was her belief in our dependence. So—when I was about eighteen and wanting to get away from Omeo—Owen and I made a sort of pact, I suppose you might call it. We agreed that we would always arrange our lives in such a way that she could go on

believing that. I don't suppose it was good for Owen and it meant that instead of going away to study pharmacy the way I'd wanted to, I got a job as a chemist's assistant in town and just learnt what I could … and so it went along like that until she suddenly got the idea we were too bright to keep away out there in the country, that she should take us to Melbourne."

He took a mouthful of water as his voice was growing more and more scratchy, swilled it carefully, then swallowed.

"I couldn't get into the course I wanted so I got a job with a real estate agency which I quite liked and Owen who was in his last year of high school started writing his book … well, you've probably heard what happened then?"

"We'd like you to tell us."

"Yes, well, it was an extraordinary success. Amazing. It took us all by surprise. Owen was a very shy lad … and, of course, I was terrified that Mum would decide Owen no longer needed her. In a way she did. She was too intelligent not to understand what the book might mean for his career—but I set up our lives in such a way she could still believe she was our refuge, that we needed her to keep us safe from all the pressures of the rat race—and certainly that was true of Owen. He was too young and too insecure to handle all the hype that was suddenly being built up around him. He would get so nervous before an interview it would often make him physically ill … well, I don't know if any of that is relevant … " He put his head briefly back into his hands.

Despite this, Frank felt that Bruce Farnham probably would have been very persuasive when talking to a potential customer; perhaps it had something to do with the odd kind of naivete he projected, which hadn't impressed Connie Lopez but which might well have appealed to a woman like Clare Brady.

Farnham straightened up again. "I gradually realized I was keeping Mum on a fairly even keel by sacrificing Owen—and so I thought maybe if one or both of us got married it would bring in someone else, someone who would be less emotionally involved, that she could see as needing her. But she couldn't bear the idea. I only had to mention that I'd like to bring a friend home or something like that and she'd go to pieces … "

He shrugged. "I don't suppose you want to hear this … and I'm blowed if I know myself what's important and what isn't any more … but, anyway, we had this sort of home life right up till about five years ago when I bought LazyDays and managed to persuade Mum to move in. She hated it of course—and that made me feel a right bastard, telling her all these lies about how I needed her there to keep an eye on how it was being run … though, as a matter of fact, she quite got to like that sort of role after a while … anyway, Owen moved into a small flat and I bought the house in St Kilda and things seemed to be a bit better."

One moment Farnham was talking reasonably briskly, the next he seemed to have fallen back into a physical and mental slump. Chadwick sat back and observed him, not unkindly, and was reminded of a piece of driftwood at the mercy of a power greater than itself.

"I don't know why it didn't," he went on slowly. "Nothing seemed to work out for Owen either. That agent he'd got was always at him trying to get him to do some sort of soapie stuff—but I'd say to him, to Owen I mean, just write what you like writing and maybe you'll hit the jackpot again. I didn't know if this was realistic, I don't know much about writing. But he came to me about six months ago—no, less than that—four maybe—and said he'd written a new book and he'd like me to read it—and then maybe let Connie read it … you know about Connie?"

Chadwick answered this ambiguous question with a brief, "We do."

"And then she showed it to a friend of hers, not telling him it was Owen's work. Neither of them liked it but I did. I gave it back to Owen and suggested he try it direct to a publisher instead of through Bauermeister—you see, I didn't trust the man—though maybe he knows his business … well, I guess he does … but, in the meantime, Owen ran into Connie's friend who said he'd just been reading a manuscript which reminded him a little of Owen's style—and he mentioned it by name and said he'd never read such a load of crap in his life … and Owen went home and shut himself up in his kitchen and put wads of stuff under the doors and put the gas stove full on—but that old dame who lives across the hall came over to see him and got into a panic and went down and got the landlady to come with her spare key … "

He shook his head wearily. His voice seemed to be hurting him but the glass was empty. "What good did it do him? Someone who's judgement he regarded as impartial and well-informed had just destroyed all the hopes he'd been pinning on that book to get his career out of the doldrums … poor bloke … he apologized to both the women and said he was sorry to be such a nuisance and they mustn't go worrying about him doing it again. But then he told me he thought he'd go somewhere else and do it."

"And you didn't try to dissuade him?"

So Polly Eyre's concern for Owen's safety was based on this very definite fear? No wonder she had pressed them for reassurance.

"No. We'd spent our entire lives thinking and talking about suicide. I knew there was nothing we could say to each other. I'd been pinning my hopes on Owen's new book. *I* thought it was a good story but there wasn't anything *I* could say which would make him believe in it again."

"What about the book he started a few weeks before he went to Crookneck?"

"No. There wasn't any other book. I don't know who told you there was."

"I see. And, quite recently, your mother died?"

"Yes, last September. It was a relief in a way. As well as her bouts of depression she was becoming convinced that she was the object of persecution there, that someone—and she accused various people—was trying to do away with her—"

Chadwick wrote 'names' and circled it. "You didn't believe her?"

"No. Why should I? I knew she was mentally unstable. And why should anyone want to get rid of an old lady who no one took seriously anyway?"

"But *you* took seriously anything she said about the way the Home was being run?"

"Well, yes, I suppose I did … " He seemed to turn the whole idea over cautiously and gaze at it in a different light.

"To humour her?"

"No-o-o … well, partly … but she did keep a sharp eye on things. She believed she was doing it for me and that I needed her help … are you saying that someone, that maybe there was someone who wanted her out of the way?"

"There is that small possibility. We'll leave it for the moment. You had various problems with several of your business ventures late last year and on into this year. Did you believe there was any connection?"

"No. I got Blackburn to look into the business with the Health people and that other business with Wyldesyde and he sacked the manager there and put on Alec Greenaway … and I went out to Gippsland myself but I was so worried about Owen at the time I decided to sell out and be done with it."

"You don't know who the buyer was?"

"No. I asked Charles Allcott to handle it for me."

"I see. Is it correct to say he handled all that sort of business for you?"

"Yes."

"He handled it personally?"

"He said he did. I wouldn't have objected if he'd handed some of it over to someone in his office but he always used to say 'I'll give it my personal attention' so I assumed he did."

This time, though, Bruce Farnham showed no sign of reassessing his view of someone close to him. Possibly because he wanted to go on believing Allcott was reliable and honest. Possibly it was the natural response of someone who'd hidden his own fears and insecurities. Allcott's air of quiet authority would suggest a man worthy of rock-solid trust.

"Hmm … " Chadwick seemed to wind down as he doodled 'A + B = ?' on the pad in front of him. "Would you care for a sandwich? A cup of coffee?"

"No. I … well, I'd rather finish telling you and be done with it—"

Finish? Chadwick bit back a sarcastic response. It would be months probably before they knew just what they had uncovered. So far, Tony Nichols had examined five recent deaths—two of which benefited Wyldesyde and the other three named Blackburn as a legatee "for his kindness and thoughtfulness"; Nichols had been annoyed to find that the women who'd left Blackburn five

thousand dollars had been cremated even though he still inclined to the belief the deaths themselves were unsuspicious.

The vexed question remained: should they apply to have Mrs Farnham exhumed. Chadwick felt that her son would not—now—make any objection …

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The wind was strengthening; an occasional sharp shower dashed at the windows; people hurried to and fro in the corridor. But the three men closetted were impervious to the rush and bluster of the day outside.

"Why did you make the same will as Owen?" Frank Pearce had puzzled over that.

Farnham looked blankly at him, his mind obviously elsewhere. "I didn't. I have no idea whether Owen ever made a will or what he might've put in it. I told him what I was planning and I said I hoped he wouldn't mind not being my legatee … stupid, I suppose, but I had the horrible feeling that if the company's troubles were more than a hiccup—well, the last thing I wanted was for Owen to get dragged down with it."

"And when did you first consider the idea of committing suicide?"

Chadwick wondered if Frank's question was wise but he let it stand, merely bringing his fingers together and looking thoughtful in a slightly grim way.

"Probably when I first realized what the word meant." For the first time Farnham put on a thin smile. "I couldn't say."

"Then why did you choose to go to Crookneck twice?"

This might be regarded as a non sequitur but Chadwick continued to lean back and let Frank plough on without interference. He had developed a certain degree of respect for Frank's way of working; he wondered what Frank would say in return.

"The first time I simply went for some peace and quiet. A few days somewhere with no phone ringing. And it was cheap. The second time … " Farnham began picking at the material of his coat lapel. The two men waited, half-expecting whatever he said next to ring with insincerity.

"Connie—you know Connie?"

Chadwick said again that they did.

"I was very fond of her. She was pretty and clever and—" he shrugged, "well, I hoped she might agree to get married. I thought if I could have a family of my own it might help me get back on track … you know how it is when you feel someone else needs you? … but Connie only laughed and said 'You must be kidding' … "

They understood why he was finding this recital painful.

"And one day I overheard her talking on the phone about it … she called me 'that fat old gasbag' … " Farnham returned to staring at his trousers.

"I made up those slow-release capsules. Nothing seemed to matter much any more. I booked the few days on Crookneck. I thought I'd just go quietly to bed there and not wake up—"

"Why did you choose there?"

Bruce Farnham glanced up. His face, beaten and incongruous, was unattractive.

"I don't know. I guess I thought I'd rather have Clare Brady saying something about me than Connie saying—well, I can only guess what she'd say—'Bloody hell, look what that sonofabitch has gone and done!'—maybe she'd say that, I don't know … I don't suppose she would care so long as I left her the house … she treated it as though it was hers anyway … "

"When did you decide to change places with Owen?"

"A few days later. I met him and we had a few drinks together and I told him I was planning to go away and he said he wanted to go away too—and we sort of started talking about changing. I suppose you'll think that's ridiculous but we often did it for a laugh and it seemed to give Owen more confidence when he could pretend to be me—and have people believe in it … I thought I might be better at promoting his book, he thought he'd enjoy going to Crookneck as me and then using it for a story later on—and no skin off anyone's nose if someone tumbled to it … of course it sounds weird now … but he came to my house and lived there over the weekend and went on to

Crookneck—and I went to his flat for a couple of days and then went up to 'Varuna' which I'd booked in his name for a week … I went to see a Sydney publisher on my way and left him the manuscript and said "it was the best thing I think I've done so far" … and then I went up to Katoomba and the first day there I spent getting the hang of the little laptop I'd bought for Owen—but I knew I wasn't going to be able to keep it up—not when the other people there started talking over dinner about 'post-structuralism' and 'deconstructed texts' or something—they sounded more like a mob from the Master Builders—and I wondered how Owen was making out talking about leasehold agreements with the Bradys … and then I decided to make an excuse and leave early and then I just asked to be dropped at the pub and I took a room for one night … I thought of taking my pills there, and then I realized Owen had them, not me … and next morning I saw that bit in the paper about Owen 'found drowned' and I—"

He lifted up his hands in a gesture of resignation, large hands sprinkled with red hair. Strange hands now. The sleeves of the fawn suit rode up uncomfortably.

"I don't know what I thought then. I didn't know whether he'd had an accident or I'd killed him. It didn't seem to matter. I'd still suggested he go there. I went to a hairdresser, then I came back to Melbourne. I was going to go to my house to get my own clothes and stuff but I remembered Connie would be back and Owen had taken my key … I couldn't decide what was the best thing to do … so I booked and came across on the ferry and went to a hotel in Devonport … and then I thought I'd ring Clare Brady. I didn't want her to feel badly about anything. And that's really all there is to say. I don't know if you believe me or not."

They already knew most of his story tallied. But they only had his word on the crucial point: had he *forgotten* to remove the capsules. Everyone, so far, had said he was fond of Owen—but if he was of unstable mind …

"Thank you, Mr Farnham. You realize, of course, that it doesn't matter what we believe. It will be up to the magistrate to decide whether you have a case to answer. And you realize we only have your unsupported word that you prepared the capsules for your own use and that you gave them to Owen by mistake. Still, I think it will be easiest if we charge you with assisting your brother to take his own life by giving him poison to use, and arrange for you to have access to legal advice." They could simply let him go and say they would need to interview him again but Chadwick did not totally trust Farnham to stay around. He might be safer in a cell and placed on Suicide Watch.

Farnham accepted that with bowed head. Then when he'd been taken to the charge room to be booked, photographed, and searched more thoroughly, before being escorted away, Chadwick and Pearce found themselves looking at each other in thoughtful silence.

"I think—" Frank Pearce said at last, but not in his usual ebullient manner, "I prefer cases where you find the bloke standing over his victim with a knife."

"Brave man," his senior said drily.

For a moment Pearce was puzzled, then he chuckled. "No—but you know you've got the right bloke."

"Yes. There's that. A lot of gaps in his story but I doubt whether filling them in will make much difference to the end result."

He pulled himself up swiftly. Two able and intelligent men had been wasted by that deep and unrecognized undercurrent of nihilism in their lives. It was an uncomfortable object lesson.

"You know, it's a bloody funny thing," Frank went on more cheerfully, "but what would've happened if that branch hadn't whacked Owen?"

"Good question—but academic." Chadwick's thoughts were still elsewhere. "And if that poor devil *had* vomited he might still be alive."

After Frank had gone out he finished labeling the tapes and left the room ready for the next user. He could also have said, "Beware of weak men—with strong people standing behind them."

But, in the end, the publisher would take Owen's manuscript and the public would clamour to read his last work; Bruce might conceivably find within himself sufficient strength of character to go on and re-establish his life; and light would be cast upon shadow.