



*Sooner murder an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires.*

- Blake

## Prologue

*At last the dog stops barking. I wait another minute, just to be sure.*

*Another minute for him to live.*

*Stepping back into the darkness of a doorway, I watch the street. No one around. A light rain makes the streetlights hazy and soft as dandelion clocks.*

*I am aware that my awareness is heightened, that all my senses are loaded and brimming like a paintbrush loaded with paint. Drizzle prickles in my scalp like a cloud of gnats. It feels good. More than good: godlike.*

*I pull the balaclava and the swimming goggles out of my pocket and put them on, goggles first, so that the eyepieces fit through the holes in the balaclava. I cross the street. The goggles make my vision prismatic. Thumbsmears of pink and green leap off the wet tarmac.*

*The door's unlocked and the stink hits me. Earlier, there was a party, though the house is silent now. The bulb above the stairs has been swapped for a red one, to create an atmosphere.*

*I swim through the atmosphere, through the bloody-mary light. A bottle of wine on the bottom stair catches my eye and I pick it up thinking, dutch courage, but even in that light and through the goggles I see two or three cigarette butts floating in it, bloated and bursting open.*

*Hugh's room is right there, at the bottom of the stairs. The only bedsit on the ground floor. I go in. A stink in here, too, but different - party smells overlaid with sex smells. Him, or other partygoers? Not that it matters now. He is lying on the bed face down, naked, the duvet wrapped round his legs. Pissed out of his tiny brain, of course. The subject was inebriated. Red light from the hall fills the room but he doesn't stir.*

*He really is breathtakingly beautiful - broad shoulders, biceps sleek and salmon-fat. But I'll not scar that whiter skin than snow. Othello.*

*I withdraw to the kitchen, looking for an electric socket. When I find one I take the soldering iron from my coat pocket and plug it in, lying it across a beer glass so that the tip isn't touching anything as it heats up.*

*Time passes.*

*Suddenly a noise. I swing round, alerted. False alarm. That ridiculous cat is oozing through an open window. It startled me. Not startled me. I am beyond fear. Angered me then.*

*It comes to me, purring, trying to lean against me, asking for food or love or whatever it is animals want. I grab it, rolling it over onto its back, right hand round its throat where the claws can't reach me, pinning it down. I touch the tip of the soldering iron once, twice, three times to the black belly. Smell of fur and a glimpse of burning pink. The noise, yowling or whatever, is indescribable. For a moment I think: error. Too much noise. Run. But then it's gone, back the way it came, off wailing into the garden and beyond.*

*Again I wait. Silence. All pissed.*

*I put a finger near the iron's tip and I can feel the heat.*

*Time to kill him.*

*I open the door to his room and everything goes white, like an explosion or a scream. I struggle through it, trying to see him, but I can't. And I'm there but I'm simultaneously back here again, back in the present day, sitting on this hard bed, the cigarette falling from my fingers. Forcing myself to breathe.*

*Pushing against the threshold of memory, finding it gives a little more with each feeble shove.*

*Laid out on the bed beside me are the things I will need again tonight: dark clothing, the balaclava, the goggles, a Stanley knife.*

*But for a while I just sit here, breathing.*

*My head rolling slowly into the basket of my hands.*

## One

The two men had been watching the street for some time now and the car was fuggy with their breath and the damp, steaming burgers they were eating. The older of the two was getting impatient - where was she? why the hell hadn't she showed? - but the younger man was relaxed, enjoying himself, watching the occasional pretty student walk past. It was the first sunny day of spring, and there was more bare flesh on display than there had been for months. He wished he had brought his sunglasses. It would have been exactly like a Hollywood cop stakeout then.

"There she is." The older man pointed. "That one just coming round the corner."

"What makes you so sure?"

"Instinct. Watch."

The woman he had pointed out was in her late twenties. Her hair, which was long, dark, and exuberantly ringleted, hinted at mediterranean blood, though even at this distance her eyes were clearly some lighter colour, light blue or possibly grey. Good-looking rather than beautiful, her clothes too looked as if they had been chosen for comfort rather than allure. She was wearing a light blue tea dress without a coat, evidently being one of those who believed that the morning sunshine was not some transitory fluke, though the effect was somewhat offset by the pair of heavy Timberlands on her feet.

The older man had been right: it was her. She had stopped in front of the house and unslung a small knapsack from her back. From it she took a copy of the documents.

Peter whistled. "Worth the wait."

"Come on then." The senior man wiped his fingers on his handkerchief, then swivelled the rear view mirror so that he could check his appearance. "This is probably our last chance, so let's do it properly."

As they got out of the car they both did up their suit jackets simultaneously, then walked purposefully to where the woman was peering up at the For Sale sign.

"Mrs Williams?" Nick, as the senior partner, held out his hand to her. "Nick Woolway. We spoke on the phone. May I introduce my colleague, Peter Soames?"

Her handshake was firm and her smile amused. "*Two* estate agents? I am honoured. Sorry I'm late, by the way. The train from London was held up."

Nick didn't hesitate. "We always come out in force for a cash buyer."

"Well. I haven't exactly brought along wads of fivers."

"But I am right in thinking you want to buy straight away?" He spoke with just a trace of anxiety, Peter thought, but probably not enough for Mrs Williams to notice.

"Oh, definitely. I need to find somewhere before the university term starts." There was a pause. "I like the outside. Shall we go in?" she asked.

"Of course, of course." Nick was fumbling in his pocket for the key. Peter suppressed a smile. His boss had a tendency to become flustered around attractive women. "Here, Nick, allow me," he said smoothly, taking the key from him and smiling at Mrs Williams with practised charm.

"I see you've had an intruder," she said conversationally as he worked the key in the lock.

Both men froze. Peter was quicker. "Pardon?" he said casually.

"Up there." She took a step back on the pavement and pointed to where the For Sale sign had been mounted on the wall. In the triangle of the board's

two sides there was a round dark shape the size of a tennis ball. As they looked, a small bird flickered out of it and was gone over the rooftops.

"It's a housemartin's nest, I rather think," she said.

"I can't think how that got there. The house has only been on the market for a very short time," Nick lied.

"You'll have to promise me something. If I do buy, I want you to leave the sign up." She smiled at him. "I wouldn't want to throw them out of their new home just as I'm moving into mine."

"Of course, of course," Nick said cheerfully, though he was groaning inwardly. A woman who worried about little birdies in their nesties was hardly going to want to set up her family home in a house like No. 57.

"As you can see, the house has been used for student accommodation and would benefit from some minor refurbishment." Peter was well into his spiel now, moving smoothly from room to room, throwing open doors and then standing in the doorway so that Mrs Williams' delightful breasts or her surprisingly muscular buttocks were forced against him as she squeezed by. "But overall the condition is good -"

"Is there a damp course?" she interrupted.

"I'm, ah, not certain about that," he confessed.

"It's a bit moist under this wallpaper," she muttered to herself, pulling at a loose join. "It doesn't really matter. I'd be putting in a injection damp course anyway."

"Er, right. And this is the master bedroom."

"Not that we're meant to call it that these days," Nick interjected.

"Bedroom One is considered more politically correct."

She glanced at him thoughtfully but said nothing, allowing herself to be led passively on their well-planned tour. After a while she simply tuned them out - what was the point in any case of listening to someone who could

open the door to a bathroom and announce "This is a bathroom"? She found herself more interested in the strange resonance their words made in the empty rooms than in the words themselves.

She had, she realised, never been in a house that felt so utterly bare, so devoid of its past. No room was furnished: here and there a series of round indentations in the carpet, mysterious as crop circles, indicated where beds and cupboards had once stood. Other rooms had been stripped even of their floor coverings, revealing their pale boards to the sunlight like the first white sunbathers of spring. Differently-coloured squares and oblongs on the walls, their corners dotted with blu-tack, were all that remained of pictures and posters, and on the back of a bedroom door the faint shadow of a triangle, airbrushed in dirt, showed where a coathanger had hung for years undisturbed. It was as if the whole house had been unexpectedly blasted, Hiroshima-like, and its inhabitants smeared sideways into angles of light.

The telephone was mounted on the wall in the kitchen, and with flagrant disrespect for college property the wall around it had been used as a notepad, a two-foot aurora of scribbles, numbers and whimsical caricatures. Someone had tried to scrub the wall clean, with only partial success, so that even here the doodles seemed to have paled under the flash of some enormous force.

Nick sneezed suddenly. She said "Bless you", and he sneezed again.

"I'm terribly sorry," he explained, "I'm just a little allergic to dust."

"You're in the right business, then," she retorted with a wry smile, "Looking round old houses." The smile vanished, replaced by a look of frowning concentration as she touched her finger to the window sill and examined the result. "There's an awful *lot* of dust, though," she said, half to herself. "Not house dust, exactly. It's too white. Like flour. Or it could be chalk." She blew gently at her hand, watching the grey, smoky residue lift and cloud the sunbeam. "What could it be? Not rot spores, but..."

With a sinking heart Nick realised that he was going to have to grasp the nettle. "Mrs Williams," he said formally. "It's fingerprint powder. We have had the house cleaned, but it takes an age to settle."

"Fingerprint powder?" she repeated, puzzled.

"Part of the reason the house is for sale is that there was a... criminal incident on the premises."

"An incident?" She laughed sardonically. " Believe me, I'm used to those. In the last five years I've lived in Clapham, Tooting, Brixton and Stockwell. I've had more Victim Support letters than gas bills. Never had the fingerprint people round, though."

"As a matter of fact, this wasn't a burglary. Tragically one of the students who lived here was," Nick tried to think of a euphemism and couldn't, "Was killed."

"Really? How?"

"By an intruder." He cleared his throat. "Frankly, Mrs Williams - er, Theresa, isn't it? - we've had some very interested purchasers who didn't want to go ahead once they found out - women on their own, couples with young children, and so on. Well, you can understand it in a way."

"Ah."

"Would the Williams family be bothered by a thing like that?" he prompted delicately.

She turned away from him and looked out of the window before replying. "I suppose most houses, old houses that is, have had someone die in them, when you think about it. It's where people used to want to die, before we decided that birth and death are illnesses that should be pushed into hospitals."

"That's a very sensible attitude," he said, unsure where this was leading.

"There isn't a Williams family, by the way. I'm separated, almost divorced. A woman on her own, as you put it."

"Oh dear. I do apologise -"

"So there's no one else I need to consult," she interrupted him. "If you'll knock ten grand off, I'm interested."

"There are four other buyers coming to look round this evening, Mrs Williams, er, Theresa," he said, lying to cover his surprise.

"Well, if they give you the asking price you'll be able to throw out my offer, won't you?" She smiled at him sweetly. "And please, I'm called Terry."

As they were about to leave she stopped him. "Would it be all right if I stayed for a bit? I just want to try and visualise things, where I'm going to put stuff. I'll pull the door shut when I go."

"Of course." He offered her his hand. With some young women you could employ a little old-fashioned gallantry and kiss them goodbye but not, he suspected, with this one. "I'll look forward to hearing from you."

She waited until they were gone, then went out into the garden and scabbled about in the rubble until she found what she was looking for: a length of rusty metal, about a foot long and solid as a crowbar. Kneeling down behind the kitchen window, she started hacking methodically at the bricks, about a foot above the ground. Ah. As she'd thought, there was a damp course already, quite a good one too by the looks of it. The house was scruffy as hell, but structurally it had been well looked after. Terry wiped her fingers on the grass and stood up.

A flash of blue caught her eye, a piece of plastic a couple of inches long fluttering on a bush. She reached out her hand to it. One end was coagulated from having been in a fire - there was a burnt patch on the lawn, which looked quite recent. Looking at the plastic in her hand, she realised that it was part of a police scene-of-crime tape.

Suddenly she was aware that she was being watched. A woman was standing at one of the windows of the house next door, a redhead of about her own age, wearing a white bathrobe and drinking from a bright green coffee mug. The mug and her eyes were the same striking colour. Terry nodded politely: the woman continued to watch her, her face expressionless, then abruptly turned away as if in response to something that had been said to her.

She went and ran one of the kitchen taps to make sure the water hadn't been turned off, then used the loo. On the back of the door some student wag had written in felt tip FARTING IS THE FREEDOM CRY OF THE REPRESSED SHIT. She looked at it thoughtfully, then decided that it might stay. Of course, no one else would realise that the repressed shit she'd be thinking of was her ex-husband David. She opened the estate agent's particulars again and began to leaf through them.

*"Number fifty-seven West Street, Osney, is a terraced property approximately one hundred years old. It currently comprises four bedrooms, having recently been utilised as accommodation for students: one of these bedrooms is on the ground floor and could easily be reconverted to a dining or sitting room.*

*Whilst in good overall condition the house would undoubtedly benefit from some cosmetic refurbishment. There is a garden of approximately one-eighth of an acre at the rear, mainly laid to lawn, although it has been neglected in recent years.*

*Osney itself is one of Oxford's most sought-after locations. Though benefiting from a secluded village-like atmosphere, it is well within walking distance of the amenities of Oxford City centre. Known by residents as Osney Island, it is bounded on one side by the Oxford Canal and on the remaining three sides by tributaries of the nearby River Thames. There are two Public Houses on the Island, one overlooking the river, a shop, and a thriving Resident's Association. Although there is some multi-*

*occupancy student accommodation on the Island, it is less than in most comparable areas.*

*Properties in this area very rarely come onto the market, and early viewing is urgently recommended.*

*Please do not hesitate to contact me or one of my colleagues if you have any queries or wish to arrange an appointment.*

*Yours sincerely*

*(illegible)*

*For Woolway, Webb & Co."*

When she had finished she unceremoniously tore a strip out of the particulars to wipe herself with and pulled the handle. I've marked my territory now, she thought, wriggling back into her jeans, I'll have to buy it. She walked slowly back down the hallway, its sides scarred by the handlebars of generations of student bicycles, and closed the front door behind her.

While Terry sat on the train back to London, members of the University staff were attending an Evensong in the tiny cathedral of Christ Church College.

If the choirboys resented having to give up part of their holidays in order to be present, if they fidgeted and winked at each other from behind the safety of their high pews in the choir, it didn't show in their singing. As ever, it was perfect, the high quivering notes swooping and diving through the stony spaces above the congregation like a blur of swallows.

There was a special ritual attached to this part of the Easter service. Whatever other litanies or psalms might be sung, it always concluded with Allegri's arrangement of Psalm 51, the psalm of contrition. The lead was taken by a solo treble voice, the child's purity making the words of abjection and repentance even more poignant:

*Behold, I was shapen in wickedness,*

*and in sin hath my mother conceived me.*

As the boy sang, the candles at the end of each pew - the sole illumination in the great space - were extinguished row by row until those on the altar itself were the only points of light remaining. Then these too were abruptly snuffed, until through the darkness came the first words of the second half:

*Thou shalt wash me with hyssop, and I shall be clean:*

*thou shalt wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.*

As the other, older voices in the choir took up the chant again, weaving their deeper melodies through the clear unbroken treble, the candles were relit, again row by row, so that by the last lines of the psalm the cathedral was once again filled with light, only the stench of burnt wicks and a faint tracing-paper haze in the air showing that they had once been snuffed. The last lines of the psalm were also the last lines of the service:

*Thou shalt be pleased with the sacrifice of righteousness,*

*with the burnt-offerings and oblations:*

*then shall they offer young bullocks upon thine altar.*

The congregation remained on their knees while the choir filed silently out, then one by one got to their feet and stretched. Here and there they rubbed knees that had spent too long pressed against the hard oak of the pew in front. As they moved slowly towards the exit hands were shaken, smiles exchanged.

In the middle of a pew towards the front one man knelt on, apparently oblivious to the fact that the service had ended, and oblivious to his neighbours, who eventually filed out either side of him. With his head bowed it was impossible to tell if he was deep in prayer, lost in thought, or simply asleep.

Only when the congregation had gone did he finally raise his head and gaze at the altar. Reaching into his breast pocket for an immaculately folded

cloth handkerchief, he silently wiped away the tears that glistened like snail-tracks on his smoothly-shaven cheeks.

As he made his way to the door he felt someone touch his arm.

“Brian?” a voice murmured.

They had clearly been waiting for him. Two of them. Like him, they were wearing formal academic gowns over their dark suits.

“Might we have a word?”

“Of course, Master. He nodded at the second man, acknowledging him. “Dean.”

“I thought we had better discuss *damage limitation*,” the Master murmured as they emerged into the dark night air. His voice sank even lower as the three men strolled slowly after the departing congregation.

## Two

It was one of Terry's rituals, whenever she moved somewhere new, to start by unpacking her books. Everything else - the disconnected cooker, the curtainless windows, the boxes of glasses wrapped up in tissuepaper like tangerines at a grocer's - were ignored until she had arranged her precious texts, by subject and then alphabetically within each subject, on the bookshelves.

It had driven David mad, which was why she'd started doing it. Now that there was no David fuming silently behind her, it felt even better.

The shelves in front of her were like a particularly colourful rock strata, a slice through the ages of her life. At the bottom were the greys and blacks of the Penguin Classics and Arden Shakespeares she'd had since school. On top of these was a bright green seam of Virago, which she'd discovered at seventeen; then a layer of thin, shale-like volumes of poetry topped in turn by an orderly block of white King Penguins. Above them came her first undergraduate hardbacks, proper scholarly editions of Joyce and Yeats and Eliot, and pressing down on these the books about books, works of criticism and academic essays. Towards the top there was a row of detective paperbacks and thrillers, their spines a jumble of lurid colours, while the books from her most recent existence, her life in London, were the biggest but fewest in number, sitting on the very top shelf : books on DIY and home furnishing, the Joy of Sex, the Reader's Digest Book Of The Home, a couple of old Habitat catalogues, back issues of Interiors and Tatler.

By way of contrast, the first thing Mo had done was to set up the stereo. Tracy Chapman was now preaching revolution to the peaceful burghers of suburban Oxford through the open front door, while Mo finished carting in from the van the binliners in which Terry, having run out of boxes, was transporting her wordly goods from Mo's flat to Oxford.

"Funny, isn't it?" Terry said as the other girl passed. "We'd never have left the door open like this or the van unlocked in London."

Mo shot her an amused glance. "There's crime everywhere, Terry. Or have you forgotten what happened in your new home?"

"Sorry. I was just -"

"You were just trying to sell me on the move. You don't have to, honestly. If you want to come and vegetate in an ivory tower, that's up to you."

She spoke lightly, though Terry knew she was more hurt than she admitted. They'd been sharing Mo's flat for six months now: no one at the agency had ever realised just how close they'd become. Leaving Mo, Terry thought, felt a bit like the first time she'd come here, as a gawky first-year undergraduate, leaving the familiar safety of her parent's suburban home.

"You don't think I'm running away?"

"From me? No way. I'll be down here every chance I get. You don't get rid of me that easy."

The books finished, Terry knelt down and started pulling crockery out of boxes. "From real life, then," she suggested.

"Come off it, darling. You weren't exactly a street-radical activist, were you? And if you start to get really provincial I'll post you little emergency parcels. A copy of Time Out and an Afro-Jewish takeaway. Or you can come and join me on the odd demo. Me in my Doc Martens, you in your gown and mortar board."

Terry gave her a hug, just as the doorbell rang.

"Visitors already?" Mo said, "Perhaps it's the vicar come to say see you on Sunday? Or could it be the Women's Institute come to ask you to tea? Ow!" Terry had pinched her to make her let go. A woman of about forty was peering through the open door.

"Mrs Williams?" she asked.

"I'm Terry Williams. This is my friend Mo Dawson." Terry held out her hand.

"Sheila Gibson. From next door." The woman approached and waved vaguely in the direction of her own house. "I just popped in to say welcome to Osney." She looked at the piles of binliners doubtfully. "Gosh. Your husband's making you do all the heavy work, is he?"

"There's no husband, actually. I'm divorced." Every time she said it, it got a little easier. "But Mo here's giving me a hand."

"Lucky you." As if realising Terry might have thought she was referring to the divorce rather than the help, she coloured. "Well, it's lovely to have you here. I must say, I think you're very brave."

"Why's that?" Mo asked.

"Oh god. Have I put my foot in it?" Sheila put her hand over her mouth, but her eyes had lit up.

"I already know about the history of the house," Terry said firmly, "It doesn't bother me."

"Oh. Good," Sheila said, though she looked disappointed. "Anyway, I'd better leave you to it. I just wanted to say, if you need anything, anything at all, just knock. We might even persuade the old man to give us a drink if you've got time." She paused, then said in a rush, "It'll be so nice to have a proper resident in here again. Those dreadful students with their parties and their bicycles cluttering up the pavement. But of course they didn't care, they were only staying a year at the most, and as soon as you got to know their names they were off again. I did remind one of them to clean the windows, they were absolutely filthy, but she just laughed at me. We've got a Resident's Association, I know you've only just arrived but I do hope you'll think about joining us as soon as you possibly can."

Terry muttered something non-committal.

"The net curtains are twitching," teased Mo when Sheila had departed.

"Don't. Come on, we need to find a paki shop. I'm getting hungry."

"Oh, we don't have pakis in Oxford," Mo said, imitating Sheila's middle-class tones. "Such dreadful people, not the sort who become members of the Resident's Association at all."

Their second uninvited visit came later.

It came in the middle of the night, long after they were asleep. It started with a scream; a high-pitched, anguished howl that sliced as effortlessly as a razor through the thick muffle of Terry's dreams.

She was accustomed to sleeping through the white noise of the London night. But this unfamiliar screech had her suddenly wide awake, her heart racing.

She was still a bit drunk. They had found, not just a corner shop, but the largest and most expensive delicatessen she had ever seen. Once she'd managed to stop Mo making caustic and entirely unfair remarks about student grants and honest taxpayers' hard-earned money, they'd had a field day: two bottles of chilled Perrier-Jouet champagne, a hunk of crumbling stilton, some chicken liver pate and a large shareable slice of cheesecake. To her delight, Mo had also found a student's guide to Oxford. Since there were no chairs they ate upstairs, sprawled across Terry's double mattress like a couple of schoolgirls having a midnight feast, guzzling champagne while Mo read out gems from the guide.

"Hertford Drama Society. Last year we produced an acclaimed production of *Midsummer Night's Dream* set entirely in winter, bringing out the bleak side of Shakespeare's comedy. Serious thespians always welcome.' Sounds cheery. 'The Heffalump Society. Activities include a termly Pooh Sticks championship, searching for the North Pole and saying our prayers.' Jesus wept! Whatever happened to sit ins and changing the world? Listen, here's another. 'The Hyacinth Society. Dedicated to drinking, decadence, and

Sandlers' proposition that poetry is the synthesis of hyacinths and biscuits." Mo snorted derisively and tossed the book onto the floor. "I'd heard that students today were boring and self-centred, but if I'd known that this was what you were coming back to I'd have tied you to my kitchen table."

"I'm not eligible to join those societies," Terry pointed out mildly. "I'm not an undergraduate. And I didn't join them when I was."

She knew and understood why Mo was being grumpy. They'd never be this close again: on Monday Mo would be back in London, photographing sanitary towel ads, while Terry would start catching up with the latest critical thinking on her doctorate subject. Despite Mo's promise to come down at weekends, their worlds were diverging. Getting drunk tonight had been a kind of ritual goodbye.

Sitting up in bed she listened, waiting. The screeching that had woke her was repeated, so close that for a moment Terry thought it was actually in the room with her. She held her breath, trying to make no sound.

At the uncurtained window two blazing eyes in an elfin head stared angrily at her through the glass. Instinctively Terry flinched, then breathed a slow sigh of relief. It was just a cat. There was a lean-to just below the window: the animal must have simply walked up the sloping roof.

She got out of bed and went towards it, trying not to frighten it away. Behind her Mo mumbled something, still half asleep. She reached the window, but the cat seemed to panic. It turned and half-fell, half-slithered down the slates. Just for a moment she had a brief impression of something pink and gaping on its behind, like a wound; it was already gone before she realised that it had been the animal's vulva, glistening and distended. Looking down at the unkempt garden, snowy with moonlight, she thought she caught a glimpse of it again, picking its way through the shadows.

Behind her Mo turned on the light. Instantly the garden vanished, replaced by the blacksilver reflection of Terry herself, naked except for a T-shirt, her hair wild with sleep.

"What's up?"

"It was just a cat," Terry said, getting back in beside her. She shivered. "It was odd," she said, "It's bum was all open."

"Perhaps it was on heat."

"For a moment when I heard it trying to get in... Christ knows I'm not superstitious, but..."

"Don't let people wind you up about that kid who died," Mo said softly. "They'll try, you know. They won't like the fact that you're a girlie and you aren't frightened, so they'll try to spook you." She reached out and touched Terry's hair. "Come here," she whispered.

Mo's mouth was sticky with sleep, a faint ghost-taste of toothpaste and champagne. Terry kissed her deeply, exploring the familiar tinyness of her teeth as their bodies fitted into each other, breasts resting between breasts, her right thigh pushing into the hollow between Mo's legs. She caught her breath, amazed as always by the simplicity of their arousal. With David, sex had been energetic; foreplay a matter of kneading and squeezing and movement. With Mo, all they had to do was lie together: within moments she felt as if she was part of some purring, gyroscopic machine, lifting them effortlessly towards orgasm. Licking her fingers, she reached between the other girl's legs.

Afterwards, Mo was asleep instantly. Terry held her, listening to the unfamiliar sounds of a new building. Even the distant traffic sounded different from London, subtly changed by the reverberations of the empty house.

David and she had been a college couple, though it wasn't until afterwards, when he had already taken a job in the City and she had started the first year

of her postgraduate studies, that their relationship became serious. It was the era of financial deregulation - nicknamed the Big Bang - and the merchant banks were offering ludicrous salaries: he earned more in a year, even as a trainee, than she would get as a grant for the whole of her doctorate. When David started putting pressure on her to get a job in London, she hadn't taken much persuading. A friend who worked as an account executive in one of the top advertising agencies got her an interview as an account planner, helping to create the strategies for new campaigns and then researching the creative work in consumer focus groups. Rather to her surprise, she found that she was good at it. Experience of decoding texts and analysing literary symbolism helped her to interpret the consumers' responses as well as simply report on them, and she soon had a reputation as a planner who fought hard for quality work. The creative department loved her, even if she had to fend off the attentions of drunken Geordie art directors on a regular basis.

One of David's perks was a low-interest mortgage, and the two of them had thrown themselves into the eighties property boom. Everyone had been doing it - everyone like them, that is, middle-class professionals with two incomes, no children, and no ties to any area or community. Sometimes when she looked back on it, it seemed to Terry that it had all been like that building society commercial of the time in which an endless blur of potters from Potters Bar, cooks from Cookham and bankers from Balham whizzed through the society's branches, borrowing and depositing, selling up and buying up and doing up, but always above all moving up, up that invisible structure known to everyone as the property ladder. It was, she thought to herself later, an interesting metaphor: a ladder, after all, is something solid and useful, as real as bricks and mortar itself. At the time no one had ever considered that the ladder might turn out to be a bubble.

Over the next two years the boom created a diaspora effect, scattering professionals like themselves out from the traditional heartlands of Fulham

and Clapham into the newly-gentrified areas of Balham, Stockwell, Brixton and Lambeth. David and she had been pioneers in Tooting, doing up and selling at a handsome profit. Six months later, they were selling up in Battersea and planting the first yellow skip of spring in a run-down street in Kennington. A year after that, they bought a house in more upmarket Wandsworth, which they intended to reconvert from flats into a six-bedroomed house. When David lost his job in the crash of '87, it seemed the easiest thing for him simply to continue to work on the house, only without employing so much help from builders. He bought a labrador puppy, replaced his company BMW with a second-hand Range Rover and drank more, but otherwise their lives seemed unchanged. Terry still rushed home from work and donned a pair of overalls to start painting or stripping or hacking rotten wood out of newly-exposed beams. It was six months before she found a pair of women's knickers in the glove compartment of the Range Rover. Her first thought, ludicrously, was that David had developed some kind of secret fetish: her second, once she had realised what it meant - she still blushed with shame and anger when she thought about it - was to examine the elastic to see if David's mistress took a smaller size than she did.

David had been having an affair with a neighbour for over a year. She had initiated it, he said, as if that was somehow an excuse. And to him, she realised, it probably was. Like so many men he simply went with the path of least resistance, with whatever flow - the City, the housing boom, infidelity - happened to have caught him up in its currents. At her request, he moved out while she considered her options.

Cunningly, he played a trump card by going to her mother, confessing all and asking for her help in obtaining Terry's forgiveness. Her mother's appeals took the form of oblique pep talks, which Terry was soon able to anticipate and break down into their component themes within moments: Stand By Your Man ("I did, mother. The problem was he didn't stand by

me."), David's Learnt His Lesson ("He may well have done. But it was a marriage, not a tutorial."), You're Not Getting Any Younger ("I'm twenty-seven, mother. These days you can have a baby when you're forty five.") and, most unforgivably of all, Well I'm Not Getting Any Younger And I Do So Want To Enjoy My Grandchildren Before I Die. ("What about my brother Mark? He and Rachel will give you grandchildren - if you pay them enough"). Finally, there was David's A Man And Men Have Different Sexual Needs. This last talk was abruptly terminated when the labrador, which David had left at the house, took it upon itself to thrust its nose up her mother's sensible skirt, promptly developed an erection like a furry gunturret, and began energetically humping her mother's leather-booted leg, dribbling quantities of thin doggy come over it as he did so. Rushing into the kitchen for a cloth, Terry had had to stuff it into her mouth and bend double over the cooker to prevent herself from laughing out loud. There were no more pep talks after that.

In the five years they had been married most of the wedding presents hadn't even been unpacked. There hadn't seemed much point when they'd always known they'd be moving on in a few months or so. Now, for the first time, Terry went through them all, methodically separating ice cream makers, crockery, pasta jars and so on into boxes. Her friend Mo, a photographer she'd met on an advertising shoot, came round to help one night with a bottle of vodka and they got carried away. When David was eventually allowed back into the house he found the sofa, the bed and the dining room table neatly sawn in half with one of his own power tools. The labrador had a dotted line drawn in black felt tip round its midriff: 'His' had been written on the front half, 'Hers' on the back. It had been Mo's idea, but the writing was Terry's.

She'd known, from rumours at work, that Mo was supposed to be gay, but put it down to sexual envy. In the predominantly male and laddish

environment of the agency's creative department, any drop-dead crop-haired blonde who could take her portfolio round with a stud in her nose and her arse hanging out of a rip in her jeans was going to take a lot of flak. But when Mo had eventually asked her if she'd like to be her lodger for a while, she'd added casually that Terry might have to be broadminded about some of the people who stayed the night.

"By people, I take it that you don't mean men," Terry had said.

"Correct," Mo said, holding her gaze defiantly.

"No problem," Terry had replied, and it hadn't been. She certainly hadn't been jealous of Mo's girlfriends, just mildly curious as to what they actually did together. She couldn't imagine it being one half as satisfying as what she still thought of as real sex; though one day, looking in Mo's bedroom for a sanitary towel, she came across a drawer full of sex toys and accessories of such extravagant and unexpected diversity that her imagination boggled.

She was basically celibate during this period, though she did miss sex. When someone at work organised an Ann Summers party, Terry ended up ordering herself a vibrator. She'd used it once, then accidentally dropped it in the bath: within a few days the batteries had started oozing radioactive-looking yellow gunk. The problem with vibrators, she told Mo later, was that they were basically frigid. Great at providing orgasms, they weren't that fussed themselves. It was what had always bothered her about sex with men, that impression she'd always had that they were constantly looking for the buttons to press, that they were either great or lousy lovers depending on how many hits they could notch up on their partner's orgasmeter. Compared with her mother's generation, she knew hers had it easy. But it seemed to her that while the goalposts might have moved in the right direction the game was still too much about scoring goals.

Mo starting giving her massages. She was careful to keep clear of the erogenous zones, but they both knew that Terry got aroused, even if they chose to ignore it. Then one time Terry simply asked her not to stop. It wasn't fireworks or earthmoving or any amazing self-realisation: it was simply something nice, something she wanted, and which she felt a little bit guilty about afterwards. They became lovers, but Terry still didn't think of herself as gay. Then she realised that Mo had stopped bringing girls home. When she asked her why, Mo said she was in love with Terry.

Terry reacted badly, going off and sleeping with one of the drunkest and most egotistical of the Geordie art directors. Then she came back to Mo's flat and threw up. Mo cleared up the sick without reproach: Terry ended the night in Mo's bed.

The two of them were together for six months. They made no formal or spoken commitment to each other, but like schoolgirls or nuns in convents their monthly cycles slowly synchronised, a kind of marriage of bodies that seemed to Terry all the deeper for being unwilling.

She knew, however, that it was a relationship without a future, and that it would be her, not Mo, who brought it to an end. In any case, she wanted to make a decision - any decision - anything to prove to herself that she wasn't simply bobbing along, like David and so many of her contemporaries, on whatever tide happened to be rising at the moment. She wrote to her old tutor, asking if she could come back to Oxford. To her surprise, he replied warmly. He had already heard of the break-up with David, and would love to have her back to finish her doctorate. He couldn't do much to help her get a grant, of course, but he would do his best to give her some teaching work with the second-year undergraduates. By this time the house in Wandsworth had been sold: David and she were both coming out of their marriage richer by around eighty thousand pounds. David immediately reinvested his share in a smaller house in Streatham, a rung or

two down the ladder. Terry started looking in Oxford. She wanted to renovate something, if only because that was the skill she had acquired in the years of her marriage, but she was also determined to find a house that she would live in, not just invest in.

She waited until she had already exchanged contracts before she broke the news to Mo.

She was almost asleep when she heard the cat again. Perhaps an hour had passed, but the sound jerked her instantly awake. It was different this time. Whereas before it had been a howl of anger, this was more piteous, a staccato high-pitched mewling. The sound of an animal in pain.

It was coming from downstairs, from somewhere inside the house.

"Mo?" she said softly. There was no reply.

For the second time that night she slid quietly out of bed and prepared to confront her fear. The naked bulb of the landing was hideously bright to her sleep-accustomed eyes. She tiptoed down the creaking stairs. The noise seemed to be coming from directly under her naked feet, from the space where they had been chucking all the empty cardboard boxes and binliners. She paused for a moment and the sound redoubled, a sudden wail of such purity and agony that the hairs on the back of her neck rose in a single movement.

Even with the light on, the recess was hard to see into. Terry went as close as she dared - if the cat was in pain she didn't want to be on the receiving end of its claws or teeth. Then she saw it. It was in one of the boxes, the blazing eyes staring balefully at her from a nest of something white. The whiteness wriggled, and she realised she was looking at a pile of newborn kittens.

The cat howled again, and another glistening package slid out and began to struggle free from its bag of slime.

It made sense now - the screams, the desperate attempt to get inside through the bedroom window, the distended pelvis she'd glimpsed as the cat had turned away. She'd just been trying to find somewhere quiet to give birth. Terry swallowed and made some soft inarticulate sounds of reassurance. The mother started to lick the latest arrival clean, while the two that had already been born scrambled for teats. There was a long strand of placenta attached to the sac: as Terry watched, the cat began to suck it up like a gourmet with a piece of spaghetti.

Knowing Mo would want to see them, she went and shook her awake. "We've got some visitors," she said, enjoying Mo's look of sleepy incomprehension. "Come and see." She led her downstairs and pointed to the box. Puzzled, Mo went and peered in it, then, seeing the kittens, she gave a little cry of surprise and delight.

"Where did she come from?" she whispered after a moment's cooing.

"I don't know. She must belong to one of the neighbours. I can't even see how she got in. Do you think she needs anything?"

Mo shook her head. "Some milk maybe, when she's finished. Other than that, she's best left alone."

"We don't need to call a vet?"

"I shouldn't think so. My parents' cats were always having kittens. After a while we just let them get on with it. Nature knows what she's doing."

They checked her occasionally, able to tell from the cries when another kitten was on its way. Eventually the afterbirth appeared, and the cat seemed to be done, lying back on its side exhausted but purring contentedly while the kittens wriggled and rolled round her belly.

While Mo warmed up some milk Terry wandered into the front room and leant her elbows on the window. It was almost dawn now. The view wasn't anything much, the terraced houses identical to the ones she'd looked out onto in London. The only difference was that many had bicycles leaning

against them, four or five in some cases, completely blocking the pavement. Those would be the student houses the neighbour had complained about.

Two figures came jogging out of the pre-dawn darkness. They were running seriously, dressed in identical Boat Club tracksuits, with handweights strapped to their wrists and walkmans clipped to their waists. They passed within inches of her, but she might as well have been invisible behind her window.

Simultaneously, a red sports car turned into the street, an old M.G. It parked outside the house opposite, and a young couple got out. The man was wearing full black tie and the woman a taffeta ballgown. Terry was glad Mo hadn't been there to see it: her stereotypes, an uneasy combination of *Brideshead Revisited* and *Inspector Morse*, were ingrained enough already.

Mo brought her coffee, and the two of them stood watching the street for a few moments.

"Well," Mo said at last, "They seem to be doing fine. We may as well go back to bed."

"I was just thinking... She could be a stray. What if we can't find the owner?"

Mo grunted. "We? What's this we?"

"What if I can't find the owner, then?"

"Then you'll have a cat of your very own. Not to mention four kittens."

"Five, you mean. I counted them. But -"

"No, four. I counted them too."

Terry dashed to the box and frantically counted the kittens. Four. "There must be one underneath her. We'll have to move her, she might be squashing it," she called to Mo, who came and helped her lift the unprotesting cat. But there was nothing underneath.

"I know there were five, Mo, I counted five. One must have escaped," she said, desperately pulling boxes out of the space.

"Calm down, Terry. Look, it couldn't have escaped, there's no way one of these little things could climb out of that box. The sides are far too high. Besides - Oh, Christ, look, it's -"

Terry somehow knew, even before she turned, what had made Mo gasp, what it was she was about to see. As if in some terrible dream she watched the cat lower its head delicately back down to what it was eating. She caught a glimpse of tiny, mouse-sized entrails, a hairless body bitten right across in cross-section. A tiny high-pitched squeaking, so quiet Terry had barely been aware of it, stopped abruptly. The cat threw its head up to swallow better, gulping the remains of its baby down greedily, like a pelican swallowing a fish. Terry turned away.

"Jesus," Mo said quietly.

### Three

From his bathroom at the back of number fifty nine, Harry Gibson could just see the punky-looking blonde in the garden of fifty seven. She was walking round looking at the plants, eating a bowl of cereal at the same time. Her hair was short, and he admired the long curve of her neck. It was sunny rather than warm, but she was wearing a thin dressing gown that didn't leave much to the imagination. Not that it mattered much, since Harry's imagination was well-practised at filling in details. She went inside, but he closed his eyes and pictured her letting the dressing gown fall, the tennis-racquet tautness of her stomach, the nipples on her gently swaying breasts teased to erection by the chilly wind. Gulping, he reached through the gap in his pyjamas.

The doorbell went, and he froze. Sheila would answer it, but if it was something that required his attention he might have to go downstairs. As he listened to the murmur of voices his erection was letting itself down in a series of little jerks. He heard Sheila's footsteps on the stairs.

"Harry? There's a girl from next door who wants to know if we know anything about a cat they've found."

"I'm just coming," he called. There. Just about decent. Twisting his pyjamas sideways so that nothing could be glimpsed through the fly, he pulled back the lock on the door.

Dorling Van Glught was not a happy man. His wife had started buying free-range, wholemeal, virtually vegetarian eggs from the shop with the jokey name on the Botley road - Eggs Eggcetera, that was it - and as a result his breakfast egg was fertile. A brown speck the size of a tadpole lay on his teaspoon as he waved it accusingly at his wife.

"Oh come on, darling," Julia said crossly, "It's nothing to make a fuss about. It's perfectly natural."

"I just happen not to like them like this, that's all," Dorling retorted, putting down his spoon. "Do we have marmalade?"

"In the cupboard."

The doorbell rang. Julia ignored it, so after a few moments Dorling went. She stopped reading and listened. "No," she heard him say, "I can safely say that we have never possessed a cat, though my wife can be a bit feline sometimes. I suggest you put a notice in the shop window. That's what we generally do round here when we mislay something, and it seems to work. Not at all."

"Who was that?" she said when Dorling came back.

"Our new neighbour is sharing her house with an unwanted moggy. I told her we didn't know anything about it. The papers are here, by the way."

Dorling took the book section first, while she flicked through the Style magazine.

"Brian's done another full page review," Dorling said, "Some American book on Wordsworth. He massacres it, of course."

"Of course," Julia murmured. For a while there was silence, broken only by the occasional chuckle from her husband.

"What's she like?" she asked.

He pretended not to understand. "Who?"

"That girl."

"Seems all right."

"Sheila said there were two of them. Very affectionate with each other, she said, which is Sheila-ese for queer. The one who's bought it used to live in London, apparently. Though why anyone should want to leave London," she said thoughtfully, picking up the magazine again, "To come back to this dump is completely beyond me."

Giles Chawker heaved himself out of the bath and towelled himself briskly, admiring the lean athleticism of his body as he did so. Then he turned to the girl who'd been sharing the bath with him. Her eyes were closed, though he knew she'd have been watching him as well. A nipple protruded through the water. Rolling it in his fingers, pinching just enough to hurt, he chuckled as her eyes opened and she squealed at him.

"Got to go, my lovely. Have you seen my kit?"

"It's in my bag. I washed it for you. I was doing a load of my stuff anyway," she added, though in fact she hadn't been. Emma was eighteen, a student at one of Oxford's hundreds of secretarial colleges, and totally besotted with Giles.

"Going to do anything while I'm out?"

"Sleep," she murmured happily, closing her eyes again.

"Shouldn't sleep when you've been up all night. It's best to go right through." He yawned. "Thank god today's only training."

"Didn't you train when you were at home?"

"Don't need to. Bonking keeps me in shape."

"Bonking who?" she asked fearfully.

"Everyone in sight, my precious." He was pulling on the trousers of his tracksuit as he spoke. The tracksuit was a plain blue one, bearing the crossed oars of the Oxford University Boat Club. "Going to seem a bit odd, training without Hugh."

"Was it really terrible, talking to the police?"

Giles shot her the look that terrified her, the look that said she was pestering him. But he spoke gently. "I don't actually want to discuss it."

"Sorry." She started soaping her firm little breasts, hoping he'd be distracted enough to give her a quick one before he went.

He sighed. "I'll take the car. You won't need it if you're just going to sleep."

"All right," she said meekly. "The' car was actually hers, a little M.G her doting father had given her for her eighteenth birthday.

"We'll probably go to the Bear for some lunch."

"Can I come?"

"No, actually. I'll want to talk to the chaps. Haven't seen most of them since last half."

"With Hughie dead," Emma said thoughtfully, "Does that mean you're more likely to get a place in the boat?"

His face darkened. "God, women are pathetic sometimes," he snapped. "What a thing to say."

"I'm sorry," she said desperately, "I was only thinking out loud."

"And you've been wearing my Blues sweater, haven't you? It reeks of that french pong."

"I wore it when you weren't here," she said. "It reminded me of you."

"Well, don't. You'll stretch it. Christ, I look as if I'm growing a pair of tits," he said, regarding himself in the mirror. He went through to the bedroom, and she heard him whistle under his breath. "Talking of tits," he said.

"What is it?"

"Red-hot totty alert. Must have moved into Hugh and Rollo's house."

Emma came and stood beside him in a towel, shivering and wet. Terry was crossing the street just below them. "She can't have. The For Sale sign's still up. Perhaps she's only looking."

"Likewise," Giles murmured. He kissed her perfunctorily on her wet shoulder. "See you later."

When he had gone Emma got back in the bath and lay with her eyes closed, thinking about Giles. The doorbell rang, but by then she was half asleep and she couldn't be bothered to answer it.

Terry had tried most of the houses in the immediate area now, and not one of them produced someone who had lost a pregnant cat. In a couple of cases, where there was no reply, she pushed a note through the letterbox. She decided that she would try one more, and if that didn't work she'd take Dorling's advice and stick a notice in the window of the local shop.

Number fifty five, the house on the left of her own, turned out not to have a doorbell but a grandiose mock-gothic knocker. It was so heavy that when she rapped it the door, which was unlocked, swung open. The layout was an exact mirror-image of her own house next door, but there any resemblance ended: while her house was bare and dilapidated, this had been furnished by someone who knew what they were about.

She rapped the knocker again, and heard movement upstairs. While she waited she admired the sculpture of a face which had been hung on the wall by the door so that, white on white, it seemed to be emerging from the wall itself. She touched it, wondering what kind of marble it was made of, and was surprised to find that it was dry and porous to the touch. Not marble at all, but Plaster of Paris.

"I see you've met Percy." The voice belonged to a man of about forty who was standing at the top of the stairs in a dressing gown, watching her.

She jumped. "I'm so sorry. The door was open, and I was curious."

"Please, don't apologise." He indicated the sculpture. "Do you recognise him?"

"Should I?"

"I was told you were a student of literature."

"News does travel fast," she said dryly.

He came downstairs slowly. His feet and legs were bare and, she couldn't help noticing, inordinately hairy, as was the vee of chest revealed by the dressing gown. "Your clue," he said, "Is that he really was called Percy."

"When was it sculpted?"

He laughed. "It isn't a sculpture. It's an eighteenth-century Italian death mask, one of only three made from the original mould."

She looked at the mask more closely. The features were fine and almost girlish below the high forehead. "Is it Shelley?" she hazarded.

"Very well done." He was standing next to her now, and she realised that he was in fact quite a small man, at least an inch or two shorter than herself. Although his body looked as if he kept it in shape, there was grey in his hair. He was also intensely, radiantly physical: so much so that she felt her body space invaded even though he was not particularly close. "It's beautiful," she said truthfully. "Where did you get it?"

"Percy and I are old friends. I wrote a book about him, and in return he allowed me to track this down in a private collection."

"It must be worth a fortune. Isn't it risky leaving it right next to the door? Particularly if you don't lock it."

He smiled. "All risk is relative. Besides, he's my household god. That's why he's next to the threshold. By having him here I actually reduce the risk of being burgled."

"Really?" Terry said politely, not sure if he was being serious or not.

"Anyway, congratulations. You've passed the first test, which is identifying him. Now you can enter, and I will offer you hospitality. A cup of coffee, perhaps." He spoke in a strange, slightly lilting way, as if he couldn't decide whether or not to give his sentences an ironic twist, though his eyes suggested intense amusement. Whether he was amused by her or himself Terry couldn't have said.

"I came round to ask if you'd lost a cat," she said.

He raised an eyebrow. "You've found one?"

"Well, several really."

She explained about the events of the night. When she had finished he said "I'm afraid I can't help you. I don't notice animals," managing to make it sound as if it would be somehow extraordinary if he did.

"Wait," he said, and thought for a moment. "I tend to have a small party on the first night of term. Will you come? Tomorrow at about eight? A lot of the islanders will be here."

"Islanders?"

He waved his hand to indicate the area around them. "Osney Islanders. We like to think we're a race apart. Anyway, it would be a chance to meet some of your neighbours and ask them about your feline friend."

"Thank you, I'd like that. I'm Terry Williams, by the way."

"I know. I'm Brian Eden. Stay there, I want to give you something."

After a few moments he returned with a book, a hardback the thickness of a brick. It was entitled simply "Shelley", its cover design a richly coloured portrait of the poet when he was barely more than a boy. Terry blushed: she'd seen the book in the shops the previous year, when it had been in the bestseller lists. Brian Eden. She recognised the name now: as well as being a biographer, he was one of the most readable of the Sunday book critics, destroying reputations as much with his languid, well-turned witticisms as with his formidable scholarship.

He wrote something on the flyleaf, breathed on it to dry the ink from his fountain pen, and handed it to her. She glanced at what he had written:

*To Terry Williams, who admired my mask.*

Mo, she thought as she returned to her own house, is going to kill me for this.

Brian watched the door close behind her and stretched lazily. He heard her own door thump closed, then the muffled clumping of Terry's footsteps through the wall. Turning towards the death mask, he bent and slowly kissed it on the lips.

His wife was still in bed when he took her up some coffee. "Who was that?" she asked.

"The girl next door. The actual girl next door, I mean, not the dramatic stereotype. Definitely not the stereotype." He glanced down at Carla, reaching out a hand to run his fingers through her red hair. "I've asked her to come tomorrow. We'll get everyone else to have a look at her."

"She's pretty, is she?"

Brian laughed. "Ravishing, in an amazonian sort of way. I wonder what her circumstances are."

"You will be careful, won't you?"

"Whatever do you mean by that?"

Carla drank her coffee and said nothing.

In their house in Scotland, Edward Pearce was about to confront his father.

He had chosen the day and the time carefully. His father was at his least irascible in the mornings; but if things did go wrong, at least there was only a day left until term started.

He waited patiently through breakfast, drinking cup after cup of coffee to try to lubricate the dryness in his throat. The old man, immersed in the sports section of the Sunday Telegraph, didn't notice.

Eventually Edward took the plunge.

"Dad, can I talk to you?"

"What about?"

"About Oxford."

His father drank some more tea, though he glanced up automatically at the painted oar that hung on the wall above Edward's head. It was painted with the names of the rowers who had been victorious in Eights week, more than thirty years earlier. One of them was his own. Then he turned back to his paper. Edward knew he wouldn't be reading now, though. He'd be calculating. God, how he hated having to ask him for anything. But it had to be faced.

"Is something wrong?"

"Not exactly. It's about my degree course." The old man was wearing a sort of silk dressing gown with a Chinese dragon on it. He'd picked it up on his travels, the memento of a shore leave in some foreign port or other. For a moment Edward had the fantasy that he was talking directly to the baleful eye of the dragon himself, but he forced himself to continue. "I've decided to change it. To English Literature, in fact."

Still no response. "What makes you think they'll let you?" his father said at last.

"I've asked them, and they seem to think it's OK." No need to go into Hugh Scott's death now. "Basically, they've got a vacancy, and the tutor's said he'll have me."

"I'm sure he did," the old man murmured. "Keen to get anyone they could, I expect. For English Literature."

Don't rise. Don't rise to anything he says. Behave like an adult and he'll have to treat you like one. "It's something I've been thinking about for a bit. Basically I'm not finding Engineering as challenging as I'd hoped." That was something he'd planned to say, to head off any implication that he was taking a softer option.

"And what will you do with your English Literature degree? Become a teacher?"

"Not - not necessarily. There are plenty of jobs for arts graduates at the moment. Probably more than there are for engineers. I could go into management."

"Management," his father repeated. Not attacking yet, just circling: looking for an opening. "And what about your scholarship? Is this tutor who's so keen to have you keen enough to go on paying your scholarship?"

Here it came. "Well, I can do without that. It's only five hundred." His father snorted. "The real problem is that I'll probably have to go without a grant for a year."

"And you want me to pay for you." His father put down the paper at last and stared at him.

Edward reckoned he'd got this far pretty well. At least he'd been able to make his case. "Yes. It's going to be nearly two thousand. I'll pay you back, of course."

"From the money you make in management." His father smirked. "What exactly do you intend to manage again?"

Suddenly Edward could feel the helplessness and the anger rising in him like vomit. The temptation to lose control was almost overwhelming. He wanted to shout and scream and break things. He drank some more coffee and said nothing.

"Something artistic. A ballet company, perhaps." His father flipped his wrist over in a grotesque parody of a queer. "Oh, do come and read some poetry to us, Edward."

Edward couldn't think of anything to say

"Gays don't do that, actually," he said at last, indicating his father's mincing wrist.

"Don't they? I bow to your superior knowledge. I don't know many homosexuals." He pronounced it hommasexuals.

"I'm not gay just because I want to read English, for Christ's sake. You're mad." Edward realised he was going to start crying, and the shame of the realisation precipitated the actual tears. Blubbing, his father called it. "I'm going to do it anyway," he said through the choking snot, "I'm going to start next week. I'll manage on my own if you really won't help me."

"Well," said his father, picking up his paper, "I see you've already started to behave artistically."

Five hundred miles away in Northumberland Andrew Harris was lying in bed, trying to discuss his daughter Emily with his wife. Ben, their three year old, had wriggled between them and was now seeing which of his parents he could kick the hardest.

"All right," he agreed, "So I don't understand. Why doesn't she want to go back to Oxford?"

"She gets homesick," Maggie said. "I think she's lonely down there."

"She's got loads of friends," he argued. "She's spent all holiday going on about how boring it is at home." He couldn't understand the change in his daughter. She'd been the top achiever of her year at her school, the local comprehensive. She'd got an Exhibition to Oxford, and had come home after her first two terms full of self-confidence and chatter about life in college. Then, this last vacation, she'd been moody and aggressive. He had a sudden thought. "Is it boy trouble?" Maggie sighed, which meant yes.

"Come on, she's my daughter too. What's the story? She's never mentioned a boyfriend."

"I don't think he was a boyfriend exactly," Maggie said carefully. Ben started to hit his father over the head with a toy submarine that was somehow lying in the bed with them. She offered him a rattle instead to divert his attention. "It was a bit more off and on than that."

"What on earth do you mean?"

"I think she was keener on him than he was on her."

"Well, there's always next term."

"Not in his case."

"Why not?"

"You remember she told you about the boy who was killed?" Andrew nodded. "That was the one she was keen on."

Andrew stared at the ceiling. "Christ. No wonder she's feeling a bit odd."

Giles parked the car on Donnington bridge and trotted down the towpath to the boathouse. The others were already hard at it, working on the ergometers or doing press ups under the watchful eye of Roddy, the coach.

"Sorry I'm late," Giles said pleasantly, slowing to a walk.

"You're certainly late, but I doubt if you're sorry." Roddy pulled on a cigarette and regarded the young man shrewdly. "You'll have to catch up. Fifty sit-ups should sweat some of the alcohol out. And next time you turn up to one of my training sessions, make sure you've been to bed the night before."

Cursing under his breath, Giles wedged his feet under a bench and started the sit ups. Roddy was right, damn him: within moments he was sweating like a pig.

Nominally Roddy was the college Fellow of Modern History. In fact, his only passion was rowing. Forty years ago he had rowed stroke for the Dark Blues in the Boat Race, in a contest that was still talked about by his generation. He had coached the St Mary's Eight for over fifteen years; in that time only Oriel had been Head Of The River more often. Yet it was said that in all the time he had been coaching he had never himself set foot in a rowing boat. The antithesis of everything a modern coach should be, Roddy

smoked and drank and swore and indulged himself at every High Table in Oxford. There was a time when he had jogged alongside the training crews, shouting instructions from the towpath; later, as he became less fit, the shouting was done through a megaphone and his ever-increasing bulk wobbled precariously on a bicycle. When even that became too much he appeared on the river one day with a C.B radio and a Suzuki moped, on which he proceeded to roar up and down the muddy towpath, flagrantly disregarding both local bylaws and common sense. Many were the dog-owners who had had to leap out of the way as Roddy, his attention fixed on the water, charged down on them, steering one-handed and operating the radio mike with the other. Somehow, though, their complaints were never acted upon. The police reckoned they had enough town-versus-gown conflicts to resolve without taking on fanatics like Roddy.

"How's that feeling, laddie?" Roddy enquired genially as Giles staggered to his feet. He puffed cigarette smoke into the boy's face. "Not feeling sick, I hope?"

"Not in the least," Giles lied.

"Have a go on the erg, then." The college only had one proper ergometer, but Roddy had had half a dozen more built by John, the boatman. A bench with a sliding rowing seat had mounted at one end of it an exercise bike wheel and a handle. When you pulled the handle, the wheel went round. A Nobel Prize-winning Professor of Physics had designed the meters which indicated the stroke rate: Roddy liked to say it was the most useful work he'd done in his life.

As Giles grunted and heaved at Roddy's torture machine, the other man crouched down and spoke to him.

"Word to the wise, Giles. I need rowers, not passengers. Considering the way you treat your body, I will admit your performance is nothing short of miraculous. But I have to consider what putting you in the boat would do

to the others. Whether they'd see you swanning around and think they could start doing the same."

"Come off it, Roddy," he gasped, "I've been rowing in Eights since I was fourteen."

"Hmm. Do you know Edward Pearce?"

"Never heard of him. Where'd he go to school?"

"Nowhere you'd think of as a school. The point is, it was on the other side of a loch. Rowing there was the only way to avoid a three hour bus ride. His father taught him to skull: he was a Worcester man himself, as it happens. Rowed stroke for their Eight."

"You're winding me up, Rodders."

The older man nodded, lighting another cigarette from the stub of his old one. "Of course. The question is, how are you going to respond? Are you going to get serious, or are you not?" He squinted at the young man across his cigarette smoke. "That dining society of yours, for example."

"What about it?"

"Let's just say that if you're really serious about *this*," He slapped the ergometer, "You might demonstrate it by spending a little less time with your socialite friends."

"It never bothered you with Hugh."

"Young Hughie's dead. And he didn't die in very nice circumstances, did he?"

"What's that got to do with anything, Rodders?"

Roddy sighed. "Those of us in college with long memories think that certain individuals would be well advised to keep a low profile for a while. And you in particular, if you want to get into my boat, are going to have to do just that. It's up to you, laddie."

When Roddy had stomped off to harass some other unfortunate a friend, Adrian Mills, came over and climbed on the next ergometer.

"Giles. How are you? Good vac? I see Roddy was giving you one of his pep talks."

"Good to see you, Ade. Yeah, the usual stuff. What's this Edward bloke like? Roddy seems to think he might give him Hughie's seat."

"You've heard that loch-and-bull story too, then? Two miles there and two miles back?" Adrian picked up some weights and began swinging them casually. "He had a chat with me as well, earlier. I got the impression he'd been asked to lean on Hugh's friends. They seem to be terrified of any publicity."

"Why, for god's sake? There are plenty of other dining societies to worry about."

"Yes, but there's only one that Hugh was involved in. I think this must all have something to do with his death." He looked thoughtful. "You went to the inquest, didn't you?"

"Yeah," Giles paused, "It was a bit of a non-event, actually."

"It was very cleverly managed. Think about it. Did anyone speak to you about what you should say, by the way?"

"My tutor phoned me," Giles admitted. "But he didn't try to coach me or anything. Just said he understood how I felt about gossip, and that I shouldn't repeat any unless I knew it to be true."

"Gossip? What gossip?"

"Didn't you know? Hugh told me a couple of stories... but nothing to do with his death. And nothing to get Roddy in a tizz."

"Anyway, it's all very peculiar," Adrian murmured. Roddy blew a whistle, and the two of them jogged towards the next part of the circuit.