

Shell House

GAYLE CURTIS

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For Chris with all my love

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PROLOGUE

September 22nd, 1974

My name is Rebecca Banford, only it isn't the name I was born with. I am a child killer. This is a reference to me which is true and unchanging. I am a part of your society and I am a product of my circumstances and surroundings, but I am socially invisible even though I am infamous. I know you're perhaps thinking I have no right to self-pity but that's how I feel at this stage in my life.

I murdered two children. I can say it now; talk about it. Well, in my own way I can.

I am eighteen and I have been given a new name in the hope I will become someone else. But I don't know

who she is. I feel like I've been donated an empty human skin that I must unzip as though it was a costume to step into. I don't even know who I am. I can tell you what I am. I am a child killer. People become lost under their labels; wife, mother, father, sister...I am entrenched beneath mine.

I am writing this diary as some sort of cathartic experience in an attempt to discover who I really am. These are the words of my therapist. I often repeat what other people tell me and project it as my own thoughts because I don't know how to think for myself. I am hoping this experience will change all this. My therapist suggested I write down everything I wish to gain from my time in a secure unit. First and foremost, I would like to see my family again, so I can discover who I am in order to change my life.

PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

Harry Rochester November 1st, 2010

I spent much of today in my shell room. I wandered slowly around the large, tranquil room the walls of which are hidden with glass cabinets that reach from floor to ceiling. The opaque shelves are laden with all kinds of shells which I have collected for eighty years of my life. Each type of shell has a small card with a description of the specimen and a Latin translation underneath. The centre of the room is filled with large freestanding glass cabinets containing more of the same; here and there rest empty turtle shells over one hundred years old. These hold the most magic and intrigue for me. I can always see them inhabited, resting on

warm sand, lit by a full moon brightly shining in a country other than ours. They are so mysterious to me because I don't know their history, I can only imagine where they came from.

My granddaughter, Nancy, is right when she says it looks like a museum and I should open it to the public. It is either age or lack of inclination that has stopped me. These two factors have been the reason for me not doing a lot of things; I've spent much of my time wondering which is the cause of my indifference.

I've consoled myself with the fact that I've just turned eighty and don't need to worry about much anymore. I'm quite glad of the excuse. When I was in my seventies I was told many times that I wasn't too old to do this or that and now I've reached eighty I feel officially vintage. Let off the hook somehow from doing what people thought I ought to do, rather than what I wanted to. I often felt like I was walking on floating stones across a vast expanse of water, unsteadily making my way to solid ground.

I can leave everything up to my family and they can do what they wish with it when I'm gone.

The collections have been purely for my own pleasure my entire life; the only thing I felt I've created on my own, unblemished and untainted. I never felt selfish about it; I consider myself to be a good man. I've always worked hard, been a reasonably good father and never shirked my responsibilities. I saw

the collection as part of myself the more it grew; like an extra limb. The idea of it not existing fills me with an emptiness I don't wish to dwell on. Occasionally I am gripped by the fear of the sea raging up over the cliffs at the bottom of my garden and engulfing the house in some strange demand for all the shells I've stolen from it. But I knew if this ever happened I'd be taken away with it and therefore I would die with my collection. This doused my fear in comfort.

As I perused and pondered the room earlier today, I still felt after all this time as I did fifty years ago, when I'd finally been able to afford a big enough house with a room where I could display my treasured collection of shells. The room has always been tranquil, gentle and cool and I felt, when I viewed it for the first time that it was similar to the atmosphere of a chapel.

I have always been fascinated by shells. They were like empty houses, the only difference being they were cleaner and more peaceful than most. This thought never saddens me, it just fills me with intrigue. A little sea house where once there lived a magical creature. I'd become lost in this mystical little world after my mother died when I was ten, and again when I was thirty and I lost my wife, Emma.

It had been like history repeating itself, the only difference being I'd changed roles. I'd been left, aged ten, with a grieving

father in a draughty, lifeless old house and then, when I lost Emma twenty years later, I had become the bereaved husband and parent. I like to think that this beautiful house by the sea has made the whole tragedy easier on my children. Houses and surroundings are important to me and I strongly believe they influence how one deals with things.

It sounds ridiculous, but I found great comfort in my shells when I was grieving. They reminded me of my own quiet, still home, the silence the sudden transition of change causes when somebody leaves or dies. It helped me to feel less alone and stopped it engulfing me.

As I grew older and reflected on the time of my wife's death, when I'd finally been able to look beyond the loss, I'd marvelled at how tranquil the house had been. Her death had been so traumatic and for a short time had filled the house with a fractious, depressing air. But I suppose it was the calm after the storm. I couldn't help feeling the house thundered when the atmosphere was unstable, and it was pleased when the cause was expelled, even if this meant death. A gentle hush had drifted over the house and through the rooms like a thousand ghosts whispering. The only thing that had broken the silence was the cry of my baby daughter, Gabrielle, bursting into a scream, but even that was brief and gentle. I had been able, despite my turmoil, to calm her and see to

her needs. My two-year-old son, Jonathan, withdrew in a make-believe world where he pretended everything was how he wanted it to be, not really understanding what had happened. We had all rubbed along together in a strange silence as we waited for the unbelievably heavy grief to leave. It was like having an unappealing guest you had to be awfully polite and respectful to.

Eventually grief departed leaving its shadowy imprint and another nightmare began to unfold in our house by the sea.

Harry Rochester November 4th, 2010

I suppose I should have started by saying that as you read this I have no care whether you like me or not. I'm not telling you this story for any other reason than I want to expel it from myself. I am undecided about what I think of most of it and I have no regard for what you or anyone thinks about me either way. I just need to talk, to put this on paper; it's the only cathartic experience I

imagine will work. My name is Harry Rochester. My arrogance when I began writing this caused me to assume you knew who I was, seeing as you are, after all, reading it and it is my name stated at the top of the page.

It's snowing today. I love the snow even though I'm eighty. It fills me with a strange kind of calm and comfort, a bit like my shells. I also love the winter and all that it brings; the cold weather, wet dark clouds and the representation of being cosseted indoors.

I often indulge in sitting in my chair overlooking the garden which slopes down towards the ocean as if my house was positioned on the edge of the world.

I sometimes read a paper or a book but mostly I just sit. When you reach my age, you have much to think about and reflect on. There are many memories to rerun and alter to what I wished had happened or could have occurred.

Today I chose to stand outside at the bottom of the garden and watch the sea turn and heave, calming itself from its turbulent storm.

I can still feel the tingle in my hands where I scraped the snow from the crumbling garden wall and gripped my hot cup of coffee to reheat them. I like the shock of the cold then the heat; it reminds me I'm still alive; that everything around me is real.

Now, here I sit by the warmth of the fire writing this bloody diary which so far is making me feel irritable. Laying forth the words onto paper as if I were expelling a swarm of bees with their bitter sweet personalities can only be a good thing. Perhaps I'm just tired. I have held onto them for far too long.

So here I am contemplating the end of my life and completing the last chapter by writing it all down before I die.

My life is almost over, and I felt today, standing in the stillness of the snow, that the filming of a movie is about to end. And now I am older and less arrogant, or so I think, and able to reflect on my regrets and mistakes and take full responsibility.

I can hear you all saying as you read this that lots of people live past eighty these days, that I'm being ridiculous, but I know my time is close. I just know. My dreams are filled with finality and life brings me inopportune moments that lead me to organising my imminent departure.

I am often pondering on the feeling of life ceasing and the heavy, empty emotions it conjures up for me now. My life came to a halt when my wife, Emma died. My memory recall is always of times before then; everything else has a hazy, surreal occurrence.

As I sit now in my faithful armchair overlooking the garden that Emma and I planned and cultivated, the room lights up as if I am transported back in time.

It was autumn and there was a post-summer storm brewing. Emma was heavily pregnant with Jonathan, our first born, and we'd both clambered into the house chased by the heavy pitter patter of rain. She was soaked through; her thin dress clung to her, accentuating the shape of a life within a life. I never tired of watching her change, knowing she was protecting and growing the most precious thing, we had ever and would ever create between us. It fascinated me.

We'd lit an oil lamp to take the edge off the gloom and hurried the kettle onto the stove to boil.

With the wind and rain still clinging to our red, cold skin, we busied ourselves with the small chores that would lead us to having an hour's rest in front of the fire.

I chuckle to myself now as I remember Emma laying out her home-made Eccles cakes on our best china. She couldn't bake but insisted on doing it regardless and produced foods that begged the question of their title. I never humoured her; she wouldn't have it.

She would almost tiptoe into the room, her face full of pride at the dark brown, hard offerings laid on the pretty china plates. She looked like she was serving royalty.

I'd light the small fire whilst she poured the tea and we'd talk easily and idly about our plans for our new home. The sitting room was the only decent area in the house. We'd just bought it and even

though it was structurally sound it needed quite a bit of cosmetic work and hard elbow grease. We made the sitting room nice and were working on our bedroom so that we had some sort of comfort in the draughty old place, especially with our first child on the way.

They were hard times for everyone, even though the war was long ended, but my Aunt had passed away and left me a substantial sum of money in her will. This had given us the lucky start we needed and enabled us to buy the home we'd spent so long staring at every time we went for a walk down by the sea.

With the money that was left we'd got a few pieces of second hand furniture and with the help of kind relatives donating old curtains and crockery we were able to keep some of the inheritance by for a rainy day.

In our little routine that we had created and slipped into there was time for Emma to sit on the rag rug, feet outstretched, ready to absorb the heat of the freshly lit fire as we sipped steaming strong tea out of the saucers of our tea cups. The Eccles cakes were politely avoided, and I remember browning slices of stale bread in front of the fire with a toasting fork.

My stomach still insists on lurching at the memory. The light has gone out along with the fire and I'm back in the present day in the same room with its lifeless silence. I can still hold onto how much in love we'd been and how perfect it all was. It wouldn't

have been so painful had we not been so in love; even if I had the ability to change the horror of the birth, which was one of the memories that replayed in my mind exactly as it was.

The film in my mind flips to the second time she was pregnant, two years later, having almost given up hope that we'd ever have any more children. How different it had all seemed. We had still been happy, but the pregnancy had been a strain for Emma. I'd watched her often during that time, how pained her face was, her expression changing to a smile when she caught anyone looking.

I'd seen and felt the cold draught from the black cloud then. Our little family and our perfect little life had been too good to be true. I'd tried desperately to will it not to be so, but I knew the catastrophic events that were about to descend on us were set in stone.

It could have been prevented in a way, in my mind, had Emma made a different decision. But I'd been over these a million times. If I'd taken it from her hands, I doubt we'd have ever recovered from it. I know that now, but at the time my arrogance and youth told me it was so. That it didn't matter if I had her.

CHAPTER TWO

4/11/2010 Rebecca Banford

The photographs came about by accident at first and then I began to collect them. It all started when I was out on one of my ‘exclusions’. They were basically accompanied excursions, but we called them exclusions because we were ostracised from society. No one dared step out of line because privileges would be removed as punishment and none of us wanted to risk that, they were too precious in our stark, stiff routines in the home or secure unit as it was known.

I don’t know whether I’ve mentioned it but I’m Rebecca Banford. I started writing this diary when I was eighteen. It didn’t really work out as you probably gathered;

I slipped off my perch so to speak. I'll tell you about that in just a minute...

I am fifty-four now. Yes, fifty-four. That's how long it's taken for me to return to this diary.

Anyway, as I think I said before I'm not Rebecca Banford. I am Gabrielle Rochester. Yes, my mother married a Mr. Rochester, only there was no happy ending. I ruined it.

Back to the photographs. We were out on one of our excursions from the nut house...I don't know why I just said that because I loved my time at Hellesdown, the secure unit I was sent to when I was ten. Anyway, I digress. I was allowed to go into an antique store. I had a thing about them; loved the smell and the history. No one else in my camp liked them but it was the only shop I requested to visit.

I was fifteen at the time, I remember now. On this particular day I stumbled across an old photograph album. I was mesmerized by it. It was filled with black and white photographs of families on outings at weddings and births. What I couldn't get my head around was how it had come to be in this shop. I felt sad about it. Then I wondered if it

was there because their family had been ruined by someone. Someone like me.

Mr. Jim, who owned the shop, piped up and told me I could have it. I was elated. I felt like I'd been given something precious to nurture.

Let me tell you a little about Mr. Jim. When I first started going into his shop he was very suspicious. He kept glancing out of the window at the others in my group and our house officer, who were all waiting outside for me. I think he thought we were 'special' kids, you know? I don't know what the correct term is today. Anyway, he was extremely aloof and watched me constantly as though I might steal something. I desperately didn't want him to know who I was and where I'd come from but at the same time I didn't want him to think I was retarded. That sounds like an awful thing to say but that's the way you think at that age. I wanted him to like me. So, I began to talk to him, ask him questions. It was the most I'd talked to anyone in years. I felt I could though. He wasn't someone who was forcing me to talk like everyone I'd ever known. He didn't know who I was, what I'd done or where I'd come from and it felt good.

Eventually he warmed, and his tone changed. Once he knew I wasn't a 'special' kid he didn't mind me coming in. Weird really when I look back. If only he'd known... He asked me once where we all came from and I lied and told him it was the boarding school ten miles away. I felt bad about that. Still do. He became a very dear friend.

Anyway, I called him Mr. Jim and he got used to it eventually. He'd introduced himself as Jim, but I was conditioned to use Mr or Sir and knew I'd be in trouble if I was overheard referring to someone by their Christian name. We weren't beaten or anything at Hellesdown, but it was strict.

Mr. Jim reminded me of my father, only not so quiet. He was tall, very lean with a head full of white hair; almost angelic.

The day he gave me the photograph album was the best day of my life. I remember him laughing at how pleased I was. "It's only a silly old album. Not worth anything to anyone except the family it came from."

But it meant the world to me. I couldn't wait to get back to my room to look at it properly. I would sit and stare at the pictures for hours. They weren't still snapshots to me,

they were moving pictures. I could see the wind blowing in people's hair, shading their eyes from the sun or stamping their feet to keep warm in the snow. I imagined what they were thinking, what they were saying. I invented entire stories for their lives and visited them in my head as clear as if it was real. I had created another world full of families and life.

I can look back now and see the affinity I had with them. They no longer belonged anywhere. They were like me and it stopped me feeling so desperately alone. I called them the 'lost people'.

After that, Mr. Jim let me have any photographs that came his way. He knew I didn't have very much pocket money, if any, and he assured me that he wouldn't be able to sell them anyway. I built up quite a collection in an old shoe box he gave me.

Then Mr. Jim suddenly died, shortly after I started writing this diary, when I was eighteen, and that was when I fell off my perch.

Harry Rochester November 7th, 2010

I'm not sure how cathartic this experience is. It only seems to be revealing a rage that appears to have been hidden for many years. I don't think I was even aware of it. Memories I don't want to recall...

Maybe I ought to get down to the nitty gritty; throw myself into it and feel it all for what it is. Perhaps this IS the healing process. I feel as though I'm opening the door to a room and closing it quickly because I do not want to see what's inside or enter it.

I am now getting my breath to carry on. I must do this before my time runs out. Not just for me but for my family. I want them to know how it was, why our lives changed, to offer some sort of explanation for the way we all are. I know there is nothing wrong with the way we are, but I wonder that we might be different had certain events not occurred. And writing this down is like setting it in stone; I find this easier than talking. I was never good at explaining things audibly.

My daughter, Gabrielle killed two children. There. I've said it. I don't know what to think about it and, yet I've thought of it constantly. It still shocks me and never fails to cause me physical pain.

I don't know her or where she is anymore. She was sent away when she was ten. I lost touch with her... I could make excuses but I'm not going to. It is what it is. I didn't make the effort to keep in contact. I thought she was the devil's child. I was ashamed. I was still grieving for Emma, her mother and it seemed disrespectful to her memory. These aren't excuses they're facts, my facts in any case.

I thought she'd come from the devil when she was born because Emma died giving her life. There were complications during the labour and she made me promise I would consent to saving Gabrielle instead of her if it came to that, I think she knew it was going to happen. 'Our children matter more' were her very words. I blindly agreed, not for one-minute thinking it would ever become a reality. But anyone looking at her lying in bed in agony would have known that one of them wasn't going to make it. She had never glowed through that pregnancy and she certainly hadn't during labour. I remember her cheeks being bright red from the pain but there was a greyish blue colouring around the rest of her face and a clammy unhealthy sweat clung to her skin. It was the cloying smell of death. I can still envisage it now and it makes me shiver.

She was so loyal to her Catholic faith; I knew there'd be no budging her on the decision. But as I said earlier I never imagined

it would come to that. I'd spent the whole of her pregnancy jollyng her along, pretending it was all fine; carrying her along in my imaginary boat to help her reach the shore safely. I brushed all the fear and sickness under the rug, only to lift it after the whole sorry mess and realise how much she was suffering. And yes, I went over it a million times thinking I could have changed it all, but she'd already told the doctor of her wishes. I arrogantly believed it was a gallant gesture on her part, a declaration of her faith and insurance in case things went terribly wrong. I had little faith in the medical professions predictions and whole heartedly thought they were wrong and that both would survive or at least she would. Surely her resilience was stronger than a small baby and we could have more children, couldn't we, if the worst happened? What a stupid, stubborn ass I was in those days. I probably still am.

I lost my faith after that. Not that I'd ever been a great believer. I saw myself as a mild Catholic. It was in the family, but Emma was a staunch follower. Bloody religion. I never spoke of it thereafter. I hear people turning to their faith during a crisis and I can understand it to some degree, but it wasn't a comfort in my eyes.

Many, many, many times I have changed that fatal conversation I had with her. I remember wanting to say to her that

I was nothing without her; that my life would be pointless. But the words never came, because I thought she was being irrational, and it would be a storm we would never have to face in my happy little boat, so I just squeezed her hand and told her not to be so daft. She fell into unconsciousness after that and then the doctor pulled me aside.... The decision I made seems ridiculous now because I would change it every time. I know that's an abhorrent thing to say about your daughter but that's how I feel. There is little point in writing this diary if I'm not going to be honest. I wanted them to do all they could to save the baby, thinking I would heroically rescue Emma and get her through the next part. She couldn't possibly die from childbirth - she was far too strong for that.

I need to think again. I've found a saddle oyster in the draw of my bureau. I'd forgotten how much I like these shells. I used to hold one when I was trying to concentrate during the times I had to bring my work home with me. As I hold it now the smooth rivets and ridges still calm me just as they did then. I can appreciate them more now - I am older and not so hot headed.

I'm tired now and must close.

14/11/2010 Rebecca Banford

I have written to my father. That's assuming he's still alive, lives in the same place or even wants to talk to me.

I have felt immensely ashamed for years at what I did even though I don't understand the whys or wherefores. I know the cold hard facts of it all when I address it but anything beyond that baffles me. Sometimes I feel as though it was me as another person in a past life. It's all a bit of a blur in my memory and that's not an excuse. I will never make any excuses for what I did. But I know I was a child and children don't fully understand the consequences of their actions. All I remember is that I didn't know they were going to die. I was so shocked by it and I still am. I was convinced for weeks that they would both wake up and everything would go back to normal. But they didn't. Obviously.

I'm not ready for this yet. I think I need to see my father before I can formulate my thoughts. He is part of the run of events and I'm staring at a puzzle with most of the pieces missing and I can't see what the picture's going to be.

Having sent the letter, I'm now wondering if I should have traced my brother, Jonathan first.... Well, there is no point worrying about it now, it's done.

I don't think I've ever wanted anything more in my whole life than a letter back from my father right now. Except the obvious – to be able to turn back time. I've never dared ask for anything ever. It's not because I feel sorry for myself - it's purely that I've never felt as though I deserved it. Not after what I did. I'm not sure I do even now but I know if I had my time again I wouldn't have done what I did. And it's not because of the punishment or the life I had following it. It's because I stole two precious lives. I'd have the same life again if it meant those two little children had lived.

I am not a danger to anyone. It didn't make me a serial killer. I have no urges to kill anyone. Fundamentally I'm a good person.

I have spent most of my life burying myself in an education which then led me to write books. My father had high hopes for my brother and I, and I like to think that I made a small contribution for my failings by being a successful writer. Not that he knows anything about it

because I write under a pen name. But I know I've done okay - that I haven't turned out as badly as everyone expected me to.

For many years as a young adult, when I was first released, I thought my guilt was plastered all over my face. This affected my confidence in getting jobs and holding them down. So, I worked in mundane, badly paid jobs under my new identity and that subsidised my education.

My life consisted of working, studying and writing. I didn't have any family to visit and I refused to impose on friends. I have always kept them at arm's length because ultimately, I am one big lie, as I see it. I hate lies. I was punished many times for supposedly lying. It's a bitter pill to swallow when you haven't actually told any. It teaches you never to do it. I can never tell my friends who I really am and that doesn't sit well with me. They ask questions that I can't answer without lying. It's ironic really because without their encouragement I would never have sent my first manuscript off to publishers. Eventually, to my shock, a publishing house offered me a contract along with a pen name to write under. Little did they know that I was already writing under one.

So, all in all I've led quite a privileged, if slightly solitary, comfortable life. I have hidden amid my stories and characters for many years as I did amongst my photographs.

Now it is time, for me, to tell the real story. Not for anyone other than myself and my family. If this is the right path to take, then my father will write back to me. It'll be my sign, so to speak; my key to the opening of the next door.

Harry Rochester November 15th, 2010

I can't quite believe it. The timing I mean. I received a letter from Gabrielle this morning. She wants to see me. I don't know what I'm going to do.

There was an initial shock and disbelief when I first opened the letter and realised who it was from. Now I feel nothing. I'm

sure that's not true but at this precise moment there is nothing there.

I became so distracted by it that I found myself sitting on a bench in front of the sea wall. I'd walked into the village as I do most days to get some groceries. The result of which was me strolling out of the shop with a basket full of unpaid food. Nobody noticed. I didn't realise until somebody stopped to sit on the bench beside me and asked me if I was okay. It was a young man who'd taken a break from his run to have some water. He meant well, and I was glad of the interruption and even more pleased that he didn't use that patronizing voice people save for the elderly. He just spoke to me normally. I don't know why I was so surprised by it. Not used to it I suppose and sometimes I don't feel entirely normal, whatever that is. I do think at times I'm going slightly senile. I have many moments of clarity and then find myself in places or doing things I hadn't consciously thought of.

I did eventually go back to the shop and pay for the items after I'd finished thinking and discussing with the sea.

The sea has a way of offering me a perspective that I may not have seen or wasn't fully aware of. I don't know if it has the same effect on everyone. I look across that grey-blue ocean and see an expanse of power. The realisation of how small and insignificant my life is engulfing me every time.

I talk to the sea. It's the wisest, dearest old friend I have. I can trust it beyond measure and it's always there for me. I've never fished or sailed in it, only occasionally paddled my feet. We like our friendship like that; it works for us. There's something, for me, about taking fish from the sea. I think you're 'chosen' to do this task and you're taking quite a gamble if you've never had that invite. It sounds very hypocritical because I'm the first person who'll rush down to the village to buy fresh fish. I just feel I wasn't cut out to fish in it. It's a magical place. It's a bit like some people can whisper to horses or herd sheep. Its tempestuous nature scares me somewhat. Any second it can decide there's an imbalance in its relationship with you and engulf you as though you were nothing more than a tiny shrimp. My way with the sea works for me. It has allowed me a beautiful house on a cliff from which to observe it, and gifted me many glorious shells. I would never disrespect it or take it for granted.

Today it heaved and sighed under the grey clouds. Together we decided I ought to see Gabrielle. I need to see her before I die. I have important things to discuss with her. I won't tell Jonathan she's coming. Not yet anyway.

20/11/2010 Rebecca Banford

It has been five days and I have received nothing from my father. I'm wondering if I should wait longer. But surely if it was a no I'd have heard by now. Perhaps his silence is a no.

Each day I have eagerly awaited the arrival of the post. I know I shouldn't be so expectant for something which is very likely not to have the conclusion I wish for.

I have toyed with the idea of just turning up at the house. I can remember the address. I repeated it over and over in my head when I was taken away. I felt like Dorothy from *the Wizard of Oz*. I knew I had to remember where I came from. I used to mutter it repeatedly as though I were reciting 'there's no place like home'. But then Dorothy wasn't sent away because she had committed the most heinous of crimes.

I'm not sure how I'm going to cope with this rejection knowing myself as I do now. I don't think I deserve it. I'm not saying it's not fair or anything; I would never be so indulgent. I just think I'm entitled to see my family. You see, it's still there. Just writing that line causes the guilt and shame to creep over me. I still don't feel entitled to do or

have anything. Yes, I have money, I'm successful, but these aren't at the core of what really matters.

Being sent away and rejected the first time was acceptable to me. It bloody hurt but I accepted it. I knew I didn't deserve any less. I had taken the lives of two small children; caused untold pain to lots of people. And however difficult a child I was, at that age I generally knew right from wrong, yet I still can't explain why I did it.

Rejection forty -four years on is going to hit me hard. I can feel it already. I've begun staying in bed longer, struggling to get out of it only wanting to return to it an hour later.

I have always been prone to bouts of melancholy. It's never depression. People say they suffer from depression when actually it's just melancholy. It's like when people say they've got flu when really, it's just a bad cold. That's how I refer to it anyway. I've never felt like slitting my wrists you see, even when I fell off my perch. Underneath it all I had the urge to live and I don't think you do when you're depressed.

I've always been grateful for what I have; I've never undervalued it. When I was young and self-indulgent and

indignant I soon snapped out of it. I was lucky. People with depression, through no fault of their own, don't have this ability.

Anyway, I don't have the balls to kill myself. It's probably simultaneously the most selfish and brave act someone can do. I think people are either born with it in them or not. It's almost like an illness waiting for a trigger; a dormant kind of cancer.

My friend's brother was like it. He just couldn't cope with life in general. And I'm not saying he was a weak person by any means. He lacked joy in anything. Everything appeared as a black, bleak empty space. If he was enjoying himself, the nothingness that he thought was beyond it depressed him. He was depressed by the atrocities of life. You'd feel slightly down just being in his presence for five minutes, although he was an incredibly interesting person to talk to. Life was good for him too which makes it even more tragic. But he saw something deeper that went beyond happiness; the black hole beyond the stars; the end to the party. You could feel the emptiness, the despairing clarity of his thoughts. Something I don't wish to dwell on or think about too much.

Had he not killed himself before 9/11 he most definitely would have afterwards. It was like an inevitable task he had to do and in the end, he just wanted to get it over and done with.

I've always used him as a marker against my own bouts of misery. I definitely have visits from melancholy. I embrace it too; give it a great big hug. It goes away quicker in my experience if you do.

21/11/2010 Rebecca Banford

A letter arrived this morning! I am elated! It's only a couple of paragraphs long but it's a positive start. The relief that he is still alive is immense. I shut the idea away for a long time, assuming he was dead all these years. Then the fear that this might be true really hit me.

I have read it over and over all day. I can detect some warmth between the lines. Maybe I've read it too much and am seeing things that aren't really there.

Anyway, he has agreed to see me. Says we have things to discuss. This worries me slightly from the point of view of him giving me a lecture about never wanting any contact from me ever again.... I can't think about this right now. Surely, he would have stated this in his correspondence to me.

He wants me to go to the house. It is all beyond what I hoped for. A new part of my life is beginning. Even if it is the one and only time I am allowed to visit I feel it will piece together a lot of components for me, however painful.

I am to travel over on the 1st of December.

It's funny because I remember it being one of his favourite days of the year aside the fact that memories of my mother, Emma and her absence made him slightly maudlin. But the 1st of December was always the day he put the Christmas decorations up and it always caused a stir of excitement around the house.

The one that is the clearest is the last one I spent with him and Jonathan. He always got the Christmas decorations down from the attic on the 1st of that month. Jonathan and I would sneak up the ladder in between his arduous trips up and down it. The attic fascinated us. It was dark and

mysterious; full of memories of lifetimes we knew nothing about. It was the only time of year we were allowed up there.

My father would set the boxes of decorations out around the freshly cut Christmas tree, sitting proudly in its hand painted clay pot. He'd light his pipe along with the fire and on would go his favourite Chopin records; this was all closely followed by a glass of whiskey. He tried in his own way to make things fun for us. I'm not sure who the decorations ritual was for most; us, my mother or him.

We were allowed to help him if we didn't chatter too much or bicker, which was worse. My father liked silence to be filled with classical music or gentle conversation. His face wore so many expressions when he was engrossed in something, and if you looked carefully you could see exactly where he was in his mind and what he was feeling. Maybe that's just because he's my father and I know him. Well, knew him once.

It has come to my attention whilst writing this that I'm not sure how to address him. I know he's my father but maybe he won't like me to refer to him as so. It feels peculiar. When I think of calling him Harry, it hurts. I'd like to think it'd hurt him too, but I don't know. I don't

really know him now. I just remember the man with the pipe who liked to play his records.

I can't really say anything more about him other than that. Apart from him being a solicitor and that he liked collecting shells. I guess I don't know him now at all. I used to panic when I couldn't picture his face or hear his voice; it was as though he was fading away from me into the distance. Then in my quieter moments when I'd calmed and finished crying he'd drift back to me and I'd hear his voice.

Harry Rochester November 25th, 2010

I am a creature of habit. I know this is a common phrase, but it fits me perfectly. I find that I slip easily into a routine and then I try to change it because I never wanted to become one of those types of people. I invariably revert back because I've found I actually like my rituals and routines. I find great comfort from continuity. It never bothered me when I worked, and it enabled me to have a successful career so why shouldn't I carry it on now I am retired?

I get great satisfaction from areas of my routine. Eleven O'clock always pleases me; it's time to stop whatever I'm doing and have a hot drink, normally coffee, and biscuits.

I always go out for a stroll around three and mainly talk to the sea. I stop off on the way home to get something nice for supper. I cannot and will not ever understand people who won't cook for themselves because they are on their own. It's one of my favourite times of the day. I can think of nothing better than preparing, cooking and eating a meal that you have created solely for yourself. That's not entirely true in my case because I share my supper every evening with my dog, Bruce. He's also retired. He was a top-notch gundog up until a year ago. His hearing isn't what it was, so we decided it was time for him to hang up his gun. He still accompanies me for beating when the shooting season starts though and he's still good at it.

I'm sure you find this all mundane and boring, but it is part of my life. The whole idea of this project is for you to get a feel of whom I was and who I am.

Anyway, I have asked her to come over. Gabrielle. She's coming on the 1st; as good a day as any. I'm wondering if I should ask her to stay for a few days. We've a lot to get through and she's travelling a long way. I don't know. I'm not sure what I want or what to expect. We might not get on and I could be stuck with her.

I don't know her, yet she's my flesh and blood; our flesh and blood, mine and Emma's.

I've wasted so many years brushing it under that big carpet. Now I can feel time trying to engage me in a race that for the most part I don't want to participate in. Not yet anyway.

I feel quite excited at the thought of seeing her and getting to know her. That small connection of a letter has dispersed, for me, so many strong emotions that I felt a long time ago. I can't forget what happened but there is now nothing for me to forgive anymore.

I'm going to make a room up for her just in case. I'll write and mention it to her then we'll see how it pans out.

I have decided not to mention it to Jonathan at all. I'm going to see how it goes first. There's no risk of him turning up while she's here, he never calls round without ringing first. I have pondered on the thought that Nancy, my granddaughter, might, but I'm going to cross that bridge if it occurs.

I remember how much she reminded me of Gabrielle when she was younger. I used to indulge myself in thinking she was her and I was having my time all over again. That's why we're so close I think, because I've spent so much time with her. We have a strong bond. I think all grandchildren have a special relationship with one or more of their grandparents, however well they get on with their parents. I'm sure some of the time she spends with me is because

she worries about me being on my own. Loneliness frightens her, so she needs to soothe it for others. She's a kind girl. She's now at that age where her college work and social life are keeping her busy, so I don't see as much of her. I'm fine with it, I like my own company and I want her to live her life. Not spend it worrying about a silly old codger like me.

I'm sure I could trust her with my news of Gabrielle's visit, but this is something that goes beyond our friendship and I must remember she is my granddaughter and this issue must be kept within those boundaries.

I told her a couple of years ago about Gabrielle. She'd grown up believing she was dead; we thought this was best at the time, the least questions asked the better and all that. That feels terrible now I've seen it written on paper.

She was shocked obviously, but very understanding, as I knew she would be. From the day I told her she has been intrigued by the idea of an aunty and what she may have missed out on. We are such a small family unit that the idea of someone new is extremely exciting.

I must just mention it, for I am extremely proud. My Nancy is training to be a solicitor. I like to think I had some influence over this decision!

This process of writing a diary feels so strange, even now. I look at all this writing and flick through the pages and can't believe I am reiterating our family story for anyone to peruse. God only knows whose hands this could end up in.

Everyone has a family story, don't they? Why will ours be of any interest to anyone? I suppose some are more shocking than others.

27/11/2010 Rebecca Banford

It's strange but ever since I received the letter from Harry, (I have decided this is the best form of reference for now), I have remembered so much more from my time with him and Jonathan.

The problem is even the happy memories carry a heavy weight because whatever I recall is immediately bound to the terrible event thereafter. It's going to be a painful journey and I'd be lying if I said I wasn't scared but I'm excited too. I hadn't realised how much I wanted to go home. I told myself quite harshly for years that I would never be able to return. I had to in order to cope. It's all I

had wanted for such a long time when I was first sent away, that and my mother who I never knew. The emotion was so suffocating I felt at times I might choke from the mass in my throat of wanting it so much. I guess it was like feeling permanently homesick.

Harry Rochester November 28th, 2010

I have flung myself from excitement and elation to outright trepidation. I have toyed all day with the idea of ringing her and cancelling. I haven't done it, mainly because I'm too frightened to speak to her. It seems ridiculous on paper but in my head, it's been far too long to speak to her on the telephone. The last phone call I had with her was when I told her never to contact me again. She was eighteen at the time and I am deeply ashamed of what I said. I hadn't seen her since her trial when she was eleven. I'd sent her the odd birthday and Christmas card but never visited and then she called me out of the blue. I think I acted out of shock more than anything, but it was dreadful. I couldn't possibly think of rejecting her again on the telephone in that manner. But then there is no best way to ostracise someone, which is quite simply just what it is. It

is cruel, and I can't and will not do it. But then I suppose writing is a cowardly way also.

After many hours of thinking I decided against it because I began to worry that she wouldn't receive the letter in time and then we'd have one of those ghastly scenarios where she'd find it on the doormat when she got home after her visit with me. That would be truly awful too.

The other reason following the first is that my emotions might be fleeting and then I would regret my hasty actions and for the main part, I want to see her. It is purely fear and a stirring up of old memories which have caused this storm within me.

The day that is the clearest for me is when the police came to take her away for questioning. I can see vividly her pale side profile through the window of the car as she sat morosely next to a police woman.

Many things slotted into my head that day. How peculiar she'd been that week; quiet, withdrawn from the rest of us, quite tearful and moody when spoken to. I knew we were in trouble the day they'd come to routine question us over the disappearance of two children from the village. It had felt like something was ending and I had no explanation of why at the time. It felt similar to when Emma was nearing the end of her labour. This creaky old house has

never failed to let us know when something is about to change. Its atmosphere would alter the turning of a weathervane.

I only went to see her a few times after she was taken away. I hadn't intended it to be that way. I had planned to stay with her until she came home, to fight for her rights, but I needed some time away from her to think. And those few hours turned into days, then weeks which then blurred into months. I didn't believe they'd take her away forever. But a few days passed, and I was informed she'd been moved to another secure unit. Then I became wrapped up in the shame of it all and that was what caused me to lose all rationale. I wanted to expel her from our lives. I was so hurt and angry at the abhorrent offence she had committed. There was no denial or investigation into her innocence. I was told she'd confessed and she was guilty and that was pretty much that. I visited her frequently once she was sent to the secure unit and my time with her became more and more difficult. I attended the first day of her trial and then to hear her sentencing, and never went back.

Media, friends and relatives all flooded in as though the sea had risen over the cliffs and I became overwhelmed with it all. And now, looking back, I was unable to think clearly by myself.

All I kept replaying in my mind was the last conversation I'd had with her in the police station. I shouldn't have had any kind

of contact with her during the time of questioning but because I knew the police well through my work as a barrister, they allowed me to see her.

I still remember those words and the look on her face. 'I didn't mean to kill them Dad. We were playing a game.' That was it for me; the end of my world. After they'd finished interviewing her and I could visit I made excuse after excuse with myself not to go but always gave in because my love for my daughter hadn't just disappeared. Eventually, I lost the argument with myself and I felt justified in my actions never to see her again. I became brainwashed by the outrage of everyone around me. She was dead to me for many years after. The lightening crack of pain that used to spread through me when I thought like this is still there, only it's not so forceful. When you're young you're wrapped up in all the hardships that hit you, but really, it's the added trauma we cause ourselves when there's a crisis. You imagine you're protecting yourself from more pain and sometimes we react to things because we feel that's how we ought to or how other people think we should. We then develop a defensive attitude and become indignant. All this tends to achieve is more physical and mental pain. I've learnt over the years to let things be as much as possible, that we have the choice in which way to react in certain situations. It's all so simple when you get to my age, but we turn it into something so complicated. I

haven't cracked it by any stretch of the mark; my emotions still get the better of me. There's a lot to be said for 'Keep Calm and Carry on'. My mother once told me that you learn to stop battling with yourself eventually and to accept your feelings. She was right, and I never understood it until much later on. I pondered on it for years and one day the penny dropped. Battling with how I'm feeling only makes it worse. Ride the storm and it's over much quicker. I'm not sure I'm making any sense, but I think what I'm trying to say is, I reached an age, I can't recall exactly how old I was when I stopped feeling so damn sorry for myself. You inflict less pain on yourself that way. There's always some poor beggar worse off than you.

I've also learnt that other people's actions are just that, their own. We choose how we let it affect us. This was a hard one to conquer with my daughter because you blame yourself for your children's actions. I got halfway there, but I don't think abandoning her was the way to do it. I know that now, but I can't change it. I needed to show compassion, but I was unable to find it. Everything else paled into insignificance beside it, which was only a good thing. It became a bench mark against everything else and I developed into a calmer person. I look back now and see that this was a good thing and in some ways, it benefited my job. Goodness knows what would have happened had I followed the path on which I was embarking.

Before I reached this stage, I went through what can only be described as 'a patch', because I have no recollection of how long it went on for. I'm fairly sure it was only months and not years. I think, looking back, that I had some sort of nervous breakdown. Either way I was on a slippery slope and Jonathan suffered for it. I think it's why we weren't terribly close when he was younger. We get on well now, far better than we've ever done but there was a lot for him to deal with as a child and I didn't help matters. I was a mass of selfish, arrogant, indignant rage because of what had happened to me. And 'me' was the whole problem. I couldn't see anyone else's pain or loss – just my own.

I decided, childishly, that I'd had enough of being a parent. Why did I have to do it on my own? What had I done to deserve this? And my all-time favourite, why does everything go wrong for me?

These were the most popular self-indulgent questions I asked myself and bored others with. Finding myself heavy with unanswered self-pity, I began drinking after work in whatever pubs I could find open on the way home. Jonathan would go to my sister, Maggie's, on the way home from school. He'd done this for years but instead of me picking him up after work he began to stay later until eventually he stayed overnight, and the weekdays ran into weekends. He'd always been happy going to her after school

and she was pleased to have him, but it wasn't right when it became a permanent and extended situation.

In the back of my mind I was hoping she'd take him on as part of her own ever-growing brood. Be his mother. I certainly didn't feel fit to be a parent. I'd messed up one child's life, I wasn't about to be responsible for another. Time passed and so did my failure to visit Gabrielle. I was shutting her out of my mind and I wanted to do the same to Jonathan. It was like erasing my entire life and starting again and I didn't want anything that reminded me of the past.

Then, as families tend to do, I was pulled aside and told of my shortcomings. It's strange but when someone points things out to you, even if you don't like it at the time, you look at it all from a completely different angle. I could see afterwards that drinking myself into oblivion every night and not being a good father, or one at all really, was not the answer. I thought it had been and it clearly was when I reached the bottom of each whiskey bottle. I sound like an alcoholic! I wasn't. I just went on what would now be described as a binge, a very self-absorbed one. I didn't like who I was or who I became when I was drinking. And I sort of knew what I was doing was wrong. You know it is, when the best of the old-time alcoholics gravitates towards you in the bar.

My family stepped in at the right time and when I sobered up properly I was extremely grateful. Jonathan didn't want a surrogate mother – he wanted his father as he had done all along. He needed me and I sure as hell needed him. My sister and her family moved away shortly after that. Her husband was in the army and he had a posting in Hampshire, so I had no choice but to get on with my own life. Unfortunately, my new found second chance didn't reach to me visiting Gabrielle again. I felt some sort of strange anger towards her and for quite some time I couldn't shake it off. Of course, now I feel immense guilt at my abandonment of her and how I failed her, and Emma.

After that our home consisted of him and me. I wasn't one of these men on the lookout for a new wife to fill the gap. Not that I'm knocking people who do. But I knew I'd never feel like I had done with Emma and I didn't want to even try to recreate it. It felt disrespectful. She was my one and only.

It felt unfair to string someone along anyway, make them think I loved them when the whole time my mind would have been comparing and wishing I was with someone else. Friends told me I'd grow to love another woman, that it would be nice for Jonathan. But this was how they'd feel about it if it happened to them. Of course, Jonathan missed his mother, but she could never

be replaced. I didn't want to be one of those fathers forcing an unwanted step-mother onto their children.

Jonathan never expected there'd be anyone new and I don't think he'd have coped with it very well. He clung to me and I to him while I waited for my mixed feelings towards Gabrielle to pass. Always waiting, as though I were expecting a visitor to come and tell me everything had changed. Had I looked internally rather than externally things may have been different. All I was left with later in life was an enormous pit of guilt. I tried to get in touch with her when she was in her late twenties but having been released from the secure unit there was no telling where she was. I must confess I didn't try very hard and I wondered at the time if my reasons for seeing her again were genuine. I was acting in desperation at my guilt and I wanted her to ease it for me. I gave up looking because I couldn't see why she would want to see me after I'd abandoned her so cruelly. There was a small part of me that was concerned about what I would be letting into our lives if I was successful in finding her. After all, I had no idea what had happened to her and how she'd turned out. Selfish emotions, when I look back,

After my sister left Norfolk I promoted our once a week cleaner to a housekeeper. Not because I couldn't or wouldn't run the house myself; I was quite capable and enjoyed it. But with work and one thing and another it made life easier. When I wasn't

at work it allowed me more time with Jonathan. Her name was Catherine and she ended up practically living with us – she was a godsend in our fractious and at times gloomy little world.

It was nice having a woman's touch around the house. Catherine's been with me ever since. She was only twenty-two when she started working for me. We're very fond of her and she's part of the family as we are hers. I think she felt a bit sorry for us when she first arrived because she used to bake us cakes and put flowers in vases all around the house. Or she'd embroider a new table cloth or knit Jonathan a scarf. The one thing I appreciated most was her loyalty and trust. She never gossiped outside the house or commented on anything that went on. She just silently supported us for the hours I employed her.

Everyone thought we'd marry. It became the talk of the village at one stage. A lonely widower in his forties and her in her twenties, they had us down as the perfect couple. They were extremely shocked when she married a newcomer to the village. I wasn't, because I knew all about it. She was more like another sister to me, still is. She does a spot of cleaning for me and a bit of washing and we often get together socially. Nobody could understand our relationship but as I became firm friends with her husband they soon forgot about it. I've played golf with Ray for many years and they visit often for supper and me to theirs. I have

no desire to waste energy worrying about what gossips say; they invariably find other carcasses to feed from.

All in all, Jonathan had plenty of female influences in his life. Maybe not the same as if he'd had his mother but more than we could have hoped for under the circumstances.

Goodness me, what a lot to say. I feel better now and I'm alright about Gabrielle's impending visit. I had the collie wobbles for a bit. It's understandable. I don't know her, do I? She may have turned out worse than I'm expecting. Prison or secure unit or whatever you want to call it, in my experience, doesn't ever do anyone any good.

Once you're on that path, that's it. I'm not saying everyone re-offends but you're not likely to have had the right kind of influences, especially when you go in there at such a young age. I sound awfully pompous, but I can't help but think of it. I must be realistic. The vision I had of her when she was a child and how she would turn out no longer exists and I mustn't allow it to. I don't even know what she looks like. I need to prepare myself. But at least I am now in a place where I can accept a visit from her. It would be awful to cancel and wouldn't solve anything for anyone, not now I have agreed to it. I must face my failings as a father and make some repairs before it is too late.

1/12/2010 Rebecca Banford

It is just gone 10 p.m. and I have retired for the evening. I booked a cottage nearby, but Harry has insisted I stay with him for a few days. I'm not sure how I feel about being in the house for long periods of time. So, for now I am staying put. Regardless of how well the next few days go, I think it is important for each of us to have our own space as and when it's needed.

The cottage I am staying in isn't far from the sea front down a narrow road filled with fisherman's houses. It's absolutely charming and is light relief from the day's mentally strained occurrences.

It has been a peculiar day and I am exhausted as I am sure Harry is also. There have been many unexpected events, enjoyable but for the most part difficult.

I'm not sure if I was what Harry was expecting. He appeared as nervous as I when I arrived and then became quite elated in a short space of time. I cried when I saw him, I couldn't help it. Behind the age and all the lines that life has brought him there was the face of the father I once knew. He shook my hand when he greeted me and even though this is playing on my mind I guess it was appropriate. I don't know what I expected from him really. It was just an odd gesture as though I had organised an interview with him and we were meeting for the first time.

I have so much to say and I don't know how to write it down. I feel as though I've been there a whole week rather than just a day.

After a very awkward start, a coffee and chat about the weather, he showed me around the house. I'm sure it was purely because he didn't know what else to do. It made me cry again but I managed to hide it, I think.

I know he was trying to make it okay for me but his kindness, for that's what it was, overwhelmed me and I felt a mixture of abandonment and loss. There was no sign of me having existed. My bedroom had been completely changed. I'm sure to anyone reading this it sounds pathetic.

Why should I expect my bedroom to stay the same after what I'd done?

What hurt, I think, was the fact that the house and its rooms were just as they were all those years ago apart from a few extra items here and there. And yet all the traces of me had been removed. I would have found it easier if the whole house had been altered. I remember the sideboard in the hallway had housed all our family photographs. These had been replaced with new ones with a few old ones of my mother dotted here and there. It was strange – when I saw the pictures of her I suddenly had a fleeting feeling of really disliking her even though I never knew her. I felt a rush of emotion to shout at her and I can't explain why.

The house throughout felt generally, as though Harry had got a pencil with an eraser on the end and rubbed me out and drawn in some replacements to disguise the fact that I ever existed, but however hard you rub, the imprint is still there.

But there you go. Maybe I shouldn't expect anything less after the horror I caused. I just can't help thinking that I was still his daughter though and I'm desperately scratching around in my mind for some empathy. How

would I feel if it was my daughter? This is something I can't answer because I didn't have any children. I am far too tired to explore this right now. I wanted to get it all down on paper whilst I was feeling it but there is such a mixture of emotions running through me. They're so fleeting that each time I formulate any thoughts the next one arrives. They are dotted with flashes of memories too.

We didn't talk about what happened. Not the actual events anyway. He just occasionally referred to it as 'when you went away'. It was as though I'd been kidnapped and missing for years.

I wondered for most of the time I was there if he was suffering from senile dementia. He could very well be. He's quite old.

We have agreed one thing, that there is a lot to talk about and I may need to extend my visit.

I am exhausted and need to sleep now.

Harry Rochester 2nd December 2010

It is 5.30 a.m. and I cannot sleep any longer, not that I have slept much in any case. It's an inevitable occurrence when you reach a certain age. Although most people I know go to bed earlier, which is why they arise at the crack of dawn. I, however retire quite late and still wake up at the crack of dawn. It's partly due to wanting to catch the sunrise coming up over the sea. A pleasure I never tire from. I digress...

It's strange but it's as if the person I imagined in my mind is disappearing. Gabrielle is nothing like the vision I had, and it's left me with a peculiar feeling. It did occur to me that she may not be who she says she is. I remember her as a child and then there's the adult I imagined her to be in my mind, although faded now, and then there is this new person whom I have just met. I can't seem to merge the three into one. I am desperate to hold onto the remnants of the adult I imagined because she is part of Gabrielle. There must be some elements of truth in this person I fabricated.

She is quite clearly my daughter, our child; she looks so much like her mother, yet she has my long limbs and build. Her features are identical to Emma's although her blue eyes are slightly paler, and her hair is darker. It took my breath away when I opened the door. She is beautiful and again the vision I have of what I thought she'd be is fading as I think of her face. It's like seeing a person walking away from you into the mist in the distance. Maybe she'll

flash before me when I'm not expecting it or in my sleep. It sometimes happens when Emma's voice begins to fade from my memory or I can't picture her face clearly. I used to panic when this happened years ago, but I've learnt that it comes to you eventually, you just have to be patient.

I don't know why I feel such a strong need to hang onto this fabricated image. She's been with me for so long, I suppose.

I will see what happens today. Hopefully it will be better, easier. She was very quiet and I'm hoping she'll come out of her shell a bit more as we spend more time together. I'm glad she'd organised to stay, albeit in a cottage. Probably for the best though; she needs her space and I need mine.

2/12/2010 Rebecca Banford

I must write this down before I forget. I had quite a restless night filled with many dreams. I must record it before I go to my father's house otherwise it'll be washed away with the tide by the time I get back.

I dreamt I was in a box similar to a coffin and I couldn't move my arms or legs. The whole thing was upright, and I was pinned in it as though I was a doll on display in a cardboard box. Someone was talking to me, a man. I don't know who he was; there was something familiar but it's hazy. It definitely wasn't my father.

Then I remember wandering around a large white room with glass boxes everywhere. That is very familiar to me.

I know there will be lots of memories flooding back to me and some of them will be unclear.

As I write this the dreams are fading now. The most vivid part is the coffin or box. I could ramble on, but I won't because I can't formulate the images into words. I must keep my notepad by my bed as I do at home.

2/12/2010 11p.m Rebecca Banford

I have had a fulfilling, sometimes enjoyable but very difficult day with Harry. I approached the whole thing head on, rightly or wrongly. I thought the words would never come out of my mouth.

He continued to behave as though I was an acquaintance, invited for tea for the first time. It was as though I'd never been there yesterday.

Having sat down in an excruciatingly polite manner with a cup of tea I asked him if we should talk about what happened. He was silent for quite some time after he agreed and for a while I thought he was never going to speak. Then we both spoke at the same time and the ice was cracked and slowly began to part and sink under a great expanse of water.

We both cried a lot, sometimes together and strangely there was no shouting, which I had expected. It was all just terribly, terribly sad. There was so much I had forgotten, blocked out, I suppose. And I guess there was stuff he had too.

He just kept repeating himself that he didn't know what to say at first. Then we agreed to start at the point where I went away. Neither of us wanted to discuss the details of what happened to lead to these consequences.

I found myself, after a lengthy discussion, feeling quite hurt when it came to the subject of me seeing Jonathan. Harry skirted around the issue and I got the impression he either didn't want to see me or that he knew nothing of my visit. I became quite prickly after that.

I suppose I am becoming attached which is causing me to feel I have a right to expectations. I must control this because I have no right over any of them. I am lucky that my father has agreed to see me at all; complacency has crept up on me quite quickly.

I'm not sure I can carry on with this. I can't even tell you that I feel melancholic but there is a sadness in me that feels similar to grief. I just want to sit and cry for a very long time.

Harry Rochester December 3rd, 2010

I'm not convinced this whole process is going to benefit anyone. A great big wound has been torn apart and it's all extremely painful and quite excruciating.

Yesterday was good, don't get me wrong, but we're both viewing it from completely different sides. As someone very wise once said, there are three sides to every story. Your truth, their truth and what really happened. I'm not sure we can get over it.

There were elements of yesterday where I felt so close to her and today I'm so tired and a bit maudlin about the whole thing. I don't need all this stress at my time of life. What good will come of it all anyway?

She says she can't remember half of what happened and wanted me to explain what had occurred here when she was taken away. I assume this is, so she can make some sense of it all.

I don't believe she's lying or putting on an act, but you never know. When she was a child I never imagined she was capable of killing two little boys, but she did.

A lot of it I struggle to remember, but I do recall quite clearly the day she told me what happened with the two children. How she'd been asked by their mother, Ellen Tailby, to watch them for her because they were asleep, and she needed to get some groceries.

I can't talk about this right now.

I will see what happens today. I need to go on one of my walks.

3/12/2010 Rebecca Banford

Strangely, I met Harry down by the sea front early this morning.

We'd chosen to take a walk at the same time which altered things for both of us I think. We realised we have a bond, but we need to take it slower and not force it to be there. I know he's my father and he knows I'm still his daughter.

I fetched us some takeaway coffees and breakfast and we sat on a bench in the bracing weather. The wind at times felt like it was filling me up and I would float away any minute as though I were being resuscitated.

It feels strange to walk out from the cottage. I can't help looking at people to see if they recognise me. Of course, they don't. There are too many new faces and the old timers have long forgotten my face.

We talked this morning; not about anything significant; nothing as heavy as what we have discussed so far. We spoke about what was happening right now and how it was affecting us both. The awkwardness disappeared like sea spray on the sand.

I cried whilst we were eating breakfast and it still chokes me now. It was the first proper meal I'd shared with my father in well over forty years. That sounds daft because we ate together the day I first saw him, but it was just some food I grabbed from the local shop; it bore no significance. This breakfast reminded me of the ones he used to cook when my brother and I were small, and I felt close to him for the first time since our reunion. A full English breakfast in a box and it was delicious, hot comforting food.

We agreed to part after that. We both needed a break and I wanted to take in my surroundings; spend some time on my own.

We've arranged to meet tomorrow instead. I've had a wonderful day under the circumstances. After I'd seen Harry I walked up the hill to the chapel and looked for my mother's grave. It gave me goose bumps looking for it and still does as I write this. I found a strange comfort in visiting

it though. Like it was a connection to my existence; as though she'd thrown me a safety rope to tie around my waist and keep me safe.

Many questions popped into my head whilst I was there. Things I need to ask Harry. I was so young when I went away I don't really know much about her. Harry never talked about her at any great length when I was at home. I need to know these things, make sense of who I am and where I came from.

I've felt calm today; like the aftermath of a storm. Even though we didn't argue I think in our minds we both knew we were at odds with one another. I drove to a town a few miles away and wandered around the shops and even managed to find some old photographs in an antique store. It reminded me of Mr. Jim.

I perused a couple of second hand book shops and I came across a copy of *Mistress Marsham's Repose* by T. H. White. I barely recognised it at first, but it stirred up memories in me like a door to a dusty room being opened after many years. I then realised it had been a favourite of mine. This then got me wondering about all my childhood things; my toys, books and clothes. I didn't dwell too much;

I was enjoying the calm contentment and I didn't want to become melancholic.

Whilst I was wandering and perusing, an idea for a new book came to me so I bought a notebook (I always begin with a fresh one), and some pens (I must write with new blue biro). There is no reason for this oddity other than it stirs up a feeling of excitement inside me; a new start.

Fresh prawns, salad and pasta constituted my supper and I made my way back to the cottage. The more I stay in the little place the more comfortable I become. It's so tiny but it feels spacious and filled with everything you could possibly want. Well, if you live simply like me. There is no plasma screen TV, X-box or Jacuzzi, you understand.

There are two steps down to the front door, which is painted black, and you must stoop through on entering. You're then in a space which triples as kitchen, dining and living room. But it's perfect and filled with interesting local art, candles and strings of lights. It contains oversized, ostentatious objects which draw me to it even more. With my background you'd think I'd require more space, but I don't. I want to feel as though I'm being wrapped in soft, warm, cossetting blankets and not just when I'm asleep.

Supper and writing in bed and I had a perfect evening.

Harry Rochester December 3rd, 2010

Something very peculiar happened this morning. I went for my walk and bumped into Gabrielle. I couldn't help imagining afterwards that we were both in separate houses preparing to get ready for the same brisk walk at the same time, like parallel lives. It linked us somehow and repaired a little of what had happened the day before, as though it was meant to be.

The sea was working its magic and it made me feel closer to her. We ate breakfast on my favourite bench and talked in a relaxed manner.

There was none of the feeling of unsaid rubbish from the day before. It was nothing significant; just giving each other permission to say what we needed to.

We could have been floating on the wind seated on that bench high above the sea. That's how it felt anyway.

When all is said and done and whatever she did or has done, she's still my daughter. And I realised something today. That I do

love her after all these years; it scares me to think that I could even imagine I didn't.

4/12/2010 Rebecca Banford

Another emotionally tiring but mainly enjoyable day.

I arrived at the house to discover that Harry had fetched all the Christmas decorations down from the attic. He wanted me to help him dress the tree that he'd had delivered that morning.

I have felt deep, deep pain today. His attitude towards me after our chat yesterday is breaking my heart. He is so kind and he wants to share everything he can remember with me. He's trying to make up for lost time.

I wept over the Christmas decorations. I have never cried so much in as many days. He poured us a port and brought out some mince pies and sausage rolls that Catherine, his housekeeper had made. For some reason I'd not imagined Catherine being around, I don't know why, probably because she was our weekly cleaner when I was there. I'd like to see her at some point even though I don't remember that much about her. I understand from Harry

that my brother was very close to her, which was obviously because she became the housekeeper after I went away. I was always slightly distant from everyone anyway...

This whole situation is beyond bizarre; I never expected it to be like this. I thought it would be filled with arguments and most of the time quite fraught. Let's face it I wasn't expecting to be permitted a visit at all.

I am starting to wonder if there's any point in us talking it through; he doesn't seem to want to. He's told me as much as he wants to for the time being, but he keeps saying that what happens now is what's important. I guess he's right.

I will never forget today, ever. This evening he cooked me supper in the old kitchen where we used to sit all those years ago. He prepared my favourite – his homemade fish and chips.

After we ate he reached across the table with his shaky old hand and clasped mine. He told me how sorry he was; that he felt he'd let me down. I tried to quieten him, but he wouldn't let me speak.

He talked about my mother, their life together and how dedicated she was to her religion; something I never

knew. I gather that had she not been I would, through my father's influence, not be here because he is in no way religious and I'm sure he would have wanted her to survive instead of me.

My first reaction was to point out how very different his life would have been had he overridden her decision and she'd survived instead of me. I stopped myself because it would have sounded so childish and quite churlish out loud and wasn't how I was feeling at all.

Of course, he would have wanted his wife to survive. I was an unknown entity and more children could have been produced to fill the space of the missing one. I know it wasn't quite like that, but mortality was more common in those days. He said he hadn't told me for this reason and I believe him; he was just trying to explain why he'd been like he was when we were growing up.

His granddaughter, Nancy, called round today when I was there; my niece. I was so eager to see her, but he sent her away at the door. I really felt for her; she sounded quite confused at why she couldn't come in and meet his guest. He'd obviously never turned her away before.

He told me Jonathan must be informed first – that it wouldn't be right for her to know before him. I was relieved that it wasn't because he hadn't wanted her to see me. It did occur to me that Jonathan hadn't appeared to have contacted Harry in the time I'd been there, unless it had been when I was at the cottage. I don't get the impression they are terribly close. Anyway, that's none of my business and I don't need to concern myself with it.

He hugged me for the first time when I left, and I swear I heard him whisper, 'I love you' in my ear.

He's asked me to stay another week. I will sleep on it.

Harry Rochester December 4th, 2010

Unbelievably and against all my expectations Gabrielle has grown up to be a beautiful human being. How is this so after the life she's had?

She told me today about the books she's written; I was filled with pride but saddened too at what a seemingly lonely life she's led.

I expected a rough diamond, a defensive damaged person to walk through my door a few days ago. She's none of those things;

she reminds me so much of Emma even though she of course had no direct influence.

I don't want to keep raking over the past; I don't have time. I want to get to know her, to...I don't know. It's not that I'm even trying to make up for lost time; that we can never get back.

I called Jonathan this evening and told him Gabrielle had been in contact and come to visit.

He didn't say much, just became very quiet. I could have taken his attitude as indifference, but I know him too well. He'll either silently seethe or eventually give me his long-winded opinion and not get involved.

He's a GP at the surgery in the village. He talks to you in that stern, clinical, stiff manner as though you were one of his patients. There were lots of solemn umms and ahhs as though he were summing up a diagnosis.

He's a good doctor. I can't say otherwise but he has an air of snobbery that wafts around him like cigarette smoke. Sometimes it seems to disperse but the lingering smell is still present. He's become very withdrawn and quiet over the last few years. Don't get me wrong – we have a good relationship, as best you can have with Jonathan. I understand him quite well, so I can read him better than most and he's a good person, but lots of people don't see that and they take an immediate dislike to him when they meet him. Put

it this way – he's a popular doctor because he's good at his job but people don't visit him for his bedside manner.

Over quite a few years, it's as though someone sucked the laughter out of him; his book cover has been slammed shut and he's inside it.

His wife, Anna, is difficult and they have, from what I can gather, a turbulent relationship. She's French. In my experience there are jolly French people and stern ones. She's the stern kind.

He was full of humour and laughter when he met her, and she was charming, shy and happy. He was an open book then; talk to you about anything. He'd love nothing more than to stand in the pub and chatter over a few pints; we haven't done that for years and I have missed it.

They both changed when they started to create a routine that they felt, as so many do, was invented especially for them. And, 'their lot' so to speak, began to slowly grind them down.

How Nancy turned out the carefree, happy child she is, I'll never know.

I don't see Jonathan much; his life is his work and he's terribly busy. He has told me he needs to think and digest what I have told him about Gabrielle.

I won't dwell on this. I would have done many years ago, but I leave him to it now. He has a knack of portraying himself as the

responsible parent and me as the elderly man in his second childhood.

We came to blows over it a few years ago. I lost my footing for a bit and allowed him to do it but then I'd seen his sleight of hand and soon became aware of what was going on and put him straight in no uncertain terms. Got to have control, has Jonathan, but he does it in such a subtle way that nobody notices. Part of the art of being a doctor, I suppose. I needed to make it clear that I am still head of this family and capable of making decisions that can be discussed but not questioned. He understands this, and I must not waste energy worrying about what he really thinks.

I, more importantly, want my Nancy to know about Gabrielle. I sent her away last night and I feel terrible about it. We don't have secrets.

It's strange what life brings you. Even at my age, when you think you've worked it all out, you still get hit with surprises. I thought Gabrielle's visit would be short and painful; filled with turmoil. It's been painful, but it's also been wonderful, I never expected any of this.

5/12/2010 Rebecca Banford

I met Nancy today; she is charming and full of life. I can see why Harry is so fond of her. And he's right – she does look very much like me.

She could barely contain herself when he opened the door. At first, she studied me, all smiles, as though she were looking at a freak from the circus. When I opened my mouth to speak to her and she realised I'm a normal person, she then flung her arms around me, exclaiming loudly in my ear how she'd always wanted an aunty.

I did wonder at first if she knew the whole story but then she started asking me forthright questions, as teenagers do, about prison and did I have an electronic tag. Harry laughed nervously and seemed quite embarrassed. He kept interrupting her and telling her not to be so nosy, not to bombard me and did she know I was a writer, as though that counteracts everything else. She was elated when she realised she'd read some of my books and it stirred a new episode of excitement.

I explained to her that I only went to prison for a short time when I was sixteen and no I didn't wear a tag because it was a long time ago and such a thing didn't exist. Harry busied himself with the washing up while I talked to her. It

didn't really need doing because there were only a couple of cups and a plate, but I think he wanted a distraction from any awkward questions.

Even though Nancy's excitement bubbled over into her chatter, she has promised not to tell anyone about me or what we discussed. Harry seems to think she will keep quiet. I'm not so sure but then he knows her better than I. I think she understands that she won't see me again if the news of who and where I am comes out.

Harry and I have agreed to meet on the bench in the morning for breakfast. I have booked the cottage for another week. I am staying for the moment.

6/12/2010 Rebecca Banford

Went running this morning before it was light; I always run when I'm at home and missing it for a few days feels peculiar. Running has always been the equivalent of antidepressants for me. I call it my motion meditation; it helps me think clearly and it keeps me young and healthy. No one believes I am fifty-four and this pleases me. I don't feel

fifty-four, maybe this is why. What does fifty-four feel like anyway?

Whilst running I passed a man I knew walking his dog. It took me a while to register who he was. He is elderly now, and he was fairly young when I last saw him. I ran another mile before it dawned on me and then I remembered who those sharp blue eyes belonged to. It was like a bolt of electricity running through me. It was the father of the two children, Thomas and Alexander. He didn't recognise me – just looked straight through me. Well, I think he did.

It really shook me; I hadn't realised he still lived in the same area. I don't know why I thought that; I just assumed he and his wife would have wanted a new start away from all the bad memories. Maybe this is what I would do if it were me and what I wanted them to have done.

I came straight back to the cottage; all sorts of things were running through my head. My initial reaction was to pack my things and leave. I didn't feel remotely like fifty-four anymore or even like an adult; I reverted back to the bad child that I was. Asking myself questions like, what right had I got to be here? And who the hell did I think I was?

Eventually I pulled myself together, showered and dressed and made my way down to the harbour to meet Harry.

It was unusually busy compared to the other mornings I'd been there. There were people on ladders adding strings of Christmas lights to the ones that were left up all year round.

Harry was already on the bench with two boxes full of breakfast and coffee when I arrived.

You may think I'm going into too much detail for a diary, but I need people to get a feel of what I'm trying to say. It's important to me that I write down everything that I recall.

Anyway, I remember feeling that when I saw him on the bench in the distance, it was as though I was seeing my safety rope again. I could almost see it winding its way across the road from the bench and wrapping around my waist like a snake. It occurred to me that it was a peculiar emotion to have because I'd never felt like that all those years ago. I'd just felt abandoned and deservedly so.

Again, I wept when I reached him and relayed what had happened. He patted my hand and said it was inevitable that at some stage I would bump into one of them.

He reassured me that I didn't need to leave and that there were so few of the original locals left that it would take anyone a long time to work out who I was.

I went back with him to the house for a short while and he showed me the room where he keeps his shells. I recalled it clearly then as it was when I was a child. That had been what my dream had been about. I'd forgotten all about it.

It's a very interesting room and far grander than I remember it. He says he's added to it quite extensively over the years. He's passionate about it and to anyone who isn't interested in shells you can't help but be carried away on his enthusiasm. He adds so much magic to the room with all his stories of what the shells are and where they came from. His memory astounds me.

I need to take my Dictaphone next time and record what he is saying. It's important for the family for when he's no longer around.

No sign of Jonathan. I'm toying with the idea of going to see him. I don't want to do that without telling Harry first and anyway I have no idea where he lives but I can find out.

John and Ellen were the names of the parents of the boys; I have no idea why that's just jumped into my head.

I can still see them lying in their beds; white faces like I'd never seen in my life and never have done since.

When I look back the little girl I once was seems to be a separate person. I don't connect with her in any way; not as I imagine you should do if you had a normal childhood. A lot of the time I hate her and want to berate her for being so stupid. I see her sometimes, mainly in my darker moments; she sits in the corner and cries.

A therapist would tell me I should learn to love her but the gulf between us is too wide. As the years have passed she has become more and more disconnected from me.

It's funny but when I've seen similar behaviour on the news I've been filled with shock. Then the real horror hits me as it dawns on me that I did that when I was a child. I'm one of them – those monsters they talk of in the tabloids. I think the best coping mechanism for me is I don't feel so much like that anymore. The older I get the further away I

am from being what I once was. The gulf continues to crack and spread.

Harry Rochester December 6th, 2010

Gabrielle was quite distraught today; she passed the father of the children. I didn't even give these potential occurrences a thought; very naive on my part. I was very lucky all those years ago that I had the support from my family and friends. Alright, there were malicious gossips but overall, everyone bent over backwards to help. I was never made to feel unwelcome or ostracised from the village. I often think on this now, that I probably would have paid that price had I chosen to support Gabrielle. It concerns me now that I may have been so frightened of being alone, and I mean that in the real sense of the word, that I chose to turn my back on her for that very reason. I will never know now because I can't remember exactly how I felt all those years ago. It's very easy to regret the way we react to situations later on, but I believe at the time something drives us to it. Maybe I think like this because it eases my guilt.

Most of the residents are long dead and gone but I'm sure the story crops up occasionally and the locals certainly wouldn't welcome her with open arms once they knew her true identity.

I was so wrapped up in her visit, I didn't give it a thought that she might collide with the victim's family. Ellen Tailby, the mother, is house bound with senile dementia, so I'm told, and there is just her and John left, no other relatives.

They continued to be a tragic family. It was as though they had a curse after Gabrielle. Quite quickly after Thomas and Alexander, Ellen gave birth to a little girl. Can't remember her name now but she died when she was a baby. I think there were one or two miscarriages that followed her and from what I can gather they couldn't have any more after that.

Nowadays the baby's death would have been put down to that Sudden Infant Death Syndrome or whatever they call it. In our day it was just the way it was; an accepted part of life. Folks were hard up; houses were damp and living conditions poor.

Terrible, terrible business that was though; I think they were trying to fill the spaces they'd lost. I remember feeling desperate for them; responsible for each little life they lost.

I didn't have the heart to tell Gabrielle about all that. I'm sure, knowing the little I do about her that it would only serve to add to the guilt she's carrying.

This last week I've spent with her has honestly felt like a few months. By coming back, Gabrielle has brought something to my family that has been absent for a very long time. I'm sad for Nancy because she's never really experienced the camaraderie of family life.

What happened hangs over us and is always there, a bit like the elephant in the room, but we seem to be getting along alright with it.

The elephant has turned out not to be as unfriendly or frightening as we first thought. We don't have to talk to him or about him if we don't want to. I told Nancy this and she laughed and said I was a silly old fool and shouldn't read her magazines when she leaves them behind!

She has suggested I make one of my Sunday dinners and invite her and her parents along with Gabrielle. It's going to be awkward but any situation of them meeting will be uncomfortable. I must talk to Gabrielle first before I make any definite arrangements.

8/12/2010 Rebecca Banford

Nancy tells me we are all having Sunday lunch together. Harry was worried about how I would react and

apparently scalded her for mentioning it to me before he had a chance to.

I do feel awkward about it but it's as good a time as any. I suppose sitting around the table and eating is a stable distraction if no one wants to talk.

I'm glad I insisted on staying in the cottage. People are starting to ask Harry questions about who I am – we've been seen out walking so many times. I think because I'm staying away from the house he can pass me off as a distant cousin. I think he's told most of them that I'm researching the family tree and have discovered we're related or some such nonsense. I'm not sure how long people will believe this story. It only takes one person to recall the past and the consequences will be disastrous.

I will have to go home soon anyway; I must get back to my life, work and friends. I don't want to. Even after all that happened I feel so at home here. I can't ever remember feeling like that; it's as though I never left.

My life at home seems blurry and distant; I don't feel I have any connection or attachment to it anymore. I thought I would miss it; it's been my safety net, my mainstay, constant for so many years. Even my friends seem like

they're from a distant past or another life. I love them, don't get me wrong, but I've never been able to be myself with them; not properly anyway. I have never been able to tell them the truth and it has made them seem, to me, fictitious; as though they were characters in one of my books. I feel sad when I think of each one of them and how fond I am. My feelings toward them have never been false but I've told so many lies about where I come from, my family. I even have old framed photographs of people I have portrayed as my family all around the house.

When I left that day, I did feel like it was the end of something. It was similar to the feeling I get when I've finished writing a book and I have to say goodbye to all the characters. You feel slightly bereft but know you'll be moving on to the next place and meeting new ones. It's hard to explain.

I don't know. How could I live here? I know Harry would say I could continue under my false identity. If anyone has asked him about me he has carefully referred to me as Rebecca. I don't know if my conscience would allow me to do that though; it seems disrespectful when I think about what I did.

For the first time in my life I feel it's as though I'm on a journey and revealing who I really am. My old life feels like a discarded snakeskin. I would like nothing more than to be near my father for the last part of his life. I suppose I could stay temporarily. I could tell my friends I've discovered a relative; I've always told them my parents were killed and I was an only child brought up in care.

I owe them all an explanation; they've been like family to me. I can always return if it doesn't work out, I suppose or move on somewhere else; spread my wings and step out of my insular world.

Harry Rochester December 11th, 2010

Our Sunday lunch with Jonathan didn't go very well at all and I'm not sure where we go from here. Gabrielle is leaving today, and I am distraught. But I must let her do what she feels is right; it must be so difficult for her. She has promised me she will visit over Christmas, but I am hoping I will be able to persuade her in the mean time to spend the festivities with me.

11/12/2010 Rebecca Banford

Dinner with Jonathan was a disaster. I'm not sure where we go from here... I'm going home today just for a short while. I think we both need a break from one another. I have promised Harry I will visit over the Christmas period.

PART TWO

CHAPTER ONE

Nancy laid the table as though it was Christmas already. She'd insisted on pink napkins and silver crackers. Harry watched her from the doorway of the kitchen, his pinny stained with meat juices and gravy. She was excited at the prospect of having dinner with her new aunt for the first time; Harry knew her father was not.

Jonathan had finally agreed, reluctantly, but then he reluctantly agreed to most things. Harry couldn't shake off the feeling that it wasn't just because he was trying to keep Nancy happy – she was so excited about the dinner. There was a hint of condescension in Jonathan's voice, as though he were going along with some childish game to appease

his father. It had rattled Harry slightly especially as he'd been able to tell what he was thinking in the few words he'd spoken. That Harry's morals had slipped; why bother with her now? It would all end in tears. Jonathan's voice was laced with disgust, disbelief and judgement; all the attributes that Harry thought a good doctor could well do without. In the few minutes they'd been on the telephone, Harry had felt the parental shift he'd had to battle to reverse only a few months previously.

He stood in the doorway now, watching his granddaughter and thinking to himself how people often commented that age brings forgiveness. But as he looked at Nancy, her heart open, wanting to make it right for him because she knew how very much it meant, he realised that age had nothing to do with it. Her comments had been that she wasn't there at the time so how could she have an opinion? Her aunt was only a child. How could anyone judge unless they knew the details? But her father had made it quite clear to her that he had been there, and he remembered exactly what happened.

Harry knew Nancy was so accepting of her aunt because he'd welcomed her into the fold. If her old

grandfather said it was alright, then it clearly was in her eyes. He knew out loud that in one sentence, “she killed two children”, sounded abhorrent, unforgivable, barbaric. But there was more to it and he couldn’t put his finger on it.

“Come on, Gramps, don’t just stand there.”

“Do you really think this is such a good idea?”

“Not entirely, but it’ll either work or it won’t.”

“Well, that’s reassuring.”

“We’ll do our bit and that’s all we can do.” Nancy lit the candles she’d placed on the table and stepped back to survey her handiwork.

“Very nice.”

“Let’s have some music; that always makes people feel good.”

“Not that drivel you listen to.”

“No. Let’s have some of your drivel on. Some of that trumpet stuff you seem to like.”

“Jazz.”

“Whatever. Have you sorted out the wine?” Nancy waved her hands to show him what she meant. “You know – poured it into something else and then back again?”

“Decanted.”

“That’s it. We must have plenty of wine; it helps Dad talk more.”

“And your mother too much.”

“Can’t be helped; either way she’s ghastly.” Nancy clamped her hand over her mouth. “I didn’t mean to say that out loud.”

“I’ll pretend I didn’t hear.”

Nancy laughed and made her way towards the kitchen; Harry didn’t budge from the door.

“Dinner coming on okay?” She tried to peer through the gap over his shoulder.

“Yes, perfectly well. Get back in there and wipe those wine glasses; they’re smudged. Don’t need you interfering with my cooking, thank you very much.”

“I wasn’t – I was using it as an excuse to taste the gravy. How about a little sherry?”

“You’re nervous?” Harry grabbed her hand as she moved from the door and could feel the sweat in her palm.

“I am a bit. I want them to be alright with her; you know how difficult they can be.”

Harry looked at the clock on the wall. “Go and sit down and I’ll bring us a little tippie. They won’t be here yet.”

Harry checked the dinner and joined Nancy in the sitting room. It looked spectacular to him every time he entered, even after all these years. A huge tree in the corner by the window, once a rich green, was now covered in tinsel, lights and angel hair. The lights looked as though they were twinkling through masses of spider webs. The fire was glowing at the other end of the room and the reflection of light from it was making everything look new, warm and fresh. It was overcast and dark outside which helped make the room look even cosier; Harry loved days when the weather was moody and unsettled.

Nancy was sitting in the chair he usually rested, reading the paper, and as his gaze turned he swore he saw Emma sat in the chair opposite. He always felt her presence keenly at this time of year; he wondered whether it was her way of supervising the festivities and making sure he did everything just so. He shook it off and went over to his record collection to choose something

appropriate, although for the life of him he couldn't think what in the present situation.

He looked up as he heard Nancy enthusiastically winding the key on an old musical Santa Claus that he'd never had the heart to throw out.

"Every year you try and get that thing working. It's had it."

"And every year Gramps, you say the same thing. It's my little ritual; my challenge to get him working properly; like you insisting we have angel hair on the tree."

"A Christmas tree doesn't look right without angel hair; that's how I've always done it."

"And that's how you'll always do it. I know, I know. I don't understand why he doesn't work!" Nancy slammed the ornament down on the table next to her.

"He was always temperamental. If we got him to rotate it was on the wonk and he never plays a tune at the same time. Someone gave him to your father when he was little, and he was obsessed with it, just as you are."

"Will you tell me what happened with Auntie Gabrielle?"

Nancy's sudden change in subject threw Harry and he hesitated as he poured the drinks out and caught up with what she was saying.

"I've told you what happened."

"Not in any detail."

"Well, I don't really know myself. I wasn't there."

"She must have told you." Nancy thanked him as she took the tiny glass that Harry held out to her.

He was silent for a long time as he poked the fire and put a record on. Nancy almost held her breath; she thought she'd pushed him too far and then he sat himself in the chair opposite and spoke.

"The day the two boys went missing their mother, Ellen came knocking on our door asking where they were. She said she'd seen Gabrielle playing and asked her to watch the boys while they were asleep, because she had shopping to do and didn't want to wake them because they'd been sick in the night. When she got back they were gone and so was Gabrielle. She thought Gabrielle had brought them here to play."

"Where were they?"

“At first I didn’t know Gabrielle was at home. After Ellen had gone I found her upstairs crying in her bedroom. She just said they’d run away from her. Then a couple of police officers turned up to question her...and then there was a huge search....”

“Where were they found?”

Harry leant forward in his chair and linked his fingers together.

“You have to understand, Nancy, she was a difficult child; defiant, you know? I always used to feel she was letting me know how alive she was, how permanent if you like. It was as though she was saying I’m here, so get on with it.”

“I don’t quite know what you’re trying to say.” Nancy put her half empty sherry glass down on the hearth; it had gone straight to her head and made her feel slightly giddy.

“I don’t know myself really. I think I feel guilty and I need you to know my reasons...the decisions I made...”

“Granddad, its fine. I said before I’m not going to judge...I don’t know what I’d do in that situation...I really

don't. It must have been so difficult for you. For everyone concerned"

Harry got up from his chair and poured himself another sherry. "The two boys were eventually found in a cupboard under the stairs in their home."

"It's alright, Granddad. You don't have to talk about it; I shouldn't have asked."

It was as though he hadn't heard her. He walked to the window his eyes distant, travelling to another time.

"Still wrapped in their eiderdowns. I only know that because the police told me. It looked as though she'd tried to hide them; two little boys, only three years old. Of course, she lied about it; said they'd been playing doctors and nurses and then they wouldn't wake up, so she tried to hide them when she realised because she knew she'd be in trouble, some such nonsense."

"What did they die of, Granddad?"

He turned and looked at her as though he'd just become aware he was talking to her. In his mind he'd been talking to Emma as he had done repeatedly for many years.

He took a deep breath and emptied his glass. "She said they were like that when she found them, but how

could they have been? All I could think of at the time was why and how the hell she'd done it all. When I was told by the police what they thought had happened I couldn't comprehend it. She wrapped them in their eiderdowns which she'd tried to tie round them with some string she'd found. She strangled them."

Nancy clamped her hand to her mouth, the shock coursing through her like the sherry. Harry sat down in his chair; tears flooded his old tired eyes. Nancy reached out to touch him.

"Please don't, darling." He shooed her hand away and patted her knee. They both sat in silence for a few moments thinking about the same thing. "Come on, gal we've got dinner to sort out."

"Yes, come on Gramps, pull yourself together."

They both took a deep breath; Harry wiped his eyes and nose with his handkerchief and they bustled around bringing themselves back to the present and the task in hand.

"You won't treat her differently, will you?" Harry turned to her as they both entered the kitchen.

"Of course, I won't. Stop worrying."

Nancy was trying to convince herself as well as him and he could hear it in her voice as well as she could. It had shaken her, and he could see she had braced herself for it, but it had hit her worse than she'd expected. She was trying to match the person she was getting to know with the child she'd been told about. She couldn't comprehend that someone could do something so abhorrent; how someone could think something like that up? He could see all this in her face as he looked at her, he knew her so well and she couldn't hide it from him. The tiny droplet of doubt had landed in her mind and it was beginning to seep through her. He knew she'd begin worrying about him and what he was getting himself involved in. She was often telling him how people could act a good part and show you what they wanted you to see; always concerned he might fall foul of a con man. She was a wise girl having watched her mother perform her various personalities.

Dinner was as awkward as it was expected to be and ended under very difficult circumstances. Five soon became four when Anna, Jonathan's wife, decided to

make a dramatic exit and flounced from the house, stating that she couldn't go along with the farce.

Harry was angry but wanted quickly to ignore what had happened; the less importance they showed it the better as far as he was concerned. He'd known from the moment dinner was suggested that she'd do something to cause a scene; he knew it would all be planned in her mind. Harry had seen it in her face. But the loud, brash, clearly damaged individual she had been expecting to meet, wasn't presented to her. He saw the disappointment in her face as she was introduced to an articulate, attractive and calm woman.

So, all in all her exit was extremely unfitting, childish and made her look quite idiotic. It left them all with an uncomfortable silence broken eventually by Harry. It was more an announcement than a conversation starter and his tone let Jonathan know he wasn't going to change his mind.

"I've finally decided to open my shell room as a museum for visitors."

There was a long pause as everyone stared at him until Nancy broke the stunted silence.

“That’s fantastic news, Granddad!”

Jonathan let out a loud sigh, making sure that Harry heard him. He may as well have blown a gale across the table at his father; it was so heavy with disagreement it filled the room with a thick, almost tangible atmosphere. Harry stared at him defiantly and waited. Gabrielle said nothing; she didn’t feel it was her place. She’d been quiet all through dinner. She’d kept willing herself to speak; get a handle on it and make some sort of conversation but her brother’s frosty reception had made her so nervous she’d thought it best to keep quiet.

“Are you doing it to annoy me or because you want to?” Jonathan glared at Harry through his precisely rectangular glasses. Harry could always see Emma in his eyes but that’s where the similarity ended. Jonathan mainly took after him, the obvious difference being that his face was cold and hard against Harry’s soft and warm countenance. Jonathan showed a brutal dislike towards anyone who stepped over his moral guidelines and

impatience to what he referred to as bumbling stupidity. He wore it like a piece of clothing.

“Everything I do annoys you, Jonathan.”

“Is this another thing you’ve talked my father into?” Jonathan turned on Gabrielle who just stared at him blankly.

“Don’t you dare start on her!” Harry stood up from the table, the legs of his chair screeching painfully across the polished wooden floor. Nancy jumped up, startling Gabrielle further.

“All I wanted was for us to have a nice dinner together like a proper family. It was obviously too much to ask of you and mother. Apologies Aunt Gabrielle and please excuse me but I’m going to make a start on the clearing up.”

“No apology necessary.” Gabrielle waved her hand at Nancy, gesturing her to go. “I think I might join you.”

“Who the bloody hell do you think you are, familiarising yourself with my daughter as her Aunt!? Something you never have or ever will be.” Jonathan stood up and defiantly faced his father at eye level. “Anna was right, this is a bloody farce and you are a stupid old fool.”

“Don’t talk to Granddad like that!”

“Nancy, go into the kitchen with your Aunt please.”

Harry wasn’t going to back down.

The two men stared at one another.

“I asked her a question and I want to hear her answer.” Jonathan turned to Gabrielle, who had placed her napkin on the table. The Christmas crackers were untouched and looked out of place on the table next to the still steaming plates of food that had been barely eaten, as though they were guests that had worn out their welcome.

Adrenalin hit Gabrielle’s stomach and drained into her legs as she spoke. “I’m not going to make any big speech Jonathan. I understand why you feel the way you do; I think it’s best I don’t say anything at all.”

“Is that it? Is that all you’ve got to offer? And you’re supposed to be some big shot writer?” He was really getting going – his bottom lip was stretched, bearing his teeth. “Spineless just like your bloody books. Nobody wants you here.”

The last comments stung Gabrielle as though he’d pushed her into an ice-cold bath and it gave her a flashback of their childhood together and how spiteful he could be.

She pushed back her chair and removed herself from the table, willing the tears to go away. There was so much she wanted to say but her dignity was telling her to keep quiet.

“That’s right, walk away. Very convenient to bugger off and leave everyone else to deal with the consequences. Think you can flounce back after all these years just when you think my father’s about to die. Think you’re in for a share, do you? Well you can piss off! He didn’t want you when you were born. My mother died for you!”

Harry, Nancy and Gabrielle all stared back at Jonathan, astounded at his cruel words and the venom in his voice; all suddenly aware that he’d obviously been drinking before he’d arrived at the house. It was the most he’d spoken in one visit in many years. He was a man of painfully few words, but it was the spiteful content of them that had shocked them all, alcohol induced or not. It was as though they were covered in the mould and rot that had been festering inside him for so long.

“I don’t want anything, Jonathan. It hadn’t even occurred to me you would think that. All I wanted was to see my family.” It was almost a whisper she was so choked at his unkind words. There was a faint glimmer of

embarrassment on Jonathan's face as he realised he'd gone too far, but he wasn't about to show it.

"Get out of my house!"

Nancy and Gabrielle turned to see a shaking Harry leaning on the table, glaring at his son, tears of disappointment and dismay rolled down his tired face. "Get out!!"

"Granddad, don't upset yourself like this." Nancy grabbed his arm, trying to peel his hands from the table to sit him in a chair before he collapsed.

"Just go, Dad!" yelled Nancy.

"Get out! I said get out!" Those last words were almost a cry and Gabrielle's heart seemed to flinch with an ache at the sound of the pain in them.

Jonathan defiantly finished his wine in one large gulp, all the time staring at his father. He slammed the glass on the table and left.

Gabrielle and Nancy sat back down with Harry, each holding his hands while he wept like he had when he'd first lost Emma.

CHAPTER TWO

Gabrielle knocked on Harry's door, not looking forward to the conversation they were about to have. He answered quickly, already wearing his coat and gloves, all prepared for his usual walk down to the sea front.

"Everything alright?" Gabrielle was concerned; he looked terribly pale and drawn after the previous day's events.

"Yes love. Got to move forward and put it behind us."

Gabrielle stopped walking and regarded his whole demeanour.

"Do we?"

"Of course we do. Come on, I need to keep moving, it's cold and I'm an old man."

“The thing is Harry I think there’s too much behind everyone to move forward.” Gabrielle began to walk and fell into step with him.

“I knew you’d say all this. You’re going to tell me you’ve decided to go home too.”

“Yes...but I’m not feeling sorry for myself if that’s what you’re getting at.”

“Not at all. I just knew you’d feel somehow to blame for what happened yesterday and think it best to leave.”

They were both silent for a while as they walked towards the bench Harry always sat on. Gabrielle pushed her arm through his. He glanced at her.

“You’ll be calling me Dad next?”

“Would it bother you if I did?”

“I would love nothing more. It felt strange when I first met you and you called me Harry even though I hadn’t seen you for all those years and shouldn’t have expected you to call me anything else.”

“I did want to but thought you might think it inappropriate. In any case we wouldn’t want anyone to overhear and work out who I am. It feels strange being

called Gabrielle again; I've been Rebecca for so long now."

"You don't mind?"

"No. I quite like it actually."

"You're still my daughter whatever you call me."

"I've had a wonderful time, Harry, I really have but I ought to go home. It won't be long before people realise who I am; I don't think Anna will keep it to herself and well, and I don't want to spoil things any further."

"You haven't spoilt anything, and you can be sure Anna won't say anything; she couldn't bear the shame of it...." Harry flinched realising what he'd said. "Sorry, that was a bit callous."

"It's true though. It's fine. We're fine. Let's leave well alone and I'll come and stay again in a few months."

"Won't you just stay for Christmas? It would mean a lot to me."

"You'll have your family around you; it wouldn't be right. You'll sort things with Jonathan soon enough and it'll all blow over."

"Will it? I'm not sure I care anymore."

"You don't mean that; you're just angry."

“I’m tired, that’s all. Weary from battling with him.”

Gabrielle squeezed his arm. “Look, I’ve disrupted things enough. Christmas will be calmer without me around. I promise I’ll be back in the New Year.”

“I’m being selfish. You must have your own life to get back to.”

“I do, and I would love to spend Christmas with you but let’s plan for that next year, hey?”

A pause hung in the air and as silent as it was they could both feel the heavy weight it carried, thinking the same thing, that Harry probably wouldn’t see another Christmas.

“We certainly will. When are you leaving?”

“Today.”

Harry nodded, unable to hide his disappointment; tears welled in his eyes. He’d hoped he’d persuade her; he didn’t want her to go and it was a peculiar feeling; a kind of emptiness. He knew things wouldn’t go back to normal or the way they were, they couldn’t, and the future suddenly felt uncertain.

“Come on let’s have one last breakfast in a box.” Gabrielle tried to stop her voice breaking and pulled him

up by his arm, suddenly needing to move and jolly them both into a better mood. She could feel the imaginary rope that linked them unravelling from her waist and it pained her.

She didn't want to leave, and it felt like the most excruciating decision she'd had to make in a long time, but she didn't want to be responsible for breaking up another family.

Having brought food, they walked to the bench they always sat on, neither of them very hungry. Harry had so many things he wanted to say to her but every time he formulated a sentence he knew it would come out wrong. He wanted to tell her he may not see another Christmas, that he wanted to spend all the time he had left with her, but he was worried it would sound like emotional blackmail and she'd tell him he was being silly, as everyone did when he mentioned dying.

They both wanted the same thing but couldn't bring themselves to tell one another for fear of the upset it would cause.

CHAPTER THREE

Gabrielle arrived back at her house sometime later that day and everything felt different. A blanket of dull clouds had swept across her life and her home and all she could think about was how she'd wished she'd said she'd go to Harry's for Christmas. It had pained her to leave but she'd thought she was doing the right thing; now she just felt filled with guilt when she remembered the disappointment that was visible on his face.

Having reassured herself all the way home in the car that she'd made the right decision, she was now asking herself what sort of Christmas he would have. What would she be spoiling if she'd decided to stay? Didn't she have a tiny right to be there, to share one Christmas with her father after all these years?

Gabrielle stood in her quiet, cold house, which seemed to snub her now, as if it had carried on perfectly well without her and didn't need her anymore. She barely

recognised it and hadn't realised how stark it was; how very little she owned. She knew these were silly thoughts commanded by her guilt and that turning the heating on and warming the place up would make it feel different altogether. It was an odd feeling though and one she couldn't shrug off even after a couple of hours of settling herself in. It was like she wasn't part of the same story anymore, as though her departure had been permanent, and she wasn't supposed to come back. She'd turned down the wrong avenue in a film and everyone on set was hanging their heads in disappointment.

After ten more minutes of pondering she ran upstairs, grabbed more clothes and rammed them in another bag. She called the woman who owned the cottage she'd rented and prayed it would be available. After a small amount of pleading and quite a large sum of money the proprietor agreed to let her have it over the Christmas period, having told Gabrielle they normally closed it until the New Year.

Her plan was to drive back to Norfolk and see how she felt when she got there. At least she'd be in the cottage if it wasn't appropriate to go to Harry's.

She took a deep breath and had one last look around the house to make sure she hadn't forgotten anything. She wasn't used to making rash decisions and it made her nervous. Most of her decisions had been made for her. The biggest one she'd ever made herself was deciding to write books. The probation service dealt with everything else in her life. Although, the last few years they seemed to be allowing her more space to get on with things and had become non-existent, as long as she didn't leave the country, which would be breaking her license, they didn't seem to care. Her probation officer, Rosa had become more of a friend than anything else and now that they met socially they barely remembered how they'd first been introduced.

The noise of the phone ringing broke her thoughts. She answered it immediately thinking it was Harry and then wished she hadn't.

It was her friend, Tara. She almost told her she'd got the wrong number when she referred to her as Rebecca; Gabrielle had become so unused to hearing it.

She hesitated quite obviously letting Tara know there was something wrong. This was a long-term friend who

she knew very well but she felt like she was talking to a stranger; a voice she'd never heard before. She couldn't hide the stiffness in her response which made her sound cold and offhand. It would have sounded normal to a sales person but to a close friend, unused to the tone, it was quite out of character. She'd kept her mobile switched off whilst she'd been away, not wanting to speak to any of her friends. It was a fear she had that they'd know over the phone who she really was, which was ridiculous when she thought about it properly, but she knew they'd detect something and start asking questions and she didn't want to be put in that position. It had been best to tell them she was going away and didn't want to be disturbed and most of them had accepted it was something to do with work.

“Rebecca...? Is everything okay? It's me, Tara?”

“I'm fine, err.... everything's fine. You've just caught me on my way out, that's all.”

“Oh, sorry...you're sure you're okay though?”

“Yep, honestly.” She heard her clipped tone and flinched; she didn't mean for it to sound so harsh but for some reason she felt extremely intruded upon. She tried to

soften her voice; feeling guilty. “I’d tell you if I wasn’t; you really have just caught me at a bad time.”

“Can I ring you later, we haven’t spoken for ages and I’ve so much to tell you.”

“I’m not sure, Tara. I’m going away for Christmas and there isn’t a very good signal where I’m staying.” She cringed at how pathetic and lame she sounded and found herself physically flinching. “I should be back in the New Year, we could catch up then?”

There was silence the other end and she knew she’d wounded her friend. She tried to appease her, but she couldn’t shake the tone in her voice.

“There’s nothing wrong, really. I’m just exploring some new ideas at the moment. I’ve met some family I didn’t know existed and it’s all quite difficult. I’ll talk to you about it when I get back.” Gabrielle physically cringed again; guilt creeping in to pinch her around the neck.

“Okay. I understand. I’ll leave you to it...take care...”

Gabrielle tried to cover the damage with a plaster. “How are you? Is everyone alright?”

“Yes, yes we’re all well thank you.”

“Good. Listen, Tara I’m sorry. I’ll explain to you when I get back.”

“It’s okay, don’t worry, as long as you’re alright. Have a good Christmas.”

As Gabrielle responded she heard the line go dead. She knew she’d hurt her friend and that she’d take it personally. Ever since she’d had children Tara had become terribly insecure and Gabrielle had noticed it getting worse and worse, always assuming everything was to do with her, never thinking beyond her own world and that other people had challenges to deal with. She was the worst person who could have called at that moment. Gabrielle gripped the receiver, knowing her friend would now be busying herself around the house, fighting back the tears, trying to work out what she’d done to offend her so badly. Before she put the phone back on its hub she wondered whether to call her back, but she wasn’t sure she’d make the situation any better. Then the irritation of intrusion unfurled inside her again; she was constantly listening to Tara’s problems and the friendship was mainly one sided. It felt selfish but all she wanted was to think about her own feelings, her own plans and her own self. She didn’t want

to appease, offer comfort or reassurance to anyone other than herself and her father.

The decision made, she repacked her case, adding more items than she removed, took one last look around and walked out. As soon as she got in the car and began to drive she felt what she could only describe as normal again. Two miles down the road she pulled over, realising she needed to call Harry and tell him the news. He was elated, and relief flooded her; her worst fear had been rejection again.

Harry had the best Christmas since Emma had been alive, long ago when they were first together and happy. It was the best Christmas Gabrielle had ever had in her life. There was no feeling of someone missing as there had been when she was a child and before she was sent away. Christmas for her and her brother had always been laced with the absence of her mother. The few members of family they had would visit and glance pityingly at them all, gazing sorrowfully around the draughty old house that seemed so forlorn on its own, overlooking the sea.

After she was sent away, Christmas barely existed. The staff at Hellesdown, the secure unit she'd stayed in, tried hard to make it special, but every child there felt the absence of their loved ones and no amount of tinsel and mince pies could change that. They were even allowed an extra trip to the shops a few days before Christmas, but even that didn't lift the mood. Every child plummeted into a melancholic stupor at that time of year and sometimes the staff wished that Christmas didn't exist, because it highlighted everything the children had lost. But the extra shopping trip was the best treat in the world to Gabrielle because it meant visiting Mr. Jim. One year he made her a cup of tea and gave her a hot sausage roll. She never forgot that year; it always held the fondest memories up until now and it was the last Christmas before Mr. Jim died.

Gabrielle and Harry sat now at the end of the large dining table; a place laid out for them both.

Harry had ordered another tree to be delivered specifically for that room and he'd sent Nancy out to get more lights and decorations, which she'd excitedly helped him to put up. It seemed as though there wasn't a surface

free from lights, baubles or tinsel. The brightness that twinkled against the back drop of the dark sky seen through the windows made it look even more spectacular.

Harry had waited for Gabrielle to go back to the cottage before he began his secret preparations with Nancy; he wanted it to be special. Once Nancy had left, promising to join them later, he set about laying the table; something he wanted to do on his own.

Out came the best crystal, the best china and the best cutlery. He decorated the table with candles and holly cut from the bush by the back door. From the first view the table looked old fashioned and outdated, but then it softened on the eye and was perfect for the atmosphere in the rest of the room.

They sat now amongst all he had prepared the previous day and instead of feeling silly and pretentious, as he thought it would, it was magical.

Gabrielle laughed as she finished her prawn cocktail.

“What’s so funny?”

“I was just thinking how certain meals are marred by their era and social standing.”

“I don’t understand what you mean?” Harry helped himself to more bread and used it to wipe the sauce from his glass.

“Well, here we are eating a prawn cocktail, which has travelled through various eras and has slipped up and down the social ladder. It’s been messed about with and altered to bring it up to date and more en trend.”

“Don’t you like it?” Harry’s face was suddenly filled with disappointment.

“No, that’s what I’m trying to say; I love it! It is what it is, and it doesn’t need changing. Look at the stew for example. That dish has been around forever and okay it’s been tweaked here and there but you don’t ever hear anyone shout, ‘oh how 1860’s’ when it’s served up.” Gabrielle realised she was getting slightly animated, so she buttered another piece of bread and calmed herself. “Well, I like it anyway.”

“Have you ever written about food?”

“No, I’m just passionate about it. It was important to me when I was in... when I was away.” A mist of silence fell across the table and Gabrielle stared at the embroidered white table cloth, unable to look at Harry.

“Go on. You can talk about it you know.”

“It’s alright. It’s the past, best left there. We agreed, remember?”

“No, come on; it’s part of your life. The more we talk the less uncomfortable it will be.”

Gabrielle took a deep breath, moved her head from side to side as she often did when she was thinking, and tried to reconnect with what she’d been saying.

“I read a lot about food. There wasn’t much else to do but read and I didn’t always want a fictional book. I like photographs. Old photographs.” Gabrielle looked him in the eye, suddenly feeling extremely self-conscious and slightly silly. “This is ridiculous. You don’t want to hear this, its mindless crap. Let’s talk about something else.”

“Okay, fair enough. What do you want to talk about?”

Gabrielle sat up in her seat slightly shocked at the ease in which he gave in; she felt rattled that he hadn’t pressed her on the subject even though she’d suggested changing it. She watched him pour them both more wine and the rattling inside her turned into a bubble of irritation.

“I was fascinated with photographs. I had nothing else. Pictures of people mainly, but I also liked looking

through recipe books.” Her voice was hard and getting louder, but she couldn’t help herself. “I used to make up stories for each dish, like what sort of people were going to eat it, where they lived, that sort of thing.”

Gabrielle knew there was harshness in her tone of voice and she was trying to control it, but she was annoyed because she felt he’d suddenly tried to belittle her or wasn’t really bothered by what she had to say. She watched his face to detect if he was even listening and was even more astounded when he pushed back his chair, collected the empty cocktail glasses and wandered off to the kitchen. By the time he came back into the room and fiddled about putting on another record, Gabrielle had pushed back her chair, folded her arms and had fixed him with a hard stare.

“Another drink, dear heart?” He called over his shoulder.

She opened her mouth to speak and then closed it again. She didn’t want to spoil his dinner, or their day and she could feel she was boiling up into a rage.

Instead she tried to make light of it but there was still a serious tone to her voice. “No, I don’t want another

drink. I was talking to you just now at the table you cantankerous old so and so.” Gabrielle was suddenly pinched with the feeling she might have gone too far.

Harry turned from where he was knelt on the floor, a mixed look of bewilderment and humour on his face. “I know you were and I was listening. I said to you I was going to clear the table and that I had something to show you.” He pulled himself up wearily by holding onto the top of the side board; his face wincing at his creaky limbs.

“No, you didn’t, you just got up and walked out of the room without a word.”

He wandered over to her, a large ornate silver box in his hand. “I tell you I did! I told you I was listening to you and that I’d be back in a minute.”

“Why didn’t I hear you then?” Gabrielle was immediately transported back to a child again; indignant and wanting to be heard.

“Because you obviously weren’t bloody listening.” He laughed and tapped her hand. “Pass me that bottle, I want a top up. This was your mother’s.” He pushed the box across the table for her to look in.

She reluctantly indulged him and opened the box, still convinced that he'd not been listening and was trying to change the subject. She gasped when she saw the piles of photographs inside.

"See, I was listening. Your mother was fascinated by photographs. It didn't matter whose they were, she'd look at them. You obviously take after her."

"Did I know this about her?" Gabrielle began excitedly looking through the piles, turning each picture this way and that.

"I doubt it."

"You never really talked about her when we were little or maybe I just can't remember?"

Harry took some of the photos from the box and began to flick through them, seeing the memories in his head clearer than what was in front of him. "I didn't talk about her, I know I should have but I just couldn't. That sounds selfish, I know. I felt if I talked about her I'd hurt more, that she'd be more present in a spiritual sense, only I still wouldn't be able to see her or touch her. I couldn't bear the thought of that. Maybe it would have been easier if I had."

“Do you find it easier now?”

“Of course. The years altered that. You can have that box with the photos.”

Gabrielle quickly put the pictures back and shut the lid pulling her hand away as if it had bitten her. The old familiar undeserving feeling crept in.

“I couldn’t. They belong to Nancy, she should have them.”

“No, she bloody well shouldn’t! They’re yours and they were always intended for you.”

“Thank you.” Gabrielle squeezed his hand which felt as dry and worn as the pictures. “I’ll look at them another time.”

“At your leisure, my dear. Now then, I better get that turkey out of the fridge.”

“I’d try the oven if I were you unless you haven’t put it in, in which case we’re going to be quite hungry.” Gabrielle laughed, and Harry chuckled, not really understanding the joke.

“It should be ready.” He shuffled out of the room and she realised how much he’d aged from the time she’d met him at the start of the month. He was getting confused and

his body was beginning to slump as though he'd let go; released his grip on the rope of life. As though he'd completed the one last thing he wanted to do; to see his daughter again. She shook the morbid thought away, telling herself he'd been through quite a lot of stress of late.

She pushed her chair back and went to help him in the kitchen even though he'd told her quite sharply on her arrival she wasn't to.

In her head she'd imagined Harry taking the turkey out of the oven and placing it on the stove top, but she was met with a completely different vision. He was sitting at the kitchen table, staring out of the window weeping.

She ran to him and hugged him feeling like she'd combust with love and choked back her own sobs. "You silly old bugger!"

He hugged her back. "I let you down, I let you down. My own flesh and blood; my daughter."

Gabrielle felt like he'd ice skated over her heart and caused it to crack across the surface; the pain she felt left her speechless for a few moments. It was as though all the love she had for him had been locked away all those absent

years and it had seeped through the last few weeks and was now flooding her body. She managed to compose herself as she rocked him in her arms, allowing him to cry. Eventually they released one another, and she sat in the chair next to him.

“Dad, I let you down and I’ll never forgive myself for that, for all the people I hurt. I’m not going to lie and say you dealt with it in the right way because I don’t think you did. But who knows what the right way is in that situation. I missed you and I needed you, but you didn’t let me down. You did what you felt was right at the time and it must have been horrific to deal with. I’ve asked myself the question over and over, what I would do if it was my daughter and I can’t answer it; not truthfully anyway.”

Harry couldn’t respond. He was mentally exhausted. Fifty years of heartache seemed to have become apparent to him and it was coming out in muffled sobs.

“Hey, come on,” she gripped his hand harder, trying to reassure him along, “I’ve turned out okay. I’m alright, Dad. We’ve got to move forward because if we keep raking over it we’ll achieve nothing and it’ll all be a waste of time.”

“I know, love.” Harry whispered; his voice broken and soft from crying. He fumbled in his pocket for a handkerchief while Gabrielle tried to wipe the tears from his face. “I can’t make excuses for abandoning you, but I did have some sort of breakdown.”

“Was that about the time you stopped visiting me?”

Harry nodded, ashamed he’d mentioned it. It sounded so feeble when he said it out loud.

“It must have been hard trying to bring up two children alone, still grieving for Mother and working long hours too. I wasn’t the easiest child, I do know that.” She rubbed his back with her spare hand.

“It’s no excuse, dear heart. Blood’s thicker than water and all that.”

“Dad, what’s that smell?”

Harry looked around the kitchen slightly disorientated as she grabbed a tea towel and ran to the oven.

“Oh buggeration! I put the vegetables back in to warm through!”

“Well, they’re definitely warm now!”

The smell of burnt vegetables permeated the air as they quickly busied themselves opening windows to let out the fresh smoke that had escaped from the open oven door.

“Did you hear someone knock?” Gabrielle stopped what she was doing and listened.

“No, who would that be on Christmas day?”

“Nancy? Jonathan maybe?”

“Nancy comes around the side door normally and Jonathan won’t come around, I know that for sure.”

Harry was staring in the direction of the front door a look of bewilderment on his face.

“Well you’d better go and see who it is. I can’t go, can I?”

“No quite right.”

“Why are you so worried about answering the door? You don’t think someone’s realised who I am?” Gabrielle placed the dish of burnt vegetables on the table and waited for him to respond.

“I’ve just got a horrible feeling it might be Anna or even Jonathan. You know, causing trouble?”

“You just said it wouldn’t be Jonathan.”

“I’m not so sure now.”

The knocking grew louder and more aggressive. They both stared at one another; various scenarios racing through their minds.

“I don’t want to answer it!”

“No and I don’t want you to! Quick let’s hide before whoever it is comes around this side of the house!”

But it was too late as a bang at the back door startled the pair and they turned to see a surprisingly dishevelled Jonathan staring at them through the glass. His face distorted further when he focused on Gabrielle standing in his father’s kitchen.

It was a few moments before Gabrielle and Harry realised he was quite drunk. They stared at him through the clear glass door as though they were examining an insect in a jar as he grappled with the lock.

Gabrielle took a deep breath and moved towards the door to unlock it and let him in. Even though she was apprehensive about what was happening she wanted to protect her father.

“Oh, how the tables have turned!” Jonathan staggered into the kitchen sounding like a petulant school boy.

“I don’t want any trouble, Jonathan please.” Harry raised his hand up towards his son who was moving precariously close to him. Gabrielle planted herself firmly by his side.

“Neither do I, Dad.” His voice, almost comical, had become slightly high pitched. “I just wanted to wish you happy bloody Christmas. No that’s not right...merry Christmas...Yep. Merry fucking Christmas and Happy Fucking New Year...”

“Either sit down son and I’ll make you a coffee, or go home.”

“It’s funny this,” he began waving his finger backwards and forwards between them, “don’t you think it’s funny, Gabrielle? He got rid of you first and now you’re back and he’s getting rid of me. Ha ha!”

“Come on Jonathan, sit down before you fall down.” Gabrielle pulled out a chair and grabbed his arm, trying to hold him steady. He was swaying backwards and forwards as though he were on a ship; his eyelids blinking in time with the movement as he desperately tried to focus.

“Don’t touch me! You can’t touch me!”

“Jonathan!” Harry’s voice boomed, “This is your father speaking! Sit down now!”

This sudden retort seemed to startle Jonathan out of his drunken stupor for a few moments and he staggered back into the chair that had been pulled out for him. Gabrielle, unable to control herself began to laugh. The two men turned and looked at her as though she’d gone slightly mad.

“I don’t know what’s so funny, Gabrielle but please try and control yourself.”

“I’m sorry, Dad...sorry.” The more she tried to stop the harder she laughed until it was quite loud and high pitched.

“Ha ha bloody ha. She’s mad, father.”

This just made the situation worse and Gabrielle started another spate of laughter which caused Jonathan to laugh. Harry on the other hand was not finding any part of the situation amusing at all.

“Well, when you two have composed yourselves and can explain to me what’s so funny you’ll find me in the sitting room.”

This remark caused them both to snigger like a couple of school children; that was what they had regressed to. Harry's outburst towards Jonathan had transported Gabrielle back to when they were children and were reprimanded in that manner by him. Instead of it making her cry, as was normal when she reminisced, because of all the heartache that came thereafter, it had caused her to laugh. Even Jonathan in his drunken state had suddenly remembered and the infectious laughter had caused him to join in. Gabrielle had visited memories time and again in her mind and the pictures were always marred by the terrible events that had followed. It was as though she had to cross a very precarious bridge before she reached any happy memories. On this occasion she had been physically transported back in time due to the enactment of the memory and had been flown over that rickety bridge and landed the other side, enabling her to indulge in a remembrance without any of the unhappy attachments.

After a while the laughter subsided and Jonathan and Gabrielle were left in the kitchen alone with nothing but their silence. The only noise they could hear was the muffled jazz music their father was playing in the sitting

room, that and the usual calamity of hungry seagulls outside.

“I’ll put the kettle on and make you a strong coffee.”

“I’d rather have a proper drink...I’ve started so I may as well finish.”

“I think in all honesty, you finished a while ago.”

“Who do you think you are telling me what to do in my own house.”

“This isn’t your house, Jonathan, its Dad’s.”

“Oh, its Dad now, is it.” Jonathan could barely keep his head off the table.

“I’m not arguing with you, especially not today.”

“She’s left me.”

Gabrielle turned from spooning coffee in the pot, unsure if she’d heard him correctly.

“Yep, left me. Just like that.”

“Who, Anna?”

“Who do you think? I’m not married to Joan bloody Collins, am I?” Jonathan propped his elbow on the table, so his hand could take the weight of his head. “You’re not very bright for a writer, are you?” he chuckled to himself.

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“What? That you’re not very bright or that my wife’s left me? Ha ha.”

Sitting as he was at the table, apart from being much older and very drunk, he was just as Gabrielle remembered him; full of humorous quips and finishing off sentences with “ha ha” as though he were still a child.

Jonathan leaned across the table and grabbed a burnt parsnip from the charred dish of vegetables.

“You’re not a very good cook either. These look like vanilla pods! Are you good at anything?”

Gabrielle laughed; there was no malice in what he said, it was just typical banter from the brother she knew long ago.

“Oh no.” He threw his chair back and began staggering around the kitchen; his face had turned a peculiar shade of grey.

Gabrielle quickly realised what was happening and tried to guide him to the toilet, but it was too late. He turned in the direction of the back door and to her astonishment managed to open it and vomit the contents of his stomach onto the doorstep outside.

“A parsnip too far, ha ha!” Gabrielle called to him.

He groaned and snorted as the next lot of liquid left his stomach mainly via his nostrils. She left him to it and went into the sitting room to talk to Harry, but he was fast asleep in his chair by the fire. She watched him for a few moments and then crept out quietly.

She found Jonathan sat at the kitchen table, his face a mixture of white and green, a hint of pink beginning to flood his cheeks.

“Come on, let me get you to bed.”

He didn’t argue with her, just looked at her, his vision causing him to see double.

After she’d tucked him up and made sure he was safely asleep on his side and was not going to be sick anymore, she made her way downstairs to find Harry in the kitchen trying to salvage some of their Christmas dinner.

“I’m sorry about before.”

“What of it?”

“I’m sorry for laughing. It wasn’t at you Dad, it just reminded me of when I was little, when we were young.”

“I know it did, love. I realised that afterwards.”

“You’re not cross with me?”

“Of course not, dear heart!”

“Good. Let me help you with the dinner.”

“No, no, no!” He raised his hand and shooed her away. “If you want to help you’ll go in the other room, open the wine that’s on the table and put some more music on and turn it up so I can hear it in here.”

“Alright.”

“It’s got you and your brother talking, has it?”

Gabrielle turned to look at him as she was leaving the room. “I suppose it has, yes. We’ll see how he feels in the morning.”

“It’s a start.”

“Yes, it is. Dad?”

“Yes love?”

“Anna’s left him.”

Harry paused briefly and then continued to baste the roast potatoes with hot goose fat. About bloody time was all he replied.

CHAPTER FOUR

Although it was first thought that Anna leaving Jonathan was the best thing for him, it turned out to be the worst turn of events for the rest of them. The bitterness and hatred that had welled between them and never been aired landed on them all like a giant mass of icy cold water.

There was a calm gentle atmosphere for the first few days. Nancy called round regularly, unable to believe what had happened or the change in her father. He'd spoken more in the last few days than he'd ever uttered in her lifetime. He vented his feelings about everything, not just his marriage but his entire life. Gabrielle and Harry found it, at times, uncomfortable and painful, but generally just quite sad. He'd lost himself in his career and he'd been isolated like Gabrielle, only under very different

circumstances. He didn't stay at his father's very long after Christmas day, deciding he ought to go home to Nancy and explain what was happening. Gabrielle hoped that he'd be less open with her; she was sure she didn't want to hear details about her parent's marriage.

Gabrielle could feel the unrest in the house and as cathartic the experience was for them all she knew something very bad was about to happen. And just before the New Year, it did. It came in the form of a journalist knocking at her father's door asking, casually if Gabrielle Rochester was in. He was calm and collected as if he was trying to catch them out, but Harry was just as passive in his reply. He told him that there was no one of that name there but unfortunately his face didn't follow his words and the journalist hung around outside the house for quite some time. Luckily Gabrielle had agreed to stay with her father over the Christmas period and help him with Jonathan, so she'd already been back to the cottage to collect some things. There was no way she would be leaving the house now – not with a journalist practically camped outside watching their every move.

Eventually more journalists rang the bell and hovered outside, having been told calmly that they had the wrong address. They were like a pack of dogs having been thrown a bone; they knew they were onto something. Old newspaper archives had been raked up following an anonymous tip off and Gabrielle had, once again, become like a rabbit in a hutch. It brought with it many memories from before and lots of events she had chosen not to remember.

Harry called the police to try and get the journalists removed, but all they could do was stop them from coming down the driveway to the house. Harry had to apply for an injunction to stop them coming along the track which led to his property.

The arrival of Gabrielle's Probation Officer, Rosa, just about pushed her over the edge; the police had alerted the Probation Service of her whereabouts and were concerned she was breaking the conditions of her licence. Her identity had been uncovered and it was a worry to them all. This only fuelled the media further and proved that they had the right location.

The Probation Service were unconcerned after so many years of Gabrielle having a clean record, and eventually, along with the police, agreed that she was in the best place at her father's house until it all blew over. "How the hell was she able to go anywhere else with the media watching her every move" was what Harry barked at them down the telephone when they'd rung to tell him what they'd decided. The police told him she was entitled to be put back under the Witness Protection Act due to the rareness of the circumstances. She'd been put into this program before, even though she wasn't a witness, but the authorities didn't know what else to do with her and knew she needed a place to hide where people didn't know her or her real name. This time, Gabrielle refused. She couldn't see the point; everyone in the whole country knew what she looked like; pictures of her as an author had been splattered all over the papers. There was no way she was leaving her father again and she couldn't face the outside world anyway. She just wanted to lose herself in her childhood home until she felt better and got a grip on what she was going to do next.

The varied emotions she experienced were all similar in the way they hit her so dramatically. In her more lucid moments she wondered if she was bipolar. Generally, whatever she was feeling made her stop and take deep breaths; the whole experience was so intense. She felt that her freedom of choice had been snatched away from her. She couldn't even go back to her home, where she'd lived for so many years, or to simply stay in the cottage near her father – not unless she wanted to be mobbed. Her career, her whole life's work, everything felt as though it was over. She couldn't help but think it was a bit like dying and starting again. She had learnt to embrace change, but this was immensely frightening, and she hadn't properly contemplated the consequences of it all. She wasn't quite sure what was better; living a lie all this time or discovering you were the most hated person in the country.

She spent much of her time sitting with her feelings, facing her emotions and the memories they stirred up in her mind. The one thing she knew she must do was to work through whatever she was feeling, rather than swallowing it and trying to stamp it out. During one of her quiet moments of contemplation she suddenly realised

underneath all the fear and anxiety that she was actually grieving. At first, she put it down to losing her old life, past grief for her family and many other things she felt she'd lost, but it was like a distant voice or song she couldn't quite hear or recognise. Then it dawned on her that she was mourning Rebecca; she actually felt like she had died. She likened it to actors losing a character after many years of playing the same person, which made her wonder if they grieved too. Because she had morphed into being someone else, as though she were playing a part in a play, she'd very quickly and simply shaken off Rebecca Banford and slipped into being Gabrielle Rochester. It had all come so easily to her, like picking up where you left off with an old friend you hadn't seen for years. It was a comfort in one way because it told her she'd always been Gabrielle Rochester; that she'd never lost that person and therefore Rebecca had never really existed.

For the most part she still felt frightened, terribly lonely and sick to her stomach with the thought of it all. She ceased to eat and Harry, struggling with his own turmoil, became extremely worried for her.

Jonathan surprised everyone by being extremely supportive. He booked time off work, which to be honest was his only option and a relief to the Practice Manager at the surgery who was going to have to tell him to do so anyway, due to the media and public attention the whole situation had caused.

He took it all in his stride, held his head high in the street, refusing to comment on anything he was asked, and he made sure that Harry and Gabrielle had everything they needed. He saw off countless journalists who tried to get into the secluded garden, ignoring the fact there was an injunction in place. He generally acted as their guard and carer as best he could. No one questioned why he had had such a change of heart – it was just accepted and very much welcomed. It was as though since Anna had left he'd become a different person, but he wasn't so different to Harry and Gabrielle, who saw him as the mature, developed extension of the same self he had been when he was a boy.

However awful things became for the family, it did have a positive angle in that it pushed them all together for the first time in their lives.

Nancy and Gabrielle formed an extremely close bond and Nancy even managed to cheer Gabrielle with games of Scrabble, DVD collections of comedy shows and chatter of events that had occurred when she wasn't around. It was to her, as though her Aunt had lived on a desert island for many years and needed updating on the ways of the world.

This routine continued for two weeks and then Harry called Jonathan into the sitting room for a private chat. He'd spent many days deep in thought, quiet but distracted, and was often to be found in the attic rifling through boxes, desperately searching for something. He stole outside into the garden at night time to watch and talk to the sea, his dear wise friend who he missed terribly, having not been able to take his usual daily stroll. He didn't fancy being mobbed by reporters or spiteful locals and he was immensely grateful that the sea was quite literally on his doorstep.

Jonathan's attempts at stopping journalists and members of the public who saw fit to wander up the path to pelt eggs and rotten vegetables at the house became

pointless, so they'd had to call the police, who then had to appoint two officers to guard the area.

His friendships, some years old, seemed fictitious now, and it pained him that people were so fickle and insincere. The very friends who'd supported him in the first place had now firmly turned their back on him, all because he'd decided to welcome his daughter back into his life. When he really thought about it they weren't his friends at all as he'd not confided to any of them about it; hadn't felt he could trust them and their friendship.

There had been the odd call from the few members of his family that were left, like his sister Maggie and his cousin Jane, but they seemed distant and unsympathetic, as though they didn't want to be tarred with the events that were unfolding. The only person outside the family who had stood by them all had been Catherine. Harry had told her not to visit because of the reporters, but she'd telephoned every few days to see if they needed anything and that had meant the world to them all. There was also his dear old friend the sea, whom Harry knew would never let him down.

“What's up, Dad?”

I want to talk to you about Gabrielle. In private.” Harry looked past Jonathan at the door signalling for him to close it.

“I’m glad you’ve said that because I was going to have a word with you myself.”

“Oh, what about?”

“No, you go first.”

“No, you.” Harry’s voice was becoming defensive and stern as though he knew what was coming next. He could tell by Jonathan’s patronising tone and demeanour that he wasn’t going to like what he had to say.

Jonathan sat himself down in the armchair by the fire opposite his father. He glanced briefly at the large box filled with paperwork and old newspapers, but he didn’t register it or didn’t feel inclined to ask what they were.

“I’m a bit concerned about how long she’s going to stay. I mean, how long is this going to go on for?”

Harry looked at his son in utter bewilderment. “How long is this going to go on?”

“Well, yes. We all have lives to get back to. Even you, Dad. You can’t stay cooped up here like a hermit for the rest of your life.”

“This is it. This is our lives; things change son; that is part of life. I’m sorry if this inconveniences you. I had thought you’d built bridges with your sister, seeing how you’ve been getting along so well. Quite clearly, it’s all been a farce, like the bloody friends I’m supposed to have in the village.”

“You can’t blame them, Dad. She killed two children and blew the community apart. You must be able to understand they don’t want her here? You made a choice all those years ago and they stuck by you for it.”

Harry’s cold, gnarled hands began to turn white because he was wringing them so hard, as his temper began to rise. “You’re right as always...”

“Good, I knew you’d see sense. I don’t mind telling her to leave if you can’t face it.” Jonathan stood up as though he were about to get on with the task immediately.

“I hadn’t finished what I was saying.” Jonathan sat back in his chair realising his father was irritated.

“I’m making a choice now. The right choice this time, which is to stand by my daughter.”

“What? You don’t know what you’re saying!”

“It’s quite clear. I’d like you to leave now. You want your old life back, for things to chug along as before then I suggest you go. I thought you were genuine in your kindness and that it encompassed us all, but it’s quite apparent it was all for my benefit, to get back into my good books.”

“Don’t be ridiculous! You don’t even know her! She’s a bad egg and you’re making a terrible mistake!”

The two men were both standing now, squaring up to one another.

“I’ll decide if I’m making a mistake or not. I’m doing what I should have done years ago.”

For quite some time father and son stared at one another. Harry’s eyes were filled with disappointment that Anna leaving hadn’t really changed anything. Jonathan’s were filled with jealousy and anger.

“You called that journalist, didn’t you?”

“Of course, I didn’t! Don’t be so bloody stupid!”

“I’d like you to leave now.”

“Come on, Dad, you’re being absurd.”

“Fine, I’m being absurd but please respect my wishes and go. I have things I need to do.”

Jonathan finally looked away, and giving in to his father's request, he walked out.

Harry took a few deep breaths and then went and sat at his desk and stared out at his dear old friend, the sea, quietly asking in his mind if he was doing the right thing. Once he was satisfied, he picked up the telephone and called a fellow Barrister friend to ask his advice about setting up an appeal case for Gabrielle.

CHAPTER FIVE

Harry didn't recognise the woman who walked into his sitting room a day later. He jumped up from his seat thinking it was a reporter. He very quickly realised it was Gabrielle and ceased the tirade of abuse which was about to fall from his mouth.

“What's all this? I didn't recognise you for a minute! What have you done to your hair? It looks very...well...”

“I know its awful Dad but at least I look completely different. That was the whole point.”

“Point of what? No one can see you in here, dear heart.”

“Yes, but they can out there, and I need to be as unrecognisable as possible. I've decided to go away.” Gabrielle raised her hand to silence him, aware that he was

about to protest. “It’s for the best. You all need your lives back and none of this is going to go away any time soon. I’m not feeling sorry for myself; I just want to do what’s right. As soon as this dies down and we try to continue with our lives the media will pounce again.”

Harry sat down carefully in his chair, resting his elbows on his knees; he clasped his hands together and contemplated what she had said. She followed him and sat in the chair opposite.

“But where will you go? They’ll only find you and you’d have to move again. You’re best off here love. It’ll all go away eventually.”

“I’m going to apply for a new identity as I did before. I was granted anonymity indefinitely some years ago, so it won’t be a problem. I was thinking of going up north, as far as my licence will allow me to, and that seems as good a place as any. Far enough away from all this anyway.” She knew her words were cold and cruel, but she couldn’t help it, she’d discovered so much anger simmering inside her over the last few days.

“But we don’t want you to go. You won’t know anyone there.”

“With all due respect, Dad, I’ve had to do it many times throughout the course of my life.”

Her cool attitude didn’t go unnoticed; it was as though she’d shut herself off from him, detached herself somehow. With her hair hacked short Harry felt like he was talking to a stranger.

“You don’t know me, not really. You just think you do. This has changed everything for me and it’s brought back a lot of memories, which affects our relationship.”

Harry felt an immediate pain through his chest. “I thought we were getting along really well?”

“We were but it’s all changed, and I feel like I can’t breathe. I’ll never be free of all this and I know I don’t deserve to be, but I’m trapped all over again like I was when I was in prison.”

“I hardly think this is like being in a Secure Unit, now come on...”

“And I’m angry, Dad. I’m angry with everyone. I’ve got this sudden rage that’s ignited inside me for the first time in years and the more comments you make like that, the more pissed off I’ll become.”

Harry sighed heavily. “Well, I’m sorry you feel like that, Gabrielle, I really am.”

She paused, and they stared at one another. Harry knew exactly what she was going to say before she said it.

“Only I’m not Gabrielle and you’re not really my Dad.”

Harry frowned. He could feel his body turning cold with the shock of what she’d said, and he knew the pain would hit him later.

“You weren’t even aware I went to prison, were you?”

“It was a Secure Unit. I hardly think that’s the same.”

“It was a Secure Unit and I went to prison when I turned sixteen. For eight years. And do you know why?”

Harry shook his head, tears flooding his tired eyes.

“It was all because of my age and the Home Office decided that was the law. I was doing well up until that point. Dr. Jeffers had organised for me to go to college so that I could have a career.”

“Who is Dr. Jeffers and what the bloody hell are you talking about?”

“See?! You don’t know! You don’t know anything about what happened to me because the bottom line is, you didn’t care!”

Tears streamed down Gabrielle’s face as she tried to gulp back the sobs. The air crackled between them and Harry watched her as if he were seeing a completely different person. It was as though she’d regressed back to a little girl.

“I did care. Had your Mother been alive things might have been different, but I did the best I could at the time....” Harry’s voice broke as his emotions got the better of him and he got up and walked to the window to try and compose himself.

“Yes, and that was my fault as well.” She almost spat at him.

“Is that what you really think?” He turned to look at her.

“You made it quite clear I wasn’t wanted.”

Harry closed his eyes, smarting at her cruel words.

“If you felt like that then I’m sorry. You can be assured you were very much wanted. I naively thought you

would both survive. You know that. I've told you a thousand times."

"Thought she'd survive you mean. Then I'd have never been born and none of this would have happened." Gabrielle's emotions began to overwhelm her and all she could do was sob uncontrollably. She knew she was behaving like a child and being cruel and Harry felt like he was facing the difficult little person she had once been. She was quite clearly unravelling, and he had no way of stopping her.

"I'll never be free of this guilt, ever."

Harry wandered back to his chair and sat down; he knew better than to try and comfort her. "If I didn't care I wouldn't be exploring the possibility of an appeal. An appeal to clear your name because I don't believe you did it."

Gabrielle stared at him and tried to form a response; she couldn't believe what he'd just said. Eventually she stood up from her chair.

"I thought you'd be pleased." Harry almost whispered; his voice seemed to be escaping him.

“Why didn’t you do it all those years ago when I needed you then?”

“I don’t bloody know!” He roared at her.

Silence fell like a mist between them and they stared at one another defiantly.

“As much as you don’t want to believe this Dad, I did kill those children. Those are the facts, so you better get used to it.”

Gabrielle left Harry alone in the half light of the sitting room, as the afternoon drew to a close, and went upstairs to pack her case.

Harry sat for quite some time, unable to believe how their relationship had dramatically changed in such a short period. But then he wondered whether it had always been there bubbling underneath the surface, and all along they had just been being terribly polite.

Maybe it was inevitable that things would alter between them. It had all been so sudden and he felt as though it had all unravelled and he now had to sort through the mess and face up to it all. Face memories that knotted and twisted his insides because he felt so guilty.

Perhaps things had been best left alone and he wished, as much as it hurt him, that everything could go back to how it was before Gabrielle came back into their lives.

Gabrielle left Harry's house two nights later with her Probation Officer, Rosa. She always dealt with Gabrielle's needs, having been allocated to her years ago. They were very close, and Gabrielle felt comforted by her presence.

Rosa agreed that a new identity and place to stay was in order and waited for confirmation of the location, so she could contact the Chief Constable, as was customary under the circumstances. It was to be an hour further round the coast; it was not something Gabrielle had a say in, as she'd first thought. They'd all agreed she didn't need to be too far away, as it would be assumed by the media she would be, so not too much suspicion would be aroused. The journalists had just discovered her old house and situation, and would be busy sniffing around that for the time being anyway.

Gabrielle was pleasantly surprised by the temporary safe house they'd found her. It was a typical fisherman's

cottage on the coast, and even though some of the guts had been ripped out of it, it had been painted white throughout with a few simple ornaments scattered around and it felt peaceful and calm. The problem was she couldn't stop crying and this environment seemed to be accentuating her emotions.

"I've not known you to be like this, Rebecca. Do you need me to call Dr. Young?" Rosa settled herself into an armchair adjacent to where Gabrielle had sat, alarmed at her roughly cut short hair and dark haunted eyes.

"No... I don't know. Let me see how I feel in an hour or so. I'm not sure I'm ready to see Dr. Young yet."

Dr. Young was the psychiatrist who she'd been seeing on and off for many years. He was excellent at his job but the sessions with him were intense and painful.

"If you feel like that then it's probably the best time to see him. Can I get you anything?"

Gabrielle shook her head. "It's weird but for years being called Rebecca had felt right, maybe because I got used to it, I suppose, but now it just sounds odd."

"In what way?"

“Well, for the time I spent at my father’s I actually felt like Gabrielle. I slipped into it so easily, and now I feel like no one. Now I’m not even Rebecca Banford.”

“I hate to berate you when you’re upset but next time you decide to make a lengthy trip anywhere, especially to family you must let us know. It’s a condition of your licence.”

“I know, I know. I’m sorry. Do you know what my new identity is going to be yet?”

“No, I’m still waiting to hear. It could be a while so if anyone asks you your name then for the time being just make one up. Not that you’ll be going out anytime soon.” Rosa sighed. “Do you think you’ve gained anything from having contact with your family?”

“Look at me Rosa. Do you think it’s done me any good?”

“I know you’re upset but maybe this is a positive thing. Maybe now you can resolve or work through some stuff.”

“Perhaps. Maybe I’m too upset to see it right now. It feels like it’s just churned up acres and acres of land that we’ve now got to sift through for some answers.”

“But at some point, Rebecca you were going to have to work through this stuff. Didn’t Dr. Young tell you that eventually the memories would resurface?”

“I didn’t really believe him because I thought I’d dealt with it. That I was becoming normal, as normal as I can be, whatever that is. Have you got any cigarettes Rosa?”

Rosa was taken aback. “You don’t smoke!”

“Not really but occasionally I do, and this is one of those occasions.”

“I haven’t but I could go and get you some. I’m sure there’s a shop around here somewhere. I’ll get you some bits and pieces if you like? What do you need?”

“Thank you; that would be a great help.” Gabrielle stood up to get her purse. “Milk, eggs and bread – that sort of thing.”

“Okay. I shouldn’t be too long....you won’t do anything silly, will you?”

“I promise. How long have you known me? You know I wouldn’t do anything stupid.”

“Okay. And you’re sure you want cigarettes?”

Gabrielle nodded. "I'm not allowed to phone my father, am I?"

"Not now. Please don't, Rebecca."

"Alright, I won't."

Rosa left Gabrielle sitting in the armchair which was where she stayed for quite some time. Any inclination to move made her body feel heavy and solid. She imagined getting up for a glass of water but never actually did it; her mind was so overwhelmed with memories and conversations from the past. She realised after some time she'd been talking to herself out loud.

She took a deep breath and launched herself from the chair in search of her mobile phone. Once found she dialled her father's number.

"Hello?" His voice sounded weak and unfamiliar causing Gabrielle to hesitate before she answered.

"Dad? It's Gabrielle."

"Oh, my dear heart! Where are you?"

"I can't tell you that and I must make this a quick call, as my Probation Officer forbade me to phone anyone. Don't worry I'm not too far away. Dad, I need you to do something for me."

“Anything.”

“I’m going to start writing my diary again. I want you to read it when I’ve finished. It’ll be about what happened to me when I went away. Will you do that for me? It’s important.”

She heard him breathe out a sigh on the other end of the line but not in an irritated way, more contemplative.

“Of course, I will my darling. But knowing I’m going to read it won’t affect your honesty in relating it? What I mean is will you be completely open?”

“Completely. I think I need to do this. To get it all on paper and then we can put it behind us.”

“It sounds like a very good idea. When will we see you again?”

“Give me a few weeks. Just a few weeks and then I’ll ring you and we’ll meet somewhere. We have to let it all die down first.”

“I know but we miss you.”

“And I you. Dad I’m sorry for what I said.”

“I’m sorry too.”

“Look, I must go, Rosa will be back in a minute and I’m not supposed to ring anyone.”

“Alright my darling. Are you okay?”

“I am now I’ve come to this realisation. And I’m safe Dad, so don’t worry. Are you okay?” Gabrielle wandered over to the window to see if she could see Rosa coming down the street.

“Yes.”

She heard his voice break and her heart immediately felt like it was expanding, causing a sick feeling to rise in her throat.

“I love you, Dad.”

“I love you too.” He whispered, and she heard him hang up the phone.

Her skin prickled with a chill that spread over her whole body as she choked back the unstoppable tears that streamed down her tired face. It was the first time he’d ever said anything like that to her.

She pulled her notebooks from her holdall and flicked through them, trying to find an empty one. Each one was used for notes and lists of characters or long hand novels but eventually she found one that hadn’t been written in.

She opened the front page and wrote her real name and the following days date at the top. Then she closed it

and laid it on the arm of the chair with the pen neatly placed on top of it.

Harry also sat in his armchair by the fire with an old hardback diary from 1987 that he'd found and never used. He opened the front cover, wrote the date at the top of the first page, took a sip of the brandy he'd poured himself and began to write.

CHAPTER SIX

Gabrielle sat with her diary for many days, unable to formulate the words to write. She had no idea where to begin and when she did have something to say it just sounded churlish and petty.

She stared for hours out of the sitting room window, watching people walk by, trying to imagine what their lives were like and what they had to work through each day.

Rosa had rung her mobile to let her know what time she was arriving, and Gabrielle was glad of the company each day. She liked the little house she was staying in and she felt as though she'd merged into the town quite easily without anyone really noticing, but she felt like she had felt many times before – isolated, lost and very alone. She

hadn't had to move for quite a few years and had become very settled. But now the old familiar feelings from years ago were creeping back and they felt heavier and more concentrated than before.

She'd located her box of photographs that she'd packed in the bottom of her holdall; looking at them normally helped, but not this time. Even the ones Harry had given her didn't seem to make any difference. She felt so blank yet filled with so many words, conversations and images.

A few minutes later Rosa knocked on the door and let herself in with the spare key. Gabrielle sighed with relief at her arrival and got up out of her chair to put the kettle on.

"Everything okay?" she called through to the kitchen as she took her coat off.

"Yeah sure. You?"

"Yes, but I think you need to take a look at this."

Gabrielle's stomach flipped; she knew Rosa well enough to know that her tone of voice didn't sound good. She walked into the sitting room to find her holding a tabloid paper. She quickly handed it to Gabrielle. On the

front was a large picture of her when she was ten years old. The headline read “Monster child killer uncovered on Norfolk coast”.

“I’m sorry to be the bearer of bad news and to be quite so harsh in the way I’ve delivered it, but you need to know what’s going on. Someone has sold a story about you and whoever it is knows quite a lot about your circumstances and movements in the last few weeks.”

“Give it to me, let me read it.” Gabrielle snatched the newspaper from Rosa’s hands.

She stared at the black and white photo for quite some time as though she were examining someone she’d never seen before. She knew it was her, but it didn’t feel or look like how she remembered herself. But then when she really thought about it she never looked how she imagined herself to be when she saw herself in the mirror anyway. It was always just a feeling inside her of whom she thought she was. She had no idea whether this was how everyone felt or if it was a foible that isolated her from the rest of the world.

She began to read the article, which had been narrated by someone who sounded like they knew her but had been

written by a total stranger. Some of it was laughable it was so far from the truth. It had been dramatized and exaggerated and in that way, was not like her at all.

“Do you have any idea who you think it could be?”

“Not sure. Maybe my sister-in-law, Anna. I’d like to think my brother wouldn’t stoop so low but then you never know.”

“I need to make a couple of calls.” Rosa went into the kitchen and closed the door behind her.

Gabrielle was barely aware; she was so engrossed in the article. She sat down in a chair, so she could give it her full attention.

Rosa eventually appeared with two cups of tea. “Okay, here’s the plan. We’re going to move you again in the next week. This was only temporary anyway until the Home Office decided what to do.”

“Who have you just spoken to?”

“My boss. Nothing to worry about.” She handed Gabrielle a cup of hot tea and touched her arm, trying to reassure her. “The media coverage is bigger than we anticipated, and we were undecided whether you would be best hiding in a community or somewhere rural.”

“Somewhere rural, please. Right now, I don’t want to be near people.”

“It is rural. I’ve just got to wait for confirmation of the location.”

“Not too far from my Dad, is it?” Gabrielle suddenly felt anxious about being any further away than she already was.

“No, it’s not. Far more rural but probably slightly closer than here. Rightly or wrongly we think people will be looking out for you in other counties. The media certainly will. They won’t think for one minute that we’ll have moved you within the same county. We can rectify that anyway by giving them an anonymous, false tip off. Lead them to think you’ve moved west or something and hopefully they’ll print it, and no one will be any the wiser. It’s important you’re rural though. You’ll have to reinvent yourself as much as possible, forget about your old life completely. You do understand that don’t you?”

Gabrielle hesitated. “Of course, I do. I did it before, didn’t I?”

“Yes, but this is different to all the other times because you’ve been revealed as a well-known writer.”

“But I’ve survived that way for many years and I can do it again. I can write under a new name...”

Rosa looked away. It suddenly dawned on Gabrielle that she may no longer have a contract with her publisher after this and Rosa didn’t have the heart to tell her. She wanted her to read between the lines of what she was saying because she felt sorry for her and didn’t want to hurt her further than she had been already.

She took a few deep breaths, trying desperately to keep herself calm; comforting herself with positive ideas, something to fill the gaping black hole that was opening up inside her. All the little notions dissipated like raindrops in the dark and suddenly everything felt pointless. It didn’t go unnoticed by Rosa; she knew her so well.

“You’re right, you can do this. You’ve done it before on many occasions and you’ll have the support of your father this time. When we feel it’s the right time for you to see him again,” she added quickly.

“That was years ago, Rosa and I was a lot younger. And as much as it’s been wonderful having my father in my life again, he’s far too old to be supporting me.”

“But he’ll support you emotionally if nothing else.”

“He couldn’t support me when I was ten so what makes you think he’ll do it now.” Gabrielle put her head in her hands, despair pricking her skin like heavy damp dew.

She didn’t hear any of Rosa’s comforting words, as she was ten again and sat in the back of a police car with the fag burnt covers and the strange perfume smell emanating from the policewoman next to her. She could still recall those smells all these years later and it reminded her of a feeling of everything coming to an end. They were scents that clung to the back of her nose and throat and had felt like they hadn’t ever left her. And she remembered every moment being filled with the expectation of her father turning up to take her home.

Gabrielle realised looking back, how she must have come across to everyone who encountered her, at the police station, temporary foster homes and maybe even in court at her trial; as cocky and cold. She overheard a few of them saying as much. But her fear had been masked with the anticipation of her father turning up to collect her. She knew he would sort everything out and take her home.

But he didn't. And she had never forgotten the last few times he came to visit her; how cold he was towards her, as though she were a stranger. He had given her some hard advice, guidance more befitting to one of his older clients. It had filled Gabrielle with dread and she'd become hysterical when she'd realised he wasn't taking her home with him.

The heavy sick feeling she'd felt all that time ago descended on her now as though it had only just happened. It was always remarkable to her that memories of smells and feelings were crystal clear to her, but images of events were always blurred or forgotten altogether.

He'd left that day and she barely saw him until she appeared in court for her trial. She'd been told he had attended some of the trial but that did little to comfort her. He visited her for a few months at Hellesdown, the secure unit where she had been sent but it all stopped when she was fourteen. She received the odd birthday card over the years but there were no more visits. Some of the teachers at Hellesdown, had kindly helped her write a letter to him, usually after an occasion where she received a card, but he never replied. They had all been heartbroken for her. She'd

wait expectantly as she had done in the early days after being arrested, hoping beyond hope for some sort of response from him. The staff had been amazed at the optimism of this small child after what she'd been through. Most children, in their experience, gave up on the notion of hearing from anyone quite quickly; they were more hardened to the way things were. Once, when she was eighteen, she'd been allowed to telephone him from the prison she'd been allocated to, and he'd told her it was best if she never contacted him again. She felt as though she were suffocating when she'd hung up the phone.

She could reflect now and see everything how it really had been. She'd not understood as a child and had felt swamped underneath it all.

She shrugged and sighed, being very aware that she wasn't in a dissimilar place to then; not really understanding what she was supposed to do.

Having come back into the present day she was vaguely aware of Rosa having said something about fetching them both some food and hearing the door click behind her. She loved that about Rosa, she knew when to

stay and comfort and the right time to leave her alone to think.

She sat now in the silence and hoped beyond all hope that wherever she was going, it would give her a sense of purpose to live because she could feel herself sliding slowly beyond melancholy.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Nancy listened carefully as Harry explained to her why he felt Gabrielle was innocent, and about his intentions to set up an appeal case. He had contacted his old friend Bill, who was now a retired Barrister, but had enough contacts to give him the advice he needed. He'd agreed to visit Harry and "advise him accordingly".

"You know, and I know Gramps that you've got to have some sort of evidence to be able to appeal. What if Gabrielle doesn't want you to?"

Harry looked surprised, the thought having not occurred to him. "Of course, she will! Who wouldn't under the circumstances?"

"But you don't know that for sure. What if...what if she actually did do it?"

Harry stared into the fire as Gabrielle's harsh words rang in his head, "face it Father, I killed those children". He conjured up the sea in his head and mentally watched the words wash away with the tide.

"But she didn't. She couldn't have."

"You keep saying that, but you have yet to explain to me why? You can't just tell people you've met her after all these years, formed a bond and you really feel she's innocent."

"I know that you silly girl!" Harry banged his hands on the arm of his chair. "I know the law and how it works – you don't need to tell me."

"It's no good getting irate about it because you're going to be asked all these questions when Bill arrives. He's coming to give you some professional advice – not necessarily to tell you what you want to hear." Nancy glanced at the clock on the mantle. "Where is he anyway? I thought you said he'd be here at one?"

"Nothing new there, dear heart. He's always late."

"You really need to try and cast your mind back, Granddad, and see if you can remember what happened

when those children went missing and the events thereafter.”

“It’s just so hazy.” Harry stood up slowly, his knees creaking, and wandered over to his desk and looked out of the window. His eyes squinted at the stark brightness of the sun peaking from behind a cloud.

“Have you been down to the sea lately?”

Harry shoved his hands in his pockets. “No.”

She waited for him to continue but he didn’t. There were too many emotions running through him; too many excuses not to go out of the house.

“The reporters have gone now, Granddad. You need to go out. You know how important it is for you to get exercise and fresh air. And I know how much it means to you to talk to the sea.”

“I know. I just don’t want anyone I know to question me...or...I don’t know. I’m just not ready.”

“What did you used to tell me when I was being bullied? Ignore them or tell them to bugger off.”

He turned from the window to look at her and chuckled at her ability to simplify everything, something the young always seemed to be able to do.

“Don’t laugh, Gramps, its easy! If anyone stops to talk to you just tell them, you don’t want to discuss it.”

He sighed and turned back to the window. She was right in a way but there was a huge part of him that felt ashamed. No one knew Gabrielle like he did. They’d judge them all on the facts they had in front of them and he guessed it would be none too kindly. He was desperate to go for a walk though and talk to the sea, which always seemed to make sense of everything, clarify it all for him.

The bell for the front door chimed startling them both; they were still so used to it being someone from the press.

‘Bill,’ they both said together and laughed.

“Will Catherine get it, Granddad?” Nancy got up from her chair in preparation to answer the door.

As he responded to her question he heard Catherine’s footsteps across the hall floor, clearly on her way to the front door. She’d been round to do a spot of cleaning having not been able to for a few weeks due to the press being camped outside the bottom of the track, and she had wanted to check if he needed anything too.

Nancy wandered over to Harry and put her arm through his. “Listen, I’ve had to put up some armour, you’re not the only one who’s been questioned. Everyone knows Dad and are quite aware of who he’s related to. Toughen up, Gramps!”

He laughed and turned to embrace her, tears stinging his eyes. “I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“And I without you. So, do as I tell you and get some fresh air. I’ll come with you if you like? I can hang around and have a coffee with Catherine while I wait.”

There was a knock at the sitting room door and Catherine’s face appeared, Bill followed closely behind her.

“Late as usual, Bill. Some things never change.”

“I got waylaid with my wife over lunch and then I was just talking to the lovely Catherine here.” Bill winked at Catherine and Nancy rolled her eyes. “The women can’t get enough of me Harry even though I’m an old duffer like you!”

The two women left them to banter with one another and wandered into the kitchen for a catch up of their own.

Nancy pulled a chair out from the kitchen table and sat down, her body shivering due to the shock of moving from the warm fire-lit sitting room.

“Is the stove on, Catherine? Nancy rubbed her hands together and pulled her cardigan sleeves down to cover them.

“Well, the kettle’s coming to the boil on it, so it must be doing something, love. That sitting room is so warm.” Catherine moved round the table and lifted the back of Nancy’s top and cardigan up. “You got a vest on?”

“Oh, Catherine your hands are freezing!”

“No wonder you’re cold, my girl!”

“I’m only cold when I come here.” Nancy laughed. She adored Catherine; she was like a grandmother to her. She was always there to listen when needed and gave the most honest advice. She was very different to Nancy’s French grandmother, who was cold and snappy on the rare occasions she had visited her in France.

“You were around when all that stuff happened with Auntie Gabrielle? Can you remember anything about it?”

Catherine busied herself making a pot of tea, clearly thinking carefully about what she’d been asked. She was

quiet for some time while she emptied a tin full of pastries she'd brought with her onto a baking tray and put them in the hot stove. Nancy wondered if she'd ever respond.

She eventually sat down, having poured them both a cup of tea.

"It was an awful time for your grandfather and a very long time ago it was too. People need to remember that."

"What do you mean? People won't ever forget something like that."

"I know. What I'm trying to say is that Gabrielle was just a child. Children don't understand their actions at that age."

"So, you do think she did it?"

"I'm not sure and I've questioned it all since the day it happened. Gabrielle was a lovely child, but she was also complex, difficult and sometimes she could be really temperamental."

"That doesn't sound good. You and my Great Aunt spent a lot of time with her and my father, so you'd know more than anyone if she was capable of murder. Even Gramps isn't sure." Nancy sighed and added another sugar lump to her cup of tea and stirred it noisily.

Catherine got up from her chair to check the pastries weren't burning in the stove.

"I don't know. I just don't know, love. She found it hard not having her mother around and your grandfather worked long hours...I'm not blaming him, I'm just saying it was tough all round."

"Have you seen her since she's been back?"

"No not yet. I wasn't here much over Christmas, was I? And the few times I did come she was at that cottage she stayed in and then your granddad said it was best not to come whilst the reporters were on the doorstep, unless I fancied being mobbed, so I stayed away. I'd like to see her though."

Nancy nodded. "She is really lovely. I can't help but like her and I'm finding it hard to get my head around the fact she could have done such a thing."

"Maybe she didn't."

"But you just said..."

Catherine hastily cut her off. "I know but I also said I'd never been sure. Just because I think that a child needs her mother and the absence of one can affect them doesn't mean I think she did it. That Ellen Tailby was a bit of a

strange woman. Her and her husband actually, when I come to think of it.”

“What, the parents of the children?” Nancy shuffled in her chair her eyes widening with interest. “Did you know them?”

Catherine nodded. “Not hugely well. We weren’t friends or anything. I used to see her around the village and on occasion at mutual friends’ parties or community events, that sort of thing, but not recently.”

“Are they still alive?”

“Yes. Well, if you can call that living. I think she’s housebound now and someone told me she had the onset of senile dementia. But that could just be idle village gossip.”

Catherine jumped up from her chair, startling Nancy. “The pastries!” She removed the tray from the oven and almost threw it across the table. “They’re not too overdone.”

“Ooh lovely!” Nancy fetched two plates and grabbed a pastry, dropping it quickly as it burnt her fingers. “Did you make these?”

“Of course, I did! You know I bake during the winter months.”

“Oh yes, it’s almost that time of year again when you throw yourself into the garden.”

“Yes, so make the most of it because it’ll be the last you and your Granddad will be getting until later this year.”

“Have the Tailbys said anything about Gabrielle since they discovered who she was?”

“I don’t know. Like I said, we’re not friends and they’d be unlikely to tell me anything anyway considering I work for your Granddad. I’m sure they know about it and the usual gossips have put their own spin on it. The most important thing is that none of you take any notice.”

“I’ll be okay; it’s Gramps I worry about.” Nancy got up from the table to fetch some tomato sauce from the cupboard. “What did you mean when you said they were strange? The Tailbys’ I mean?”

Catherine grabbed herself a sausage roll from the pile of pastries and went into the pantry on the hunt for some relish to accompany it.

“I don’t know really. I just never took to the woman.” She found what she was looking for and sat back down, trying to put her thoughts into words. Memories flooded her mind, but nothing looked or felt clear. “She always gave the impression she didn’t want to stop and chat if you saw her in the street. A bit aloof, I suppose. She’d smile but her eyes would be saying something different, do you know what I mean?”

“I think so.”

“Put it this way – I never saw her at many village events when my children were little. It was almost like she thought she was too good for everyone.”

Nancy paused for a moment.

“Maybe she couldn’t face it, what with her children being...you know...dead.”

“No! I’m talking before all that happened.”

“Oh, I see.”

Nancy pondered on what Catherine had told her. She wished she knew more, that she could see the memories in her head to try and make sense of them herself.

“She must have been quite friendly with Granddad to ask Gabrielle to watch her children.”

“I don’t understand?”

Nancy sighed. “She asked Gabrielle the day it all happened if she’d watch her children, didn’t she? Or have I got that wrong?”

“Oh, I see. Yes, yes she did but that was fairly normal in those days.”

Nancy frowned. “Wasn’t it more normal for kids just to be left alone, especially in a village community?”

“Yes, I suppose it was,” Catherine frowned as she poured another cup of tea, trying to remember what it had really been like. “Her children were poorly at the time though, I think, and Gabrielle happened to be passing and she just wanted her to sit with them.”

“Poorly? From what?”

“I don’t remember the details, love. Why is it so important?”

“Just curious that’s all; trying to get it straight in my own head.” Nancy wondered whether to tell her of Harry’s plans to appeal but thought better of it. After all, it wasn’t really her news to tell.

“I don’t think anyone will ever get to the bottom of it. It was too long ago and none of it’s clear to anyone anymore. Memories become distorted over time.”

“But the truth is out there. That’s what’s driving me crazy.”

They were both quiet as they pondered on visions of the past.

“Does it really matter?” Catherine broke the silence. “The truth, I mean. Isn’t it more important who she is now, not what she was? She was so little it just feels like it almost doesn’t count.”

Nancy’s eyebrows rose slightly, and she placed her cup back in its saucer. “I don’t think Mr. and Mrs. Tailby would see it like that.”

“I don’t mean the children that died...oh I can’t seem to put it into words. I don’t think we’ll ever know what happened that day and how can someone be judged on something they did over forty years ago?”

“I think I understand what you’re trying to say but surely we all need to know the truth one way or another?”

“Maybe so but some of you might not like what you hear. The truth may already be out there.”

“Yes. Perhaps because we don’t like it we want to change it.”

“Anyway, I must be off, the garden won’t dig itself.” Catherine got up from the table and fetched her coat from the hall cupboard.

“Oh, I keep forgetting it’s that time of year when you strange green fingered folk start gardening in the freezing cold.”

“If I didn’t, you and your Granddad wouldn’t have all that lovely fresh veg for your dinner.”

“I know, I know.” Nancy moved from the table and went to see Catherine off.

Harry walked bravely down to the sea front later that day feeling vulnerable and exposed. He’d wrapped himself up well, partly to protect him from the cold but also to hide himself from being recognised; his scarf covering half his face, his trilby tilted over his eyes.

He walked there alone having asked Nancy to leave him to it because he needed time to think. Things hadn’t gone as well as he’d anticipated with Bill.

He'd known really, deep down, but there had been a glimmer of hope that his friend would shine some positive light on the situation. The truth being, there was no new evidence and no reason to call a retrial after all these years and there probably never would be after all this time. And the one major point Harry had overlooked was that it was he who was enquiring after an appeal and this most certainly had to be done by Gabrielle and not on her behalf. He knew there was no way she would put herself forward for anything like that. Her guilt and remorse weighed too heavy upon her and she'd see it as disrespectful to the family of the victims. After Bill's visit he was left feeling desperate, drained and terribly weak.

Words swirled around in his head in time with the tide that was edging away. He couldn't quieten his mind to think clearly at all. He had no idea when he was going to see Gabrielle again and this was making him feel anxious.

He pondered on his life now without her and thought about the realism of never seeing her again and it all felt horribly pointless. He knew he had Nancy, but like all young people, from what he'd observed, they were

expecting you to die; knew it was on the agenda at any time. Grandchildren expected grandparents to die however much they didn't want it to happen. But he always thought that when it came to children and their parents they didn't want to admit or talk about that inevitable fact. The fear of them no longer being around at the top of the hierarchy made them starkly aware of their own mortality and if nature took its course, they'd be next in the queue. That's how he'd felt with his own parents anyway.

He knew Nancy would miss him when he was gone, and he'd occasionally seen a fleeting glance of her grief when he'd caught her staring at him in a concerned way. The difference was that they'd had the privilege of one another's company and he hadn't had enough of that with Gabrielle. And soon Nancy would be going off to university and starting a new life, which wouldn't include him so much and rightly so.

His mind flitted back to death and nature taking its course and Emma's face appeared in his mind. Some religions would say that nature did take its course and it was God's will to take her at that time. That's what Emma had believed anyway. He thought about all the years he'd

endured without her; far more now than he'd ever spent with her. Most of it had flown by, being a working single parent with two children, although in the early days of grieving he would have said the time passed slowly and endlessly. Now here he was sitting in front of his oldest and dearest friend, the sea with the story of his life stored in the fathoms of its soul. It made him feel acutely aware of all the things he'd meant to do and hadn't; his life had been overshadowed by so many emotions after Gabrielle was taken away. He wasn't feeling sorry for himself, it wasn't in his nature. He was just wondering where all the time had gone and how he'd come to be eighty years of age. It was as though he'd suddenly become consciously aware of it, like it was tangible for the first time in his life and right now he could really feel it.

Having talked to the somewhat turbulent ocean, he pushed himself up slowly from the bench, content with the advice he'd been given, and carefully made his way home to attend to the business that had become clear to him was unfinished.

Gayle Curtis

Shell House

The Feldstein Agency

CHAPTER EIGHT

There were many days that passed in which Gabrielle seemed to spend hours just sitting and thinking. Having moved into her new safe house, she was emotionally fatigued, and she couldn't muster up the energy to do anything. It was a peculiar house, not unwelcoming or impractical; it just wasn't something she would have chosen for herself. It gave her a strange comfort and she wasn't sure if it was the house itself or the fact she felt safe and cosseted because she'd been moved somewhere where her identity was once again hidden.

Driftwood was the name of the house; not terribly original but it was quite an apt description of how she was feeling at that moment. The building itself was a 1970s chalet bungalow, pebble-dashed white with chipped and sea- weathered blue painted window frames. It was situated down a quiet, narrow road which led to the beach and the sea. It was completely private, surrounded by a high privet hedge. It was a place where lots of people passed during the day and she guessed at all hours in the

summer, but it was somewhere she could blend in along with all the other holiday rentals. Many people moved in and out of the area, so no one was really aware of who was coming and going.

Even though Gabrielle was an hour or so away from Harry, she didn't feel completely cut off from him. It was quite literally a one road drive all the way around the coast. When she'd first arrived, she'd run upstairs like a child to look out of the window across the coastline, to see if she could see her father's house standing proud on its jutting cliff side. She knew this was an impossible concept as the distance was too far, but it offered her some comfort just to look. She imagined in her mind, when she was drifting off to sleep, that she could see the house all lit up at night, twinkling above the dark sea.

The house was clean, if a little tired, and warm, thanks to Rosa having turned the heating on when they'd first been escorted there by a rather burly plain clothes policeman. Rosa had stayed with Gabrielle for a few days and she'd been glad of the company. The problem was she'd just wanted to get on with things and Rosa's presence made everything feel at a standstill. She craved

space and the freedom of being alone, which she felt she hadn't had for a long time.

When it was approaching a week since she'd moved in she asked Rosa, politely, to go home. She reassured her that she was mentally calm and feeling much better, which was the truth. She wasn't feeling back to her usual self by any means, but she had shifted from depression to melancholy. This to her was a huge relief and far preferable to the great chasm she'd felt she'd been helplessly lying in. At times she was still staring into the void, but it was looming behind her rather than gaping in front of her.

All her possessions had been packed up and taken from her old house and her old life, and brought to her in a large van. Rosa had helped her arrange pieces of furniture in each room, but Gabrielle had left unpacking the boxes of books and ornaments to when she was alone.

She needed physical activity to keep her busy and feel as though she was making herself a home, however temporary it felt. As ridiculous as it seemed when she thought about it, and quite impossible too, she held onto the hope that she would one day be able to go and live near

her father, or even with him. As much as she knew this notion would never come to fruition, she didn't want to lie to herself that it wasn't what she hoped for. Although right now, a one hour visit with him would have elated her; even just a phone call when she came to think of it.

Having emptied most of the boxes, stored the unwanted ones and generally made the strange house a home, she'd spent the last few days not really knowing what to do with herself, other than to think. She hadn't even felt inclined to write or make an attempt at the diary she wanted her father to read; it all seemed so very pointless.

Her attention was drawn to the telephone that was situated in the hallway. It was a 1980s, green retro affair sat on a dark wood telephone table. It was extremely dated and inconsequential. But to her it represented her father. She'd lifted the handset many times and listened to the dialling tone. She'd promised not to make any phone calls and she knew how serious it'd be if she was traced, and she didn't want to go through that again. She kept telling herself she'd make a call from her mobile in a few weeks' time, forgetting that Rosa had taken it from her to be

destroyed. A few friends from where she used to live had called her on it, and as painful as it was, she'd had to ignore them. More than anything, she wanted to speak to her father, and without her mobile the retro phone in the hallway felt like a life jacket being thrown to her. It frightened her, the undefined expanse of time that was laid out until she could speak to him again. What if he died in that time, was all she kept thinking.

There was a strange type of anger gurgling up inside her. She'd become aware of it when Rosa had reiterated the no phone call policy before she'd left. Then she'd begun reasoning with herself about whether she could risk a quick call and the emotion had seemed to tap her on the shoulder. There was an odd shift in her that she'd not noticed before and it'd begun when the police had moved her to the temporary safe house. She'd spent her whole life without her mother and most of it being unable to reach her father. All she wanted was the short time with him that he had left, and she was beginning to feel angry about being told she couldn't.

The idea of him secretly coming to live there with her had crossed her mind several times but she knew it was absurd and something she couldn't possibly ask him to do.

The problem Gabrielle had was that she was beginning to wonder what she was hiding from and if she wanted to be protected anymore. It seemed that it was everyone else around her who didn't want her identity to be discovered. She toyed with the idea of moving near her father and facing the music, but then the terrible guilt of what it would put him through and how the Tailbys' and their family would feel hit her.

She got up from where she had been sitting and staring into the garden and wandered into the hallway to turn the heating up, the telephone table glaringly obvious from the corner of her eye. She ignored it and a sudden overwhelming desire to look through her collection of old photos began to sweep over her. She realised she hadn't looked properly at the ones belonging to her mother. Just the thought of it lifted her spirits. She turned the radio on, made herself a hot drink and emptied boxes of photographs onto the kitchen table. The telephone was forgotten about, for the time being at least, and it was

replaced with another idea forming in her head, an idea she needed time to think through.

CHAPTER NINE

When Harry arrived home from his walk he was surprised to see Jonathan sitting in his kitchen waiting for him.

“Decided to return then? Worried about your inheritance?”

Jonathan frowned at first; not gathering what his father was on about.

“Is that what you think of me? I don’t want your money or anything from you other than to talk.”

Harry shuffled across the kitchen to put the kettle on. His legs were stiff from the bitterly cold winds.

“Anna pleased with herself?”

“About what? I haven’t seen her; she left me, remember?”

“Don’t tell me you didn’t know she was going to reveal Gabrielle’s identity? Or was it you?”

“How bloody dare you! Whatever I think of Gabrielle, she’s still my sister. I could never and would never do something like that. For one thing it’s exposed us all, not just her, so why would I do that? I don’t know if it was Anna or not, but it had nothing to do with me.”

Harry sighed and sat down at the kitchen table with his son. He removed his hat and gloves but left his coat on, trying desperately to get warm. “What a bloody mess.”

“Quite. What are you going to do about it all?”

Harry stared at Jonathan and searched his face, unable to believe he was genuinely concerned.

“What are you doing here, Jonathan? We haven’t seen or heard from you for weeks and you turn up demanding to know what’s happening.”

“I stayed away Dad because, if you remember, you asked me to leave and the reporters were swarming the place.”

“Have you heard of the telephone? Marvellous invention.” Harry got up from the table, hearing the kettle begin to boil.

“Dad, my wife’s just left me. I couldn’t cope with anything else. I had to go back to work as well and that

hasn't been easy either." Jonathan raised his hands indignantly and let them drop heavily onto the table.

Harry turned to look at him suddenly feeling guilty. "I know son, I'm sorry."

They were both quiet while Harry made a pot of coffee.

"So, where's Gabrielle? I was hoping to see her, but she doesn't appear to be here?"

"Of course she's not here. She couldn't stay after her identity was revealed." There was still a hint of accusation in Harry's voice and Jonathan detected it.

"You have to believe me, Dad. I did not tell anyone where she was. I'd like to think Anna didn't either but then the last few weeks have shown me I didn't really know her at all. Honestly Dad, it had nothing to do with me."

"Okay, okay. I don't suppose you would, having spent all these years pretending she doesn't exist."

"That's really unfair! Why are you suddenly making Gabrielle out to be the victim in all of this? You were the one who bloody disowned her in the first place. I grew up believing she was a monster not to be spoken of. You Dad were the one who caused all this!" Jonathan stood up from

the table causing his chair to scrape on the old brick weave floor.

“Don’t you think I bloody know that!” Harry slammed his coffee cup on the table, spilling it on his hands. He ignored the scolding pain, his voice was broken with emotion and he was trying not to let the tears fall. “I’m trying to put it right. How the hell I do that I don’t know!”

“I didn’t mean that, Dad, I’m sorry.” Jonathan moved to his father’s side and grabbed his hand. “You’ve scalded yourself with your coffee. Let me run your hand under the cold tap.”

Harry snatched his hand away. “Leave me be, I’m alright.”

Jonathan moved away as though he’d been burnt himself.

Harry, feeling guilty again at his harshness, reached across and patted his son’s hand. “I’m okay, really.”

They sipped their coffee in silence for a while. Jonathan was waiting for Harry to tell him where Gabrielle was. He gave up in the end and broke the silence himself.

“So, do you know where she’s gone?”

“No. No one’s allowed to know. She’s been sent to a safe house. She said she’d contact me as soon as she could, but I haven’t heard anything yet.”

“I suppose with all the press coverage she won’t be able to.”

“She’ll phone me when she can. I know she will.” Harry’s voice was stiff and terse, covering the pain he was feeling inside. “And in answer to your other question I’m not going to do anything about it. I will sit it out until it blows over.”

“Blows over? You must be joking! She was convicted of murdering two children.” Jonathan held up his hands before Harry could say anything

Harry physically flinched at his harshness. “She was a child, son. I’ve realised that now. She didn’t have any comprehension of what she was doing. Anyway, I have my doubts about whether she did it at all.”

“What makes you say that?” Jonathan shifted in his seat, surprised at what he was hearing.

“I don’t know really. Having got to know her I can’t believe she could have done anything like that.”

“But like you said yourself, she was a child.”

“I know, but I don’t think the case was investigated properly. It was a highly unusual set of circumstances and no one knew what they were doing or how to deal with it. I should have supported her instead of listening to other people and running away like a bloody coward.”

“Is that why you’re saying you think she’s innocent? Because you feel guilty?”

Harry bristled at his words. “You’re one hell of a crass bastard at times.”

“I learnt it from you, Mr Hotshot Barrister.” Jonathan smirked, turning it into a smile, causing Harry to reciprocate.

“You’re probably right, but I have this niggling feeling about what happened.”

“Well, I wanted to talk to you about that. Or both of you, but seeing as she’s not here, I guess it’ll just be you, which is probably for the best.”

“What?” Harry’s eyes widened with interest. “What’s going on?”

“This is really difficult for me Dad, because I’m breaking patient confidentiality. I’m not sure I’m doing the

right thing and you must keep what I'm about to tell you to yourself until I find out more."

"Come on, what?" Harry took his coat off, having finally warmed by the heat of the kitchen stove.

"I was on call the other night and a message came through to the surgery from Ellen Tailby saying she needed a doctor to visit her at home. There was no one else on call apart from me so in the end I rang her and said I was the only one available, but I could request a doctor from another surgery. She said no and that she wanted me to come to the house. I'm not her normal doctor obviously..."

"Go on." Harry fetched a bottle of whiskey from one of the kitchen cupboards and poured them both a hot toddy with the rest of the coffee in the pot.

"She wouldn't tell me what she wanted me to come out for, just said she was ill. So, I got her notes out and made my way over to her house."

"Where was John?"

"I don't know. Pub I think. He wasn't there anyway. He wouldn't have let me in, that's for sure. I shouldn't

have gone really, it's unethical. A conflict of interest I guess..."

"But what else were you supposed to do she'd called for a doctor? You'd be in more trouble if you ignored it, surely?"

"I should have insisted she have a doctor from another surgery but at the time I couldn't see what harm it would do. I'd heard she might be suffering from the early stages of senile dementia and thought she wouldn't know who I was anyway."

"But she asked for you?"

"Kind of. She said my name, but I didn't think she'd comprehended who I was. There was a part of me that wanted to see her. An odd kind of curiosity."

"Did she know who you were when you got there?"

Jonathan gulped his drink down. "Dad, she told me Gabrielle hadn't really killed her children."

Harry placed his cup back on the table the colour draining from his face. "Go on," he whispered.

"She said she'd killed them because she was sick. I looked through her notes and there's a history of mental illness dating back to before she had her first child."

Something else drained from Harry at that moment and at first, he thought it was his life until he realised he was still breathing and it was shock coursing through his body.

CHAPTER TEN

The rusty, half painted old gate appeared to be hanging off one of its hinges, causing the bottom leg to be resting on the concrete path. Gabrielle had already decided she wasn't going in via that entrance anyway. It would draw attention to her immediately and she could see John Tailby through the window of his living room. The movement of someone outside had already distracted him; she could see from the tree she was peering round that he kept looking up from his newspaper and the television. Her first plan had been to knock on the Tailby's door. She'd reasoned with herself that it had all been such a long time ago, having been a child when it happened and that surely, they could sort it all out in a civilized manner.

Luckily, she came to the realisation this scenario was impossible. She remembered clearly John Tailby's angry, distorted face all those years ago at the trial. How he'd mouthed expletives at her just as she was being sentenced.

She doubted there'd be any chance of reconciliation. In fact, she knew there couldn't possibly be when she thought about it from a rational point of view. Rosa had told her how John had recently sold his story to the newspapers and his words were filled with as much venom now as they had been then. After all, she reasoned with herself, she'd taken away his twins, his only children.

So, she had come to the house to talk to Ellen. Whatever reception she got from her she was prepared to take it, but felt she needed to receive it from her rather than her husband. There was a huge part of her that was frightened of John Tailby because she knew he would register who she was at first glance and probably try to harm her. But the other part of her, the real reason for wanting to see Ellen alone was, she felt that it had all been between Ellen and herself and no one else. The days she'd spent thinking in the new house had enabled her to visit the past. She felt safe for the first time in her life to do that. No one apart from Rosa and a few other officials knew where she was and there was something strangely comforting about it. Even though no one had known her where she used to live she'd become lost in a new life, a

new identity and it had somehow blocked her revisiting the past. As though she was playing a part in a never-ending play and couldn't get out of character because someone might find out whom she really was. Someone might see what was going on in her head and it scared her.

As horrible as it was, having her identity uncovered, it brought with it an odd kind of liberation. She'd been released from the play, so to speak, and she could revisit the past properly. It had been a tiny bit of self-discovery. Once she'd dared to look back on what had happened in her life, it had brought with it a clearer picture of the run up to the awful events. The memories of that terrible day, which had been so blurred, were becoming clearer, and she had questions she needed answers to. Part of this emergence for her had been the overwhelming urge to visit the Tailbys.

And here she was standing in the half-light on a rainy Saturday afternoon, the hood of her waterproof jacket pulled over her head for fear of anyone recognising her. She doubted they would; not with her hair cut short, so short that she barely recognised herself. Her eyes were the

giveaway to anyone who knew her well; starkly pale blue but bright and flecked with grey.

She moved away from the tree and tried to walk casually past the Tailby's semi-detached house. She was waiting for John Tailby to go out. She was hoping he hadn't changed his routine of going to the pub at 5 o'clock. It was a slim chance after all these years, but she remembered him being a creature of habit and didn't see why he'd have changed anything; her father had told her he still worked for the same firm as he had done then and spent a lot of his spare time in the local pubs.

There was a track down the side of the Tailby's house leading to more cottages and she knew she could access their garden from that direction without too much trouble. She was guessing she'd hear him leave from the back way because the track was also a shortcut to their nearest pub. She crept around to the gate, looking up to check no one was watching her from the upstairs windows, but the curtains had already been pulled shut. She let herself in as quietly as possible without looking too suspicious and prayed their shed was unlocked. Trying to look inconspicuous made her feel bigger and more obvious than

she really was. Luckily for her the shed was unlocked, so she let herself in as carefully as possible and waited patiently to hear John Tailby leave.

She tucked herself away at the back of the shed as best she could in case John stopped by for something on his way out. She hoped because of the bad light that he wouldn't be able to see her. If he did catch her in there, she hoped he would think she was just another reporter. At least that's how she'd planned to play it. She could hide enough of her face with her hood and her scarf; Gabrielle was the last person he would be expecting to see.

She sat underneath a shelf between what she thought were boxes of newspapers; they were swollen and cold from the damp, making it hard to tell.

The time ticked by as she went over in her head what she would say when she finally came face to face with Ellen. She knew there'd be a confrontation, so she'd prepared herself. Every time she tried to think beyond this scenario it replayed in her head as though it were a scratched record from her father's old collection.

After an hour had passed she began to think he wasn't going out at all and she'd misjudged the situation.

She was stiff from sitting on the cold, hard floor and needed to get up and perch herself on one of the boxes. Her limbs throbbed with pins and needles as she slowly pulled herself up from the floor, and she realised she was too old for all this. Once she had the feeling back in her legs she decided to stay another half an hour before she gave up on the whole thing. She was cold and tired but had come such a long way, the bus route doing a detour around so many villages and towns, but she didn't want to give up just yet. But the time passing, and the ever-lowering temperature was making her think what a bad idea the whole plan had been.

She suddenly realised she was sitting on a box in a shed belonging to the parents of the children she'd killed, as though she'd been transported there in her sleep. In a matter of moments, the whole thing seemed utterly ridiculous and she became angry with herself for even thinking it was a good idea.

She had, in a rash manner, decided to expose herself because she didn't care anymore. It had suddenly dawned on her that Ellen and John Tailby probably didn't want to see or speak to her. She felt despicable thinking it would

be the easier option talking to Ellen rather than John when he'd lost just as much as his wife. It left her now feeling guilty and selfish and not unlike she had felt when she was ten years old. She wondered now if that was how it had all happened. That she'd done something without thinking or really being aware of the consequences.

Memories flitted across her vision in the darkness as though she was projecting them from her mind, but she just couldn't grasp any of them. The string of events seemed to be jumbled and unclear; she couldn't recall what was real and what she'd made up in her head.

She remembered being in a bit of a temper that day, something and nothing over a scolding from her father most probably. Ellen had stopped her in the street and asked her if she'd sit with the twins, that they'd been sick in the night and weren't up to much. She'd been surprised at the request because she'd let their dog loose some weeks previously and he'd run off and not come back. They had been terribly angry with her at the time.

Doctors and nurses flashed now in her mind, so she was fairly sure she'd played this game with them. But she couldn't remember much after that, it just all seemed a blur

of faces and a mixture of dark, serious voices and whispers. Then the guilt flooded in as her mind quickly recalled putting the twins in the cupboard under the stairs, still wrapped in their eiderdowns. Tying the rope around them. They had been tiny little scraps for three-year-olds, but she still remembered what a struggle it had been to get them in there; guilt reached her stomach, making her feel sick. She felt like she was reliving the panic of knowing she'd done something so devastating and nothing would be the same ever again.

Someone humming a tune brought her back to the present until she realised it was coming from herself. Something she'd always done when she was nervous or frightened and it had been accentuated after she was sent away. Throughout the trial she'd hummed; it made her feel like she was somewhere else, somewhere safe and away from strangers.

She stopped the noise immediately for fear of being heard and began to move her limbs, ready to clamber from the shed and walk to the bus stop to travel back to the safe house.

Just as she was about to turn the handle on the door she heard a noise from what she thought was the Tailby's house. She launched herself, quite literally to the back of the shed and tried to curl up as small as possible; she held her breath as she listened intently to the noises outside. Footsteps could be heard coming down the path and to her sheer horror they stopped outside the shed door. She pulled her hood further around her face and squished her body as far back against the shed wall as she possibly could, hoping the boxes of newspapers were hiding her.

Then she heard the unmistakeable click of a gas lighter being flipped and she prayed he'd just stopped for a cigarette. She held her breath and waited and eventually the footsteps continued and the latch on the back gate was lifted. Once she heard the slam of the gate she allowed herself to breathe again, her heartbeat pounding in her ears.

She sat for a few minutes trying to calm herself down, her ridiculous idea seeming even more absurd, and so she decided to make her way to the bus stop.

The noise she made getting up off the floor stopped her hearing the second set of footsteps coming down the

path and the opening of the shed door. It wasn't until the torchlight hit her that she realised someone was standing in the doorway, making her yelp with fright. She immediately held her hands up as though whoever it was might be armed. She couldn't see who it was because the light of the torch was glaring in her face; she tried to speak but nothing would come out of her mouth.

“I've been waiting for you. Come into the house,” was all she heard. It was Ellen Tailby.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The tapping on the glass disorientated Harry and Jonathan to begin with. They listened as best they could over Bruce's barking and then put it down to a branch hitting one of the windows around the back of the house; it occurred to neither of them that it might be a person. They were both so engrossed in their conversation that it wasn't until they heard banging that they got up to investigate.

"Bloody reporters again, I shouldn't wonder!"

"Stay where you are, Dad. I'll deal with it."

The two men had moved into the sitting room to continue their discussion. It was warmer in there once the fire was stoked and Harry wanted his cigars, which were in his desk.

"Let me at least have a look with you." Harry attempted to get up from his chair.

"No Dad! I mean it. Hand me that poker."

"Don't do anything silly, will you?"

The banging ceased, causing them both to stop talking and stare at one another. A muffled noise, which seemed to be coming from the window behind Harry's

desk, startled them both. They squinted to look out of the window but all they could make out was a shadowy figure. Jonathan ran to the window to get a better look.

“It’s Gabrielle!” Harry exclaimed before Jonathan had barely focused. He was standing in front of the lamp and all he could see was his own reflection in the glass.

“Don’t be daft! It’s one of those bloody reporters sniffing about!” He banged back on the window, startling the figure outside.

“Bugger off before I call the police! How bloody dare you!”

He could just make out someone shouting something about it being freezing. He switched off Harry’s desk lamp, so he could see through the window properly, but when he turned back to look there appeared to be no one there, as much as he could see in the darkness.

“Well I never. There was definitely someone there, Dad.” He turned to see why his father was so quiet, but he was talking to an empty room and then he heard voices coming from the other side of the house.

Harry had made his way out to the kitchen, unlocked the door and braved the wind and the rain that was

billowing around the side of the house to fetch Gabrielle. It was as though his dear old friend had sent her across to him on the wind.

Jonathan, who had gone in search of his father, had found him with Gabrielle in the kitchen. Harry was bustling around with the kettle and then a glass for some whiskey; he didn't know what to do with himself.

Jonathan gasped when Gabrielle removed her hood and he realised it really was her. "What have you done to your hair?"

"Thanks Jonathan, I nearly got hypothermia out there." Gabrielle wrapped her arms around herself, trying to get warm.

"I'm so sorry! I thought you were a reporter or a crank...why didn't you ring the bell?"

"I did. It doesn't work."

Jonathan ran his hands through his dark wavy hair unable to comprehend what was going on. He and his father had been talking about her and suddenly she'd appeared out of nowhere. The spirits he'd drunk had made everything look more miraculous than they really were, as though they'd conjured her up like magic from their words.

“I’m so pleased you’re here!” he ran to her and grabbed her cold hands.

“Really?” Gabrielle frowned at him.

“Of course I am! Dad’s been so worried...well, we all have.”

“I shouldn’t be here. I’m in so much trouble.”

Harry handed her a towel he’d found in the utility, so she could dry her rain soaked face and hair.

“What are you doing here? I mean, how did you get here?”

“I got the bus.”

Her father and brother looked at one another and frowned.

“The bus?” they both said in perfect unison.

“Yes, the bus. Can I have that drink please?” Gabrielle was tired and becoming increasingly irritated by the pair of them. Her heart was still pounding from her ordeal and she felt like a frightened rabbit having escaped a fox.

“Let’s go into the sitting room. Warm you up a bit, its better in there.” Harry gestured to the door with the

glass of drink he'd poured her as though he were enticing his dog with a treat.

"Lock that door first."

They both frowned again.

"The back door! Lock it, Jonathan, please, my fingers are too numb." Gabrielle stood up slowly, her jeans were soaked through and she was beginning to understand the meaning of being chilled to the bone.

"Are you in trouble as in police trouble?"

Harry glared at Jonathan for making such an insensitive remark.

"Well, I had to ask, she looks terrified and she's cut her hair."

"It doesn't necessarily mean I've done anything wrong, Jonathan." Her voice was terse but slow from the cold; her face felt numb.

"I'm not in trouble to that extent but I've just done something really stupid. Let me get in the other room so I can warm up."

"Fetch a blanket please Jonathan and a dressing gown."

“I’m fine, Dad, don’t fuss. I’ll have a bath in a little while if that’s okay?”

“Of course it is, dear heart.”

Harry smiled; pleased she was going to stay, for the time being anyway. It was all he could think about when he’d let her in, how he could keep her there. Especially after what Jonathan had told him; he wasn’t about to lose her again.

“Why is my car still parked in the driveway? I thought the police were going to take it away?” Gabrielle settled herself slowly in the old, winged leather armchair by the fire; Bruce sat keenly at her feet.

“I persuaded them to leave it. It isn’t registered to this address and I thought, well...maybe you’d need it back. Anyway, you worked and paid for it, why should they have it?”

“When you’re under licence, Dad, you don’t really get much say in anything.” Gabrielle sipped her whiskey which Jonathan quickly topped up before seeing to his own and Harry’s.

“That might all be about to change.”

“Dad!” Jonathan glared at his father willing him not to say anything.

“What?” Gabrielle looked from one to the other. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing. Tell us what’s happened.”

Gabrielle was about to press them further but couldn’t muster the will, she was so tired.

Harry and Jonathan waited patiently for her to begin.

“Before I start I want you both to promise me that you’ll hear what I have to say before you make a comment. I know what I’ve done is extremely childish and foolish, but I don’t need anyone to tell me that.”

They both nodded hesitantly, more out of curiosity than chastisement.

“I went to see Ellen Tailby.”

She saw a flicker of change in her father’s eyes, but he didn’t say a word.

“I got there, hid in their shed waiting for John Tailby to go out because I wanted to talk to Ellen alone, realised how rash and stupid I’d been and then decided to come away.” She paused, ebbing the flow of words with a sip

from her glass. It didn't matter how many sips she took, she still grimaced at the starkness of the alcohol.

"Is that it?" Jonathan couldn't help but speak; he wanted to hurry the conversation along, so he could tell her what he'd found out.

"No. John went out and Ellen caught me leaving, said she'd seen me going into the shed from the window."

Harry and Jonathan's eyes widened in shock. Harry who, up until now had been standing by his desk next to Jonathan, walked across the room and sat in the chair opposite Gabrielle.

"I was so frightened I can't begin to tell you. And ashamed. I'm fifty-four years old for Christ sake, I should know better." She shook her head, disappointed with herself.

"We all do things, dear heart, which we don't think through beforehand."

"I think I've done enough of that to last me a lifetime, Father."

"What did she say to you? Did she know who you were?"

“I thought she did at first, Jonathan, then I realised she was talking to someone completely different. Someone who died a long time ago.”

“You know she’s having tests for senile dementia, don’t you?”

“No. No I didn’t.” Gabrielle pondered for a moment. “That kind of makes sense though when I think back to the things she said to me. It was so, so weird. I should have known there was something wrong because she was really calm and nice to me from the get go. I followed her into the house as she asked. She said she wanted to show me some photographs.”

“What did you say to her?” Jonathan stood up from the settee and went to help himself to one of his father’s cigars. He didn’t normally smoke as a rule, knowing first-hand how bad it was for you, but certain occasions prompted him to.

“Not a lot really. I was a bit gob smacked to say the least. I asked her if she knew who I was, and she told me not to be so absurd, of course she knew who I was. Then she asked me why everyone kept asking her that question. She even showed me pictures of the twins. Oh god it was

awful.” Gabrielle put her head in her hands and Harry reached forward to console her.

“I’m okay, Dad. Just a bit shaken.” She looked up at him and smiled her eyes red from the cold and tiredness and what Harry suspected was a lot of crying.

“Who did she think you were?” Harry looked at her with concern.

“When she showed me pictures of the twins I just kept telling her how sorry I was, which sounded totally inappropriate, but I couldn’t think of what else to say. Then I knew something was very, very wrong when she began her sentences with, ‘when you died’ and after you died’. Then she started crying and touching my face and calling me her little Muriel and how sorry she was.”

Harry rubbed his head. “How awful. She really is very poorly.”

“Do you know who she was talking about, Dad?”

“I think she might be talking about her baby daughter who died.”

Gabrielle let out a shocked sob.

“She is. She had a daughter called Muriel who died when she was six months old. Convulsions or something,

I can't quite remember now without looking it up." Jonathan said.

Harry and Gabrielle both looked over to where he was standing by the window, smoking a cigar.

"How do you know that?" Gabrielle frowned at him.

"Did she say anything else to you, Gabrielle?" Harry tried to intervene not sure if he liked where the conversation was going.

"Answer my question. How do you know that?"

"I'll tell you in a minute. Did she say anything else to you while you were there?"

Gabrielle was too tired to argue. "Not really, she just kept repeating what she'd been saying and gripping my hand really hard. So hard at one point I thought it was all a trick and she'd lured me into the house to kidnap me or something. I know that sounds ridiculous, but it felt horrible in there and I had that feeling, you know? The feeling you get when you know you need to get out of somewhere really quickly?"

They both looked away, slightly embarrassed by what she'd said, neither of them having ever been in that

situation and thinking she was making a reference to what had happened at the Tailby's house all those years ago.

Gabrielle didn't even notice; in her mind she was back in that awful, depressing house, remembering the feeling she'd had and recalling it from when she was ten. Something she knew was strange in her head, but she couldn't quite pinpoint why.

"When she finally let go of my hand I made a run for it out of the house."

"So, you really thought she was going to do something to hurt you?" Harry asked, wondering how you could feel threatened by an old lady.

"I don't know. I just knew I had to get out of there and it's a good thing I left when I did because I bumped into John Tailby on my way out of the front door, quite literally."

"Did he recognise you?"

"I think so. We came face to face and then I ran from him and I heard him shouting at me."

"Shouting what?" Harry sat up in his chair.

"Bitch, mainly."

Harry bristled. “It doesn’t mean he knew it was you, he probably thought you were a reporter.”

“I don’t think we need to worry about that now, Dad.” Jonathan had removed himself from the window and was sitting back on the sofa. “We’ve got something we need to tell you.”

“Best leave it until the morning, son. We’re all tired and it’s very late.”

“No, she needs to know now.”

“Will one of you please tell me what’s going on?!”

That night Gabrielle woke several times until eventually she got up and went downstairs. Bruce wagged his tail from his bed at the sight of her in the kitchen, but he didn’t get up. He was getting old and there wasn’t a lot that disturbed him from his bed especially not that time in the morning. Gabrielle smiled and went over to pat his head as if she’d noticed him for the first time.

She couldn’t believe how tired and exhausted she felt, yet unable to sleep. All sorts of things were interrupting her rest and it wasn’t the shocking news that Jonathan had

told her a few hours ago. It had seemed to skim over the surface of her body as if it held no truth in it. Ellen could quite possibly have senile dementia; nothing she said could necessarily be believed. She pondered on whether, once the information had sunk in she'd feel differently. Maybe it was all the years of knowing something to be true and then being told to think the opposite that she was struggling with. One thing she did know was that it had made her question if she'd ever done anything deliberate to the two little boys. She'd been told a lot of things by a lot of people when it happened and for a long time afterwards and now she had no idea what her real memory was. She couldn't work out if the visions she had in her head were her own or ones put there by other people.

When she'd finally gone to bed she hadn't thought about any of this; it was as though she were afraid to. Other things were keeping her awake, like the anxious feeling she had when she realised she'd left her photographs behind. That had been when she'd decided to get up for good; the slight panic causing her to well and truly awaken.

Before that she'd tossed and turned, thinking about how Ellen had seen her going into the shed, and she wondered why Ellen had waited for John to go out as well. But then she supposed being ill would make her react in a different way to normal.

Then her mind flitted to the couple who'd stared at her on the bus ride over, how they'd not taken their eyes off her as she quietly read her book.

Then she thought about all her possessions she'd left in the safe house and how she would get them back. What Rosa would say? She wondered whether she should just go back in the morning and pretend she'd never left, but thoughts like that made her anxious too, because it meant leaving her father again.

He and Jonathan had talked to her quite forcefully about staying with them and not going back to the safe house. Jonathan had promised to organise a removals van and supervise her things being collected.

She wasn't sure what she could do under her licence but seeing as she'd applied to the court for anonymity she didn't see why she couldn't have it reversed. But then she also knew the law didn't work like that.

Guilt descended on her again as she pondered on all these things whilst making herself a pot of tea. She couldn't help wondering how everyone would feel knowing she'd moved back to the village where she'd caused so much devastation. It worried her they'd think she was brazen and not at all sorry, and how it would affect her father and the rest of the family.

Harry and Jonathan had assured her it would all be okay. They were like a solid wind breaker ready to protect her against the storm. And she felt happy to hide behind it for the time being even though she was unsure if it was the right thing to do. She felt physically and mentally exhausted and the offer of someone else taking over and sorting everything out was overwhelmingly appealing right now.

Picking up her large cup of tea, she tapped her leg with her free hand signalling for Bruce to come into the sitting room, where she was sure the fire would still be going. He clicked and creaked as he got up and stretched with a yawn halfway out of his basket, and followed her obediently into the warmer room.

She needed to think, and she wanted to watch the sun come up over the sea as she did it.

She sat in the Captain's chair behind Harry's desk and let it rotate her side to side allowing her mind to settle on what Jonathan had told her about Ellen. The thing that immediately sprung to mind was how they'd react if they found out she did really do it and their theory was wrong and this frightened her. She'd believed all this time she had and now that it was being questioned she was unsure. She wanted them to accept her whether she was innocent or guilty.

The sun was peeping up on the horizon, shining red on all the puffy clouds, making them look pink and swollen like eyes that had been drenched with tears, not dissimilar to hers.

Thinking about it all now she suddenly became aware she couldn't even remember how the twins had died. What she'd done to them. She gripped the mug harder, not wanting to think about it too deeply. It was so far removed from who she was now, but she knew she must delve deeper into her mind at some point; stop being scared and

face it. After all, there was no better time to do it than now and that's more or less what her father had told her.

That period when it all happened had mapped out her entire life, a life she'd spent alone apart from a few friends, who were now gone from her life. Not just because of what had happened but also due to the fact she'd never allowed herself to get close to anyone. Even potential boyfriends had been kept at a fair distance, making most of them keener to be closer to her. But when it became too serious she'd end it because she couldn't bear living a lie and involving someone else in it all. It was being alone in a world where she was Rebecca, and no one knew she was really Gabrielle. She thought now how that must be the loneliest kind of lonely.

What if it was true and she hadn't killed the twins and Ellen had? How different would her life have been? She'd have still been a writer; she knew that for sure, because as soon as she could speak she'd been telling stories. But everything else would have been different. A life she could have had started to appear before her, marriage, children, a family. Her stomach tightened in pain and she drew her knees up to comfort herself. She had never ever thought of

this concept because the guilt of what she'd done was ingrained in her and she'd accepted things just the way they were. Even when friends questioned her about getting married or having children she'd just brushed it off. But then she realised she had been someone else and maybe Rebecca hadn't wanted any of those things. The facts had always been that she'd committed murder. Regardless of her name or her identity, none of it changed her flesh and blood; she was still the person who killed the Tailby's children.

Tears streamed down her face and she could feel the cold, empty chasm of depression creeping into the room. She fixed her stare on the horizon, not daring to look behind her.

CHAPTER TWELVE

When Harry found Gabrielle, she was sitting in the small cavity under his desk, partly hidden by the Captain's chair. It was only because Bruce was whimpering by the window and hadn't come for his breakfast at the usual time that Harry had gone to see what he was making a fuss about.

"Whatever are you doing down there?"

Being tucked under his desk should have told him there was something very wrong, but it wasn't until he heard her humming that he realised to what extent.

He tried to crouch down, so he could talk to her properly but having just got out of bed his creaky old legs wouldn't allow it, so he leaned one hand on the desk and bent forward.

"Gabrielle, listen to me." He tried to keep his voice stern and commanding. "You must get up off the floor."

She lifted her head from her knees and stared blankly at him; her eyes pale and dull grey as though someone had turned out the lights.

"Come on, dear heart." His voice was softer now. "You can't stay down here all day; you'll catch your death."

She sighed deeply and continued humming, averting her gaze from him to the view of the cloudy sky through the window.

Harry went to fetch Jonathan, who had stayed the night also and was in the kitchen making breakfast.

“Jonathan, we need to call a doctor.”

He looked at his father and laughed. “I am a doctor, you silly old man. What’s the problem?”

“Don’t just stand there, come and see for yourself.”

Jonathan tutted; not impressed with being interrupted whilst he was perfecting his scrambled eggs. “Is it Catherine? Has her back gone again?”

“No, it’s Gabrielle.”

Jonathan moved quickly passed his father and made to go upstairs, thinking she’d done something awful to herself in the bathroom.

“No! She’s in the sitting room.”

Harry led him over to the desk and showed him where she was sitting.

“Oh Christ. Have you been able to get any sense out of her?”

“None at all, she just keeps humming.”

“Call Dr. Nobes, Dad.”

“Can’t you do anything?”

“I can try and get her upstairs to bed but I can’t prescribe her anything. She needs an independent diagnosis.”

“What’s wrong with her?”

Jonathan ushered his father into the hall, so Gabrielle couldn’t hear what they were saying.

“I think she’s had a nervous breakdown. Not surprising really.”

“A nervous breakdown?” Harry was sceptical about all that sort of thing; he thought it was something made up to get out of certain situations. He found it hard enough to admit he’d had one himself all those years ago. “She was alright last night.”

“It’s an illness, Dad. Something snaps, and the brain switches off. A bit like when you pass out; it’s your body’s way of saying it’s had enough.”

“Poor, poor girl.”

“She was a bit odd last night when I come to think of it.”

“In what way?”

“When you’d gone to bed she kept on about a load of old photos that she’d left at the safe house. I reassured her we’d collect her stuff, but she wouldn’t drop it. Wanted me to promise I’d sort it out. I just thought she was tired.”

“Yes. Now you come to mention it she was a bit odd.” Harry scratched his head causing the wisps of grey hair to stick up, disturbed from where they’d lay.

“Right, it’s no good standing here chatting; we can do that later. Call Dr. Nobes and I’ll get her upstairs. She needs to be kept warm.”

They both went about their allocated tasks quietly, Jonathan’s taking longer. It wasn’t easy getting her from under the desk. Bruce growled, having taken up the role of protecting her, knowing there was something wrong but not quite sure what.

“Shut up, silly dog! I’m not going to hurt her.” He pulled her arm, hoping she’d shuffle out and stand up to follow him, but she just fell forward and lay on her side, humming. His eyes filled with tears at the very sad state of her, that and how guilty he felt at the way he’d treated her. She looked just like a little girl again, tiny and vulnerable. She’d lost so much weight that she could ill afford and

when he picked her up he was shocked at her slight frame. It really was like carrying a child.

When he held her close to him she stopped humming and laid her head on his chest. He carried her up the stairs with Bruce following obediently behind.

Harry watched as tears of guilt and sadness pricked his eyes. He swallowed them back, gritted his teeth, and tried to muster up the will to make himself useful by fetching a glass and a jug of water.

Jonathan tucked his sister into bed, leaving Bruce lying on the rug on the floor beside her. Then he made his way downstairs to the kitchen to wait for the doctor, which was where he found Harry making tea.

“They won’t take her away, will they?”

“No Dad, I’ll request she stays here unless Dr. Nobes thinks she’s a danger to herself.”

“Then what?”

“Well, then she’d have to go to hospital I’m afraid. It is a real and serious illness, Dad.”

“I realise that now. I’ve just never seen anything like it. I’ve heard of people having nervous breakdowns, of course, but I always passed it off as a bit of a cop out.”

“Lots of people think like that; you’re not the only one. It’s hard to understand mental illness because we’re so used to physical symptoms.” Jonathan leaned on the back of one of the kitchen chairs ready to answer the door. “She’ll probably be like that for a few days. Once Dr. Nobes has been I’ll nip home and check on Nancy, pick up some clothes and move in here for a bit. She needs to be kept an eye on.”

“Okay.” Harry warmed the teapot and emptied it in the sink, his mind somersaulting from one thought to the next. “Don’t leave Nancy by herself, will you? Bring her here.”

“She was staying at a friend’s last night Dad and its back to Uni tomorrow. She’s had half term remember?”

“Oh yes.” He nodded, trying to focus his mind on everyday things. He couldn’t keep up with her movements since she’d started university.

“Dad, please stop worrying – we can all sort ourselves out. Just concentrate on Gabrielle and yourself.”

A loud knock at the door told them Dr. Nobes had arrived.

“I’ll let him in. You can sort a bed out for Bruce; he’s quite clearly not going to budge from her side and I don’t want him making his way onto her bed.”

“He won’t get up on the bed, he’s far too old. That’s the first time I’ve seen him go upstairs in months; he barely moves from the kitchen these days. He’ll do what he wants, and they’ll be no budging him, son.”

“I wonder who he gets that from. Animals shouldn’t be in the bedroom full stop, Dad. It’s unhygienic.”

Harry pulled a face at his son retreating and wondered if Jonathan’s finicky foibles came from being a GP because he certainly didn’t get them from him or his mother. He sighed and fetched Bruce’s bed, knowing that he probably wouldn’t move from Gabrielle’s side and wouldn’t take a blind bit of notice of anyone else. Harry was just pleased he was protecting his little girl and if he wanted to lie in her bedroom or on the bed then so be it.

He said hello to the doctor as he passed him in the hall and made his way upstairs with Bruce’s bed. Gabrielle was fast asleep when he crept in and sure enough Bruce had managed to haul himself onto the bed beside her. Harry threw the dog bed in the corner. Bruce lifted his

head from his paws and glanced at it before looking at Harry, and with a sigh resumed his former position and went back to sleep.

Harry could hear Jonathan and Dr. Nobes coming up the stairs, so he crept back out and left them all to it.

He went into the kitchen to clear up the cold scrambled eggs and breakfast things. He had to keep himself busy because he didn't want idle time in which to think too much. Emma was very present in his mind and had been for the last few days. It was almost as though she were standing by his side watching over Gabrielle with him.

He knew he must keep Gabrielle at his house whatever it took, and he felt so passionate about it that he didn't care for the consequences. If it meant they stayed there, ostracised from the village, then so be it. He was going to look after his family if it was the last thing he did.

He began tidying up, but his mind wandered again, and he stopped what he was doing while he thought over the previous night's events. He shuffled into the hall, his legs stiff from the frequent trips up and down the stairs. From where he was stood at the bottom of the stairs, he

tried to listen to what was going on in the bedroom, but the door was too thick to enable the sound to carry. All he could hear were two deep, muffled voices.

He turned to go back into the kitchen and stopped to look at the telephone, his hand reaching for the receiver. His stomach tightened, and he pulled his hand away. He'd intended to call Bill and tell him what had happened, but he realised it was more out of proving a point than wanting advice. Bill had been helpful and honest, but there was a harshness to his voice and Harry felt he'd been ever so slightly patronizing, as if he were talking to a disillusioned parent who couldn't face up to the fact that his daughter was clearly a criminal. And he wouldn't – because it wasn't true.

Bill had been friendly enough but seemed to brush the subject off by talking about other things. What was supposed to be an advisory visit on a professional level had very quickly turned into a social one. It was after Bill had gone that Harry had reflected and then become rattled by his words.

So, he decided not to ring him for fear of the same treatment and Harry didn't want to seem churlish – the news would come out soon enough.

He shuffled back into the kitchen with the intention of washing the crockery up from earlier, but he ended up staring out of the kitchen window, down the garden and to the sea in the distance. A vivid memory had appeared in his mind and he couldn't recall what had triggered it. It was a memory he'd forgotten about for a very long time, and something that had happened not long before the incident with the Tailby's children. He had no idea why it was visiting him now.

He had taken Gabrielle and Jonathan out for a walk. It was a beautiful area filled with patches of forest, not far from where they lived, but a place they had to drive to. It had a narrow track that ran along the cliff tops and wound around the forest. The cliffs overlooked more woodland area which had once, a very long time ago, been filled by the sea. He had often taken them there to walk the various gundogs he had at the time. During the holidays or at weekends, occasions when he had time, they would picnic there. The day he was remembering now was one when

they had taken a picnic out with them. The weather was hot and there were blustery clouds masking the sun's glare. He recalled it so clearly because it reminded him of Gabrielle's mood. She had been skittish, excitable but slightly snappy that day. He was used to these interchangeable moods; ever since she was small she'd be crying one minute and laughing the next.

That day having finished their picnic and cleared everything away they began to play a game of hide and seek catch.

It was all going well, the dogs were barking, excited to be allowed to join in, and Harry, having found Jonathan was chasing him to the base point. Having been defeated due to Jonathan's head start, he began to look for Gabrielle. After a few minutes of not being able to find her he started to feel a panic rising in his chest. He'd always told them to stay close by and not to hide too far away. He'd called and called her but there was no sign of her. Normally when she heard him call she'd let out a snigger, unable to control her excitement. But that day there was nothing.

He'd begun to run around and around commanding his three dogs to find her. It was his eldest gundog, Pepper, who alerted him to her whereabouts. He could hear Jonathan in the distance, shouting for them to hurry up because he was bored, but Harry ignored him, still nervous at what he was going to find. A lack of noise from Gabrielle was telling him something was very, very wrong.

Eventually having followed the sound of Pepper whining and yapping he found Gabrielle in a small clearing a few hundred yards away from where they had been playing. She was kneeling on the ground with her back to him and, from what he could see she appeared to be cradling something in her hands. He called her, but she didn't answer him. Pepper began to bark again, and he shouted to quieten her, but she replaced her yapping with a sorrowful whine; her head cocked to one side.

"Gabrielle, dear heart, whatever are you doing?" His voice had been filled with a mixture of relief and concern.

She'd eventually turned around as he walked towards her; she had the strangest look on her face. She'd raised

her hands up to him and he focused on what she was cradling; it was a young dead rabbit.

“Oh, my darling, you can’t rescue that, it’s dead. Put it down. Come on.” He crouched down beside her.

“I wasn’t going to rescue it. I put it out of its misery. I found it in a snare.”

As he looked closer he realised its head had come away from its body, she’d pulled the wire so hard. He still remembered the chill that had crept across his arms and up the back of his neck.

“Put it down, Gabrielle.” His voice had become stern.

She immediately dropped the rabbit’s head and body and stared at her blood-stained hands, sticky and feathered with fur.

“Leave it!” He barked at Pepper who moved to pick up the remains.

“You’ve found me now, does it count?” She stood up holding her hands slightly away from her and began to run towards the place they’d chosen for base as if nothing had happened.

He didn’t run after her and when he’d caught her up he washed her hands silently with a spare flask of water he

had for his dogs while Jonathan chattered on about the rabbit she'd found and how he wished it had been him. Harry nodded, trying not to show them there was anything worrying him. He knew Jonathan wouldn't have been able to do anything like that. He'd taken him shooting and he couldn't bear it when a bird needed finishing off. It was the calm way she'd reacted and the look on her face that had unnerved him.

The subject soon changed to the game they had played, and Harry decided not to mention the incident with the rabbit until he was tucking Gabrielle into bed later that evening.

“Why did you kill that rabbit?”

“I didn't kill it, it was already nearly dead. It was suffering so I put it out of its misery. You're always telling us animals shouldn't suffer.” She shrugged and reached for her book which was tucked under her pillow and began to read.

He kissed her goodnight and they never spoke of it again. It popped into his head frequently and after a short time he brushed it off as a normal act of kindness which was what he convinced himself it had been.

He was still lost in that memory when Jonathan brought him back to the present day by putting an arm around his shoulders.

“You were miles away, Dad.”

“Sorry. Just thinking that’s all.”

“Well, you can stop worrying. Dr. Nobes has given Gabrielle some medication to help her sleep for now and he has advised she stay put, but we must keep an eye on her. If she continues to behave strangely or we think she’s a danger to herself then we have to call him.”

“Oh...right. Does he want a cup of coffee?” Harry was still staring out of the window, his mind vaguely somewhere else.

“No Dad, he had to go – he had another call. Are you okay?”

“Yes.” He snapped. “What’s wrong with her?”

“He thinks she’s had a nervous breakdown. Not a major one though. Her mind has just closed down for a bit.”

Harry turned from the window, pleased it wasn’t terribly serious but sad she was ill at all.

“Well, old bean, we must look after her.”

“Yes, we must, and I need to decide if I’m going to call the police.”

“Quite. It’s probably best done whilst she’s not aware of it.”

“I just need to get things clear in my head first; the implications.”

Harry nodded and began to make a fresh pot of coffee for them both. They spent the next couple of hours talking it all through in between checking on Gabrielle. Even though Harry had forgotten about his flashback, having something else to occupy him, it still niggled at the back of his mind as it had done all those years ago.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Gabrielle was conscious but couldn't muster the energy to get up from her bed. What felt like a few hours to her was actually a few days.

She was fairly coherent to her father or Jonathan when they looked in on her, but she had completely shut down. The world beyond the bedroom door seemed too frightening when she thought about it in the cold light of day. So, for now, she was quite content to leave the world to continue without her for the time being; Bruce held a vigil by her side.

She had ventured out of bed and downstairs a couple of times when she'd felt like she was getting back to

normal. She'd been quickly marched back to her room, having been found rifling through the drawers in her father's desk, intent on looking for something but unable to tell anyone what. It felt dreamlike as though she were sleep walking and in her saner moments it left her wondering if she'd gone anywhere physically at all, and this scared her. She felt like she had no control over her mind, as though it had shifted into another dimension; a kind of hypnosis she couldn't pull it back from.

As she slowly let go of the urge to be consciously aware, she began to have no idea what was going on and no will to care. It was as though she'd taken all the memories of everything she'd ever experienced and thrown them in the sea, closing the door behind her. She didn't want to fight, analyse or question her feelings anymore and in some ways, it felt liberating.

She spent many hours reminiscing her time at Hellesdown Secure Unit where she'd been most happy. Sometimes she felt she was physically there again, instead of just visiting a memory. It felt so real that when she came back to the present she thought she'd been out for the day.

So that's where she spent most hours in her mind, the place she'd felt the safest.

She remembered when she'd arrived there, how frightened and homesick she was. She'd been brought straight to her room and she recalled being so rigid from fear and cold that she'd just sat on the bed for what seemed like hours.

There had been many days that passed like that; she couldn't remember how long exactly, but time is distorted when you're a child. Then one day she realised that no one had hurt her or been cruel and that the staff were all quite nice. Even the other children weren't too bad, although most kept themselves to themselves. She realised later that a couple of them were new too. Anyone else who was remotely chatty or loud she stayed away from for fear of becoming a target to be bullied. Time passed and before she knew it she'd made a couple of friends.

Most of the teachers liked her and she had fond memories of a couple who became particularly close to her. The main thread running through Hellesdown was education and they were all expected to work hard. The whole unit had been set up for them to accept whatever

crimes they had committed, and education was the key therapy in their healing process. Proper therapy wasn't available when Gabrielle was there, and many professionals felt that the children may have suffered because of this. But they were all getting the best education and looking back now Gabrielle knew it hadn't been dissimilar to private education; something which most of them would never have received at home.

The education as therapy system worked in Gabrielle's case but it in no way dealt directly with what had happened in her past. It was discussed on rare occasions when psychologists called in but apart from that it was seemingly ignored. So, Gabrielle had spent most of her life avoiding it, having been conditioned to deal with it that way.

And now, she was facing it properly for the first time in her life and it was as though she'd released a big piñata of memories in her head, and it had exploded, splattering the recesses of her mind with all sorts of things she'd forgotten or chosen to store away.

She spent hours writing whilst she was in bed in her room and Harry and Jonathan had thought this was a good thing and a sign she was recovering.

After what felt like a week but was in fact three she tried to get out of bed, get dressed and make herself look normal. She knew something wasn't quite right, but she thought by making herself do it she'd feel better.

She combed her hair, found some clothes which were hung over a chair in her room and made her way downstairs with Bruce in tow and what felt like a bag on her shoulders full of something she was fed up of carrying.

She was surprised to find that Harry and Jonathan weren't shocked to see her when she entered the sitting room.

"How are you feeling, dear heart?" Harry tried to sound bright and unperturbed by the sight of her.

She sat down on the sofa before she answered him. "Not too bad. I don't think I'm right but definitely better. I'd quite like to have dinner down here this evening."

Jonathan and Harry looked at one another.

"Do you think it's a good idea just yet?"

“You can’t keep me in confinement forever, Dr. Jeffers. I know I shouldn’t have hit Fiona, but she stole my diary and read it.”

Harry made a move to get up from his chair, but Jonathan reached across from where he was sitting and put his hand on his knee to still him.

“I know, Gabrielle. How about you eat your supper in the kitchen this evening?”

Gabrielle turned to look behind her, a puzzled look on her face. “Are you talking to me? I’m not Gabrielle. My name’s Rebecca.” She stared at Jonathan, waiting for an answer, and then she turned to Harry as though she was seeing him for the very first time. “Are you one of those psychiatric people?”

Jonathan jumped in quickly before Harry could answer, not that he looked for a minute like he was going to... he was absolutely lost for words.

“He’s a colleague of mine; nothing for you to worry about.”

“Why did you call me Gabrielle then? Are you trying to catch me out?”

“Not at all. Sorry Rebecca, I got into a muddle for a minute there. You look like a patient I used to know.” Jonathan looked to his father, his eyes pleading with him to go along with it.

“Oh. Am I really allowed to sit in the kitchen and have supper? Won’t I get into trouble?”

“No, I’ll make sure you don’t. You can do it just this once Rebecca.”

Harry got up slowly from his chair, unable to listen to anymore and at a loss to know how to control his emotions. Jonathan didn’t stop him from leaving and stayed behind to keep an eye on Gabrielle. A few minutes later he heard the front door close and knew his father had gone to visit the sea.

Harry was glad of the early spring wind hitting his face. It seemed to blow life back into him again; he’d barely been able to breathe at home. He pulled the brim of his cap further down his face and his scarf and the brim of his coat up around his chin to hide the tears that were streaming from his eyes.

The pain in his chest was threatening to engulf him but as he took in great gasps of air he began to feel it subside.

He couldn't believe it had come to this and the enormity of it all had suddenly become apparent to him. So much had happened in such a short space of time and Harry reflected on this now as he sat on his bench. Not that he'd had much to do with the events – he'd been more of a bystander than anything else, and had allowed Jonathan to take the lead on it all.

Jonathan had finally rung the police after much discussion, and they'd called round to take a statement from him. He'd asked for more compassionate leave from the surgery, so he could help Harry with Gabrielle, for which Harry was extremely grateful. They'd agreed it was best they stayed away from everyone and everything as much as possible while the police conducted their investigation. The last thing they'd been told by the police was that the case was being re-opened and they needed time to follow up their enquiries. Harry couldn't see what they would uncover evidence-wise and he didn't feel

terribly optimistic about any of it. One person's word against another didn't really stand for much.

All had seemed quiet for a few days and Harry had thought Gabrielle was getting better. She'd seemed to awaken from the strange state she'd been in, which was neither conscious nor unconscious. But her behaviour was peculiar and grew worse as the days went on. She often spoke as though she were back in Hellesdown and she frequently talked of a Mr. Jim and a Doctor Jeffers, neither of whom they had ever heard of but then Harry thought, well why would they? They knew nothing about her past, not really.

When they tried to get her to have a bath or a shower she behaved like a petulant child and refused to wash for days. They regularly found her rifling through drawers, humming or muttering whilst emptying the contents all over the floor. During the evening she would come downstairs half dressed, her skin clammy and hair greasy from lack of washing; it broke Harry's heart to see her like this.

Harry had insisted she have a private nurse in the end, to at least keep on top of her personal hygiene, something

they both felt too embarrassed to deal with regardless of her resistance.

He'd imagined she'd battle with the nurse when she first arrived purely because she was a stranger to her, but to their surprise she allowed her to take care of her as though she'd known her for years. The nurse made sure she showered daily and if she wasn't well enough to get out of bed, that she had a bed bath and clean night wear.

Harry thought, and it was so trivial, that this must have helped her mental state even just a tiny bit. She began to write again, albeit in bed, but it was a sign to Harry that she was beginning to recover. She was awake more often than asleep and the half-dressed confused visits downstairs seemed to be a distant memory.

But then the nurse had been unable to come for a few days because she was going on holiday and Gabrielle went downhill rapidly, back to the point where she'd been that moment before he'd walked down to the sea, with his hopes dashed again.

He scalded himself now for thinking that a nurse keeping her clean and getting her dressed had been any sign of her recovery as it could just have been a

coincidence or a brief glimmer of sanity in her peculiar world. This was quite apparent to them both, having just seen her come downstairs again, half dressed, her greasy hair pinned back in the fashion she used to do it as a child.

Jonathan had gently suggested having her sectioned under the Mental Health Act which was his professional recommendation, and Harry knew that's what he'd be organising now while he was out.

He rubbed the soft, smooth wooden arm of the bench where he sat, his heart tightening as he thought about it now. He'd become irate when it had first been suggested to him. Visions of straitjackets, graffiti covered walls in cold cells and patients rocking in chairs like imbeciles had flashed through his mind. When he'd eventually calmed down and listened to what Jonathan had to say he realised it wasn't like that at all. He knew it would be the best thing for her, to be looked after by professionals who'd make sure she was set on the right road to recovery. It didn't stop it hurting though and he'd hoped beyond hope she'd show some signs of recovery before it came to that. He couldn't bear the thought of her being sent away again under such similar circumstances as the last time.

He also didn't want to lose her again but thinking on it now, he had lost her anyway. Her mind had wandered off somewhere else for the time being and Gabrielle had been replaced with a damaged young girl called Rebecca.

He patted the arm of the bench as though it were a dear old friend and then felt around in his pockets for his gloves. He looked up at the sea as if noticing it for the first time; his vision had been clouded by memories of the past few weeks. The sea was calm, unperturbed. The tide was in at its highest and it heaved in all its magnificence, not breaking the water.

He saw someone approaching the bench out of the corner of his eye, but he didn't look around until he felt their weight as they sat next to him a little too closely. At first glance he didn't recognise the man, and then he turned back quickly as the realisation dawned on him.

John Tailby leaned into him, his face distorted with bitterness. Harry stared straight ahead, his heart pounding and his mind racing at what to say or do next. There was a time he'd have stood up to him, but he knew his limits. He was old and more fearful, especially of an aggressive man almost twenty years younger than him.

John tightly gripped Harry's arm causing him to flinch.

"Listen to me carefully, Harry. Your daughter is a murderer and that's how it's going to stay. I don't care if she didn't do it. She did. That's what everyone knows around here and that's not going to change. Do you understand me?"

"Get your hand off me and leave me alone," Harry hissed, anger welling inside him.

John moved in closer causing Harry to lean away, reeking of the smell of stale whiskey, which seemed to be oozing from every pore. His grip tightened on Harry's arm.

"You're going to go home and make your stupid son withdraw his statement. Tell the police you've made a mistake and you don't want to take it any further."

"It's out of our hands now." Harry tried to get up from his seat, wishing Bruce was with him. An old dog he may be, but he still knew how to protect his family.

John pushed him back down.

"Do it otherwise you may find your precious daughter hanging from a tree with a suicide note attached

to her. I won't have my wife's name dragged through muddy waters."

"Get away from me you piece of scum." Harry seethed through gritted teeth.

John released his grip. "I hope we understand one another, Harry."

"We will never understand each other." Harry stood up, his whole body shaking. He tried to control himself by pressing his feet firmly into the ground, not wanting John to see he was scared.

"Think you're better than me, always have done. I had the last laugh though, didn't I?"

Harry pushed his hands, which were now formed into fists, hard into the bottom of his pockets. It took all his will not to punch John in the face, but he knew it was he who'd get hurt, reminding himself he was over eighty. And really, he felt quite sorry for John. He'd been there once; lost his wife and his daughter in the bottom of a whiskey bottle, and he was lucky enough to have the wherewithal and support to pull himself out of it before it was too late.

He chose to rise above it, nodded his head to the sea as a farewell gesture and made his way home. He had no

idea if John said anything else to him; he tucked his scarf up around his ears and didn't look back.

He'd never felt much sympathy towards John even just after the horrible events; it had always been pity. He just couldn't find it in himself; he despised the man and, yet he didn't really know why. He'd had endless amounts of sympathy for Ellen, John's wife. He wondered if it was because John had a drink problem, but Harry had met plenty of alcoholics in his time so that wasn't the reason.

He pondered on this as he strolled home and concluded that it was because John had always appeared cold and heartless. Always begrudging of other people's good fortune and Harry hated that trait in anyone.

John's words littered his mind like discarded sweet wrappers. He decided not to worry too much about his threats. After all, John was pissed half the time and couldn't remember what day of the week it was.

As he got halfway down the track which led to his house his eyes caught sight of two unfamiliar cars parked outside. He knew they were from the hospital and there to take Gabrielle away. The same dull pain he'd had earlier

began to throb in his chest, reaching his throat like a hand with a vice grip.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

As the police continued to investigate the case, people began to talk, and the story leaked out, causing droves of reporters to swarm around Harry's house again. He managed to get an injunction to stop them coming down the track towards his home, which was a little bit of relief.

One thing he was grateful for was that Gabrielle had been taken away before the reporters arrived, so for the time being no one knew where she was.

The house felt oddly empty without Gabrielle, as though it were mourning her absence, falling in line with Bruce's mood. Harry was glad of Jonathan's company, especially at times when he felt very low. Having accepted that his life might be coming to an end because it seemed he was on borrowed time, he had now begun to pray frantically to live longer, willing himself to carry on. He was losing time with Gabrielle and it scared him.

She'd been sectioned under the Mental Health Act and he'd insisted she be taken to a private psychiatric hospital that he had been glad to pay for. He wanted her to have the best care possible but there was no telling when she'd be better or allowed to come home.

He waited every day for a phone call or a visit from the police telling him some sort of news, but the days passed, and he heard nothing. It felt like many months had gone by when it was barely a few weeks and there was finally a knock at the door; a Detective Sergeant Delton from the local constabulary.

Butterflies played in Harry's stomach when he heard the policeman announce himself to Jonathan, who had answered the door. He knew it was important if CID had been sent to deal with it.

DS Delton was quite young and when he walked into the sitting room Harry's hope waned slightly as he wondered how he could possibly take on such a big case. But then everyone seemed young when you were over eighty.

Then, after a short while of discussing Gabrielle's case, his hope was restored as DS Delton explained how

all the old case files had been looked over and John and Ellen Tailby had been visited, which Harry knew already. Apparently, there were some “details” that needed clearing up, but the detective wouldn’t say what. All he did say was they were waiting for a report from an independent doctor who had come to assess Mrs. Tailby to establish whether she was fit to be interviewed as he understood she’d just been diagnosed with the early stages of senile dementia. So, they had to sit tight for now, but he assured them both he’d be in touch in due course when they had more news.

An awkward moment ensued when the Sergeant asked where Gabrielle was and if he could speak to her. He nodded his head gravely, offered his condolences and then stood up from his seat to leave.

“I need to tell you something.” Harry piped up.

“Yes?”

“I saw John Tailby when I was out walking, and he made some sort of threat towards me. Well, more towards Gabrielle really.”

Jonathan’s head snapped round. “When?”

“Oh, last week. The week before...”

“What exactly did he say to you?” DS Delton sat back down in his seat.

“Hang on a minute.” Jonathan put his hand up to DS Delton as a way of interrupting him. He wanted to clear this new revelation up with his father now. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I don’t know. It didn’t seem that important at the time. We had all that stuff going on with Gabrielle and you were organising removals for her things to be picked up from the safe house. I didn’t want to make a meal of it.”

“The police should have been told immediately. You of all people should know that, having been a Barrister.”

Harry saw DS Delton’s eyebrows raise at Jonathan’s patronizing tone.

“Why don’t you go and make another pot of coffee, son, while I talk to DS Delton here.” Harry wasn’t going to be spoken to like that and Jonathan realised he’d stepped over the mark by his sarcastic tone, so he did as he asked and went into the kitchen while the two men discussed what they needed to. He’d grill his father about it later.

In all honesty, he was glad to be away from it. The whole situation was becoming extremely serious and they were at a point from which they couldn't return; now it was in the hands of the CID. He wasn't sure if this was a good idea or not because this could fall badly on the shoulders of his sister if there was nothing new to uncover and she was in fact guilty of what she'd been charged in the first place. She certainly wasn't in a fit state to deal with it now and he doubted she ever would be. It was all unravelling very rapidly and there was no way of slowing it down.

He knew now that they would be heading for another period of limbo and he wasn't sure how either of them would cope. In a very small way he envied Gabrielle not being aware of anything going on. Then he felt guilty for feeling that way when he thought of what she'd been through; she was so poorly, and he suspected she had been for quite some time. It had all been bubbling under the surface and she'd bravely managed to keep on top of it all.

He hadn't told Harry, but when he'd been to the safe house to pack up her things, having jumped through hoops

with her Probation Officer, he'd discovered a very worrying scene.

Most of the furniture and the floors in every room were covered in black and white photographs. Obviously, they were photos she'd collected over many years, and he realised it had been what she'd rambled on about the night she'd turned up in the rain.

Seeing it all carefully laid out was like viewing his sister's life for the very first time and it had made him feel terribly sad. It still did as he reflected on it now. They were all pictures of families, people, children and pets. Some of occasions or holidays and others just randomly snapped pictures. He'd carefully collected them all up and put them in the empty boxes he'd found dotted around the bungalow. When he'd gone into the kitchen to collect the last ones, most of which were laid on the kitchen table, he'd stopped in his tracks. They were all photos of his parents when they were young and some of himself as a baby. A silver jewellery box, which he'd recognised as his mother's, was sitting open on the worktop nearby and he'd suddenly realised where they had come from. He remembered her mentioning the box the night she came

back and his father reassuring her they'd go and collect it and to stop worrying. A tiny prickle had crept up the back of his neck as he'd looked at how precisely she'd laid the photographs out, as there wasn't one of her amongst them. She'd placed any photos that included her with the random photos their mother had collected in a separate pile on the worktop.

With a heavy heart he'd set about packing her belongings, of which she had very little. It was mainly books and photographs but very few clothes or ornaments or anything else for that matter.

While he'd waited for the removal lorry he'd sat and thought a great deal about how she'd have turned out if she'd had a normal childhood. What would their lives have been like? He'd even wondered if he'd have ever married Anna, although he couldn't pinpoint why it would have had such an impact on his decisions, but then maybe it had. Perhaps the effect of what happened had hit him harder than he'd thought or could remember. It had made him question the person he'd become and wonder if this was a natural progression of who he'd been when he was younger.

When he thought of Anna his immediate reaction was that he'd opted for her because she was quiet, and controlled, safe even. And he now realised all these years on that he'd wanted someone who wouldn't bring him any trouble, but all he'd ended up with was years of boredom. It hadn't occurred to him that he could have been with someone full of life, who was balanced and sane. Everything had been black and white, from one extreme to another, good or bad when he was young. And he had been so very young when he'd married Anna and he wondered if the decision had been an unconscious one.

All the people he'd chosen to be in his life, because it had always been his choice and not the other way around, were quiet and intellectual. Through school and university, he'd steered clear of anyone remotely loud or fun for fear they might become reckless or do something they regretted later, because this was exactly how his sister had been; temperamental and unpredictable.

Collecting Gabrielle's things from the safe house had been life changing for him. It had made him aware of so many things, especially now that he was going through a divorce. He was a successful GP, but he was now asking

himself about all the things he'd missed out on. His career and his controlled life had stopped him from living and he despised himself for it, despised Anna for wanting to own him, placing restraints on him that he'd agreed to.

He was sure his sister had lived a fuller life than he, and she'd been confined physically and mentally for most of it. And he felt relieved when he'd sat in the safe house and thought about the kind of life that would bring. The thought of a new identity, a new life where you could reinvent yourself, filled him with a kind of optimism and hope that he couldn't quite explain.

Harry appeared in the doorway of the kitchen startling him from his thoughts. "Bloody hell, boy, where's that coffee? I'm parched!"

Harry moved closer and looked at him more carefully. "You look really tired; are you alright?"

"Sorry Dad, miles away. DS Delton gone?" He rubbed his face to bring himself back properly into the here and now.

"Yes. He's got lots of enquiries to make but he said he'd be back as soon as they have any kind of news. He's sending a police officer to take a statement from me about

John Tailby. Bloody stupid if you ask me. I just wanted them to be aware of it, not make a bloody meal out of it.” Harry pulled a chair out from the kitchen table and sat down opposite Jonathan.

“Well, they have to make sure they do everything properly. What happened with John Tailby anyway?”

“Oh, something and nothing. He was drunk; no point making a big deal out of it.”

“What exactly did he say to you?” Jonathan stared at Harry defiantly. It had obviously shaken Harry for him to be so cagey about it and Jonathan wanted to get to the bottom of it.

“He wanted me to tell you to withdraw your statement or else Gabrielle would get hurt. Well actually, that she’d be found hanging from a tree.”

“Oh, is that all?”

“Well yes but...”

“I was being sarcastic, Dad.”

“Oh.”

“You should have told me as soon as it happened.”

“And what would you have done about it? Hey?” Harry’s voice suddenly sounded dark. “You had enough

to sort out.” Harry got up from his chair again and went over to the cupboard under the sink to get a bottle of whiskey he kept there.

Jonathan turned in his chair to see what his father was doing. “You shouldn’t drink so much. And why do you keep a bottle under the sink like an alcoholic?”

“You’re a fine one to talk about drinking too much. I, young man, am over eighty and I can do exactly what I want. I am on borrowed time.” Harry prodded at his own chest nonchalantly as though he were making a statement to himself and not Jonathan. “And for your information I keep a bottle there for medicinal purposes.”

“Sit down Dad. I need to talk to you.”

Harry stopped his banter and obediently sat back down in his chair opposite Jonathan, setting two glasses down and pouring them both a whiskey.

“Have you thought about what’s going to happen or rather how you’re going to feel if the police discover that Gabrielle is in fact guilty?”

Harry breathed in sharply through his nose. “I don’t want to talk about that now,” he snapped, causing Jonathan

to sit up in his chair, something he did automatically when he thought they were about to start arguing.

“Come on, we’re going out.” Harry thrust himself from his chair, startling Jonathan slightly.

“Where are we going?”

“To the pub. Come on, get your coat.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, we can’t go to the pub.”

“Yes, we bloody well can. I’m your father so do as you’re told.”

“Dad...”

“Don’t argue with me, just do it. We’ve not done enough of that sort of thing and we’re bloody well going to do it now. I’m...”

“Dad, what are...”

“Don’t interrupt me boy with your sensible doctor chit chat.” He flicked his hand dismissively at him. “I am going to the local pub with my son and we are going to hold our heads up. If anyone says anything we’ll be dignified, and we’ll tell them we don’t want to talk about it.”

“I wasn’t going to lecture you; Dad I was wondering why you put the whiskey bottle in the fridge?”

Harry swung round. “Did I?” He opened the fridge and sure enough there was the bottle of whiskey in the door.

“Oh. Habit. Thought I was putting the milk away most probably.”

Jonathan laughed.

“I’m old, son. My brain doesn’t work like it used to.”

“Too much booze, that’s your problem.”

“I’ve only had one! Go and get your coat, you cheeky beggar.”

They both wrapped up warm against the early spring chill and made their way down to The Nelson, one of the local pubs near the harbour.

Everyone turned to look at them when they walked into the bar, and at first Jonathan felt that maybe they shouldn’t have shown their faces after all. He felt it may have been construed as inappropriate, but he soon realised they were doing it to everyone who walked in and no one realised who they were. Conversation would halt, and heads would turn towards the door as a few moments of silence ensued.

Harry reassured him that just because it had been in the papers didn't mean everyone knew who they were by sight, and he didn't care much if they did. Jonathan had hissed at him that of course they knew what he looked like, he was the local GP. But it fell on deaf ears. Harry had spent the best part of his life feeling ashamed in the village and he was determined to end it here and now.

Jonathan on the other hand, felt his father was being slightly too optimistic; treading on thin ice. Harry had convinced himself the police had found evidence that would prove Gabrielle was innocent and Jonathan knew this wasn't the case at all. He thought it a bit premature and distasteful to be arrogant about the whole situation, especially if they turned out to be wrong. But then again maybe it was form for him to feel that way; to assume the worst. He'd spent most of his childhood feeling ashamed and as though he didn't have the right to live in the village. Children had been spiteful to him at school, knowing what his sister had done, and the stigma had clung to him for many years.

At one point he'd begged his father to let him change schools, but he'd just growled at him and told him to get

on with it, lost in his own turmoil at the time. His Aunt and Catherine, whom he went to at different times after school, comforted him and told him that things would get better and eventually they did.

It was ridiculous when he thought about what he did for a living and how he saw people every day and he never felt threatened or ashamed in that position. Yet, put in an environment such as a pub and his old feelings and fears crept back to haunt him, and made him feel guilty.

They talked over a few drinks for a good couple of hours and when they decided they were both unbearably hungry they left and went to pick up fish and chips as they made their way home. The smell of their supper was so good they almost stopped and sat on Harry's bench and ate them out of the paper. But the cold weather and the thought of a warm fire and a hot cup of tea made them change their minds.

They could talk more openly when they arrived home, the alcohol enabling their conversation to flow more freely than normal, and it was almost like they were completely different people.

They chatted and laughed after they'd had their supper and the whole evening had been just what they needed; to step away from all the turmoil for a while and blow the dust of the last few weeks away. And then the conversation turned slightly more serious as they both became tired and maudlin from the alcohol they'd consumed.

"Do you honestly think Dad, that Gabrielle is innocent? Really, deep down?"

It was a few moments before Harry answered.

"I'm going to answer that as truthfully as I can. I honestly don't know, son. I swing from one opinion to another. One minute I think she couldn't possibly have done such a thing and then I begin to doubt it. I question my motivation for wanting her to be innocent. Do I want it because I feel guilty? Well of course, but it's more than that. Apart from the obvious goal of wanting her name clear, in my quiet, still moments I feel she didn't do it." He sighed heavily. "What do you think?"

"The same as you really. I swing from one conclusion to another. I find it hard to remember what she was like

when we were children. I know she was defiant and temperamental, but we got on well.”

“That’s because you were also defiant and temperamental.” Harry laughed.

“Yes, I suppose I was. Can you remember anything in the days running up to when it happened? It’s all a blur to me.”

Harry reached for his pipe from the mantel piece and tapped its contents into the hearth before he began to refill it with tobacco, thinking hard before he answered.

“It’s a bit of a blur for me too. I remember we’d clashed a lot that week but that could have been because I was stressed and not necessarily due to her mood being any different.” He puffed on his pipe and shifted in his seat.

“What is it, Dad?”

“When I talk about it I just can’t believe she did it. But why if I can’t believe it now did I believe it then? I feel so bloody desperate about it all.”

“But there must have been some sort of evidence to make you think that? It was difficult, Dad. I remember it

being an awful time.” Jonathan got out of his chair and went over to Harry’s desk in search of a cigar to smoke.

“They’re in the left-hand drawer.” Harry waited for him to find the cigars before he continued. “There was evidence and it was all laid out for me by the police but even so, I of all people should know it doesn’t make that person guilty. You’re innocent until proven guilty and I always stood by that vehemently, so why didn’t I feel like that when it came to my daughter, my own flesh and blood?” His voice started to break, and Jonathan could see he was getting worked up.

“Come on Dad, don’t upset yourself.”

“It’s so different when it happens to you personally and I’d battled with her since she’d been born and that seemed to confirm it for me. It was as though I’d run out of patience. I had a lot of pressure from the people in the village and I’m not proud to say it, but I knew, even though I wasn’t totally conscious of it that I’d be ostracised if I showed her any signs of support.” He shook his head almost in disbelief. “I’m so ashamed of that. I was so bloody selfish in those days; hot headed and arrogant. All

I kept thinking about was how hard everything had been for me and how I couldn't go through it again."

Jonathan joined him by the fire again and lit his cigar. "You were in shock though Dad. Anyone would have been; it was an awful thing to deal with. I'm sure I didn't make it any easier for you. And as you said yourself, you thought you had some sort of breakdown."

"You dealt with it surprisingly well, son. I suppose I was protecting you also and I didn't want you to suffer any backlash from the witch hunt. I selfishly wanted people's sympathy and pity if I'm honest; not their wrath."

"But then you have to remember that we're talking from the point of view that she was innocent and that may not have been so."

"Don't you think I should have supported her regardless? She was just a little girl after all."

"I don't know, Dad."

"What would you have done had it been Nancy?"

"Oh, you have no idea how many times I've asked myself that. If I was with Anna and it had happened to us I probably wouldn't have supported Nancy but who knows? I don't really know how she would have reacted –

we never talked about it; Anna was just disgusted by the whole thing.”

“She really changed you, didn’t she?”

Jonathan puffed on the last of his cigar and threw the stub into the grate, causing the flames to flare. “I wouldn’t say changed, more that she stifled me.” He smiled at Harry. “I’m okay, Dad. I feel relieved she’s gone. That’s all I can say about it right now, I’m just relieved.”

“So am I. Bloody woman.”

“Why did you never say anything?”

Harry breathed deeply. “Because it’s your life, son and none of my business. You wouldn’t have listened anyway; look how we’ve battled all these years.”

“We’re not battling now though, are we?”

“No son, we’re not. Can we agree on something though?”

“What?”

“Whatever happens with Gabrielle, we’ll support her?”

Jonathan stared into the fire needing to think. Finally, he nodded his head. “Of course.”

“You need to remember that if she did strangle those children...” he flinched at his own words, “if she did do it; she’s not that person now. She was just a child.”

“Suffocated, Dad. She suffocated them, it’s something very different.”

“Son, as much as I hate to say it she strangled them with a piece of rope.”

Jonathan frowned. “That’s not how I remember it. I was always told they were suffocated.”

“Who by?”

Jonathan stared into the fire again, trying to recall where he’d heard it.

“It certainly wasn’t by me. I’ve never lied to you about what happened. Why would I tell you that anyway? It’s just as abhorrent.”

Jonathan got up from his chair and fetched two glasses and some whiskey from the drinks cabinet. Harry’s eyebrows rose slightly. “Don’t lecture me, boy about drinking too much.”

“Nightcap, Father. One for the road.” His mind was racing as though there were hundreds of fingers picking

through files of memories in his head, desperately trying to find the answer. Then it came to him.

“I read it. I read it somewhere.” He handed his father a glass and sat back down in his chair.

“Where would you read such a thing?”

“Let me think.”

“I don’t see what difference it makes anyway. You’ve misread or misheard something. The facts are they were strangled. I read the pathologist’s report and I’ve been over it a million times in my head.”

“It’s important. I don’t know why just yet, but it is.”

After a few moments Jonathan suddenly jumped up from his seat and blundered from the room.

Harry sat still and waited; he was too tired to chase after him and put his amateur dramatics down to the alcohol he’d drunk.

A quarter of an hour later Jonathan burst back into the sitting room, startling Harry from a doze he’d slipped into.

“It’s written in one of her diaries.”

It took Harry a few moments to register what he was saying. “Who’s diary? What are you going on about? You woke me up.”

“Sorry, Dad. Gabrielle’s diaries. She had been writing one when she was in the safe house and in it she talks about what happened.”

“And you read it?” Harry’s tone was dark.

“Only parts of it.” Jonathan sat down in his chair, realising what he’d done. “Dad, I wouldn’t have done it if she hadn’t been ill, I promise you. I wanted to see if it would help us understand her situation better.”

“Even so, it’s not right.”

“I didn’t read any of the others I found. Just this one and I only read the last few pages.”

“I didn’t know she’d been writing diaries for years, I thought it was something she planned to do now. In fact, she told me she was going to write one a few weeks ago.” Harry thought of the one she said she wanted him to read.

“I found quite a few packed away. But I promise you I didn’t read them, tempted as I was.”

Harry suddenly thought of his own diary that he’d neglected for quite some time and he wondered if Gabrielle and he had been writing at the same time and about the same thing. Jonathan broke his thoughts.

“Dad, look, she talks about what happened the day the twins died, and she says in a couple of entries about them suffocating although she does say how she can’t really remember what happened that day.”

“Let me see.”

Jonathan handed him the notebook. Harry found himself wishing the sentences were highlighted brightly so he wouldn’t accidentally read anything else. It felt like a terrible betrayal of privacy and he was extremely uncomfortable about looking, but he consoled himself with what Jonathan had said and that ultimately it could help Gabrielle.

“Why would she write that?”

“I don’t know, but it’s a strange thing to say, isn’t it, if you are sure that’s not what actually happened?”

“I’m positive the coroner concluded they were strangled. Trust me; it’s imprinted on my memory.” Harry fixed him with a hard stare.

“If it means what I think it means, Dad, then someone’s got to be made responsible for one of the biggest cock ups in history which resulted in an innocent young girl being incarcerated. If we can trust what she

wrote in her diary, she didn't even know how the two children were killed."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Harry and Jonathan had a slow start in the morning mainly due to the alcohol they'd consumed and the copious amounts of coffee they'd drank into the small hours, the combination making them feel tired and jaded.

The telephone had woken Jonathan first; it was DS Delton requesting a visit; he had something important to tell them both. Jonathan, with blurry eyes and a muggy head had clambered back upstairs to wake his father. Slightly dishevelled, they managed between them to make a pot of coffee, which they took into the sitting room while they waited in silence for DS Delton. The anticipation of what he had to say hung heavy in the air; they hoped it was what they wanted to hear and would marry up with what they'd discovered in Gabrielle's diary. But Jonathan couldn't shake off the niggling feeling he'd had when he heard the police officer's grave voice, which was suggesting to him it wasn't good news at all. He busied himself making up the fire while Harry watched; his eyes vacant as though he were somewhere else in his mind. A knock at the door startled them both from their thoughts.

"It's not good news, is it?" Jonathan blurted to DS Delton when he answered the door.

“No, it’s not, I’m afraid. Can I come in?”

Jonathan realised he was blocking the entrance; one hand on the door and the other on the frame, as though stopping him from coming in would alter the news somehow.

“Sorry. Of course. Come through.”

Nausea rose in his stomach and he prayed the news wasn’t too horrific, because he had no idea how his father would cope with it.

“Coffee, DS Delton?” Harry stood up when he entered the room and moved towards the tray on the table to pour the policeman a cup.

“Dad, leave it, I’ll do it.”

“None for me thanks. Please.” DS Delton gestured for them both to sit down.

Harry did as he was told, also slightly concerned about what was coming next. He’d assumed it was about some new evidence they’d found, and he was eager to show the Detective Sergeant what Jonathan had discovered, but the look on his face and his whole demeanour told Harry he had some very grave news.

“I’m afraid your daughter has gone missing from the psychiatric hospital.”

Harry and Jonathan both turned to look at one another, their eyes wide with panic.

“We have a team of officer’s out looking for her and making door to door enquiries. I take it she’s not turned up here?”

“No.” Jonathan answered. Harry was too shocked to speak. “When did this happen? How long has she been missing?”

“She was noticed missing at around seven yesterday evening.”

“Why did the hospital not inform us?” Jonathan then remembered that they’d been out for most of the evening and neither of them had checked the telephone since they’d arrived home.

“They left a couple of messages and then called us because she’s registered under the Witness Protection Act. They must follow procedure. We sent an officer round but there was no one here.”

“We were out,” Harry said in a matter of fact way, pointing out the obvious because he didn’t know what else to say.

Jonathan jumped up from his chair. “I need to go and find her.”

“Please sit down, Dr. Rochester. We are doing everything we can to find her and the best thing you can do is stay here with your father in case your sister turns up. Please, I haven’t finished.”

Jonathan sat back down concerned about what was coming next.

“I want you to understand that what I’m about to tell you doesn’t necessarily have anything to do with Miss Rochester’s disappearance.” Harry and Jonathan both frowned and waited anxiously for what DS Delton was about to say next.

“John and Ellen Tailby were found dead this morning.”

Silence fell across the room like a blanket of mist as the two men took in what he was saying.

“What happened?” Jonathan eventually broke the atmosphere.

“We’re not sure yet but it looks as though Mr. Tailby killed his wife and then himself.”

“Does anyone know why?”

“Not entirely.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Harry wanted to know if this was going to drastically affect Gabrielle’s situation, and as sad as he felt about the Tailbys, his only concern was his daughter.

“I can’t really say; it is way too early to know.”

It then dawned on Harry why DS Delton had said it wasn’t necessarily connected with Gabrielle’s disappearance. “Tell me what you think this has to do with my daughter? Please don’t tell me you think he’s done something to her?”

“We’re not saying that, Mr. Rochester, but because he threatened you recently, we have to explore every avenue.”

A panic surged through Harry causing him to stand up from his chair as though he’d had an electric shock. He made his way from the sitting room, unable to speak to anyone; he was so choked up with tears.

“Where are you going Dad?”

Harry didn't answer, so Jonathan followed him out of the room.

"Dad?"

Leave me be was all Harry could manage. He put on his coat, left the house and made his way down to the sea.

He couldn't formulate any clear thoughts; the sick feeling in his stomach was dominating his whole being. He didn't care what happened with the case, he just wanted Gabrielle back or to at least know where she was and if she was safe. It was the not knowing that was excruciating. When he thought about how vulnerable she was it made him feel a thousand times worse.

He thought of all the years he hadn't known her whereabouts and yet now he was stricken at the very thought of her absence.

He sat on his bench and digested everything he'd been told. A flurry of questions flooded his mind and he had a sudden urge to leave the sea and go home to talk to DS Delton. But as soon as the urge came it left and he sat back down; he didn't feel there was any point. His daughter was missing, and he wouldn't settle until she was found safe and well.

John Tailby's threat rang in his head causing him to physically shiver. He looked out to the sea but didn't feel it could offer him any inspiration or comfort. There were no answers it could give him; he already had the conclusion he wanted in his head.

The sea was choppy and temperamental and as daft as he knew it was he felt it was almost arguing with him, being disagreeable and contrary to what he so desperately wanted.

A sudden surge of rage overwhelmed him, and he thrust himself from his bench and made his way home. He wanted some answers to why his daughter had gone missing with what it seemed to him to be little or no concern for her welfare. He also wanted to know how hard the police were working to find her. He needed to vent his anger somewhere and it felt comforting in a way; it was preferable to feeling helpless and ashamed. His hot-headedness was a small glimpse into how he'd been when he was younger, working as a Barrister, and it had always spurred him to fight for what he thought was right. He just wished he'd channelled that anger into supporting and fighting for his daughter when she'd needed him all those

years ago. He certainly wasn't going to make the same mistake again.

As he made his way up the track leading to his house he was disappointed to see that DS Delton had already gone.

He stormed in via the back door and hunted around for Jonathan, who he eventually found upstairs in Gabrielle's room.

"What are you doing?"

Jonathan spun round from the boxes he was bent over, clearly startled by Harry's sudden appearance. He frowned at his father's accusatory tone and the change in his demeanour.

"DS Delton said it was important to look through Gabrielle's things because it may shine some light on her whereabouts." He said this pointedly, not wanting Harry to take the moral high ground with him again. "It's a long shot but it's worth a try."

"Quite. I'm going to call the psychiatric hospital. I want to find out what happened. Why she was allowed to walk out without anyone noticing."

Jonathan stood up from where he'd been crouching so he could look at his father properly. "Dad, just leave it will you; let the police deal with it. DS Delton has already been to see them, and no one saw or can recall anything strange happening yesterday. Patients aren't locked in, as you know. If they've served their twenty-eight days, they can do as they please and Gabrielle had just completed hers. I've been through all this with DS Delton."

"And what else are they doing about finding her?"

"He has assured me they are doing absolutely everything they can to find her."

"Yes well, I know what these policemen are like and what they say and what they actually do are two very different things."

"It's not like that anymore, Dad. It's not like it was when you dealt with the police at work. Gabrielle is being classed as a vulnerable adult and she's under the Witness Protection Act because of her licence, which means they will definitely be doing everything they can to find her."

"What, because they think she'll re-offend?"

"They have to consider this, Dad. No one knows her like you or me. As far as they're concerned she served a

life sentence for murder. It doesn't matter how long ago it was, she's breached her license and they must consider the implications of her state of mind. Why are you being so aggressive? It's not helping the situation." It was more a statement than a question; Jonathan wasn't in the mood for his father's temper. Harry fell silent as he went back to sorting through Gabrielle's things.

It was like someone had thrown a bucket of cold water on a fire, you could almost hear the hiss and it caused Harry to calm somewhat.

"I'm sorry. I just feel so bloody helpless and I suppose I'm angry with myself." Harry sat down on the bed. "It's all too little too late."

"What are you talking about?"

"I should have felt like this when she was little. Supported her and fought for her rights regardless of the consequences."

Jonathan stacked up the notebooks he'd found onto one of the bedside tables and sat down opposite Harry.

"Dad, you've got to stop going over and over this and beating yourself up. What's important is what you do from here on in."

“I know but I feel wracked with guilt over it all.”

“But you must move on from it. You did what you did because you thought it was best at the time. You can’t change it. I know that sounds harsh, but you can’t. All you can do is support her now. It’s no good getting angry with everyone who’s trying to help. Gabrielle has led a complex life and a lot of it we still don’t know about. No one knows how they would react in that situation until it happens to them; no one. Even Gabrielle accepts that.

“But I shouldn’t have felt like that about my daughter.”

“There’s no should or shouldn’t about it.” Jonathan sighed, he was trying to be sympathetic, but he felt physically exhausted and emotionally drained and he didn’t want to rake over the past anymore. “I’m not going over all this again with you. It’s important to move on, for Gabrielle’s sake. If you really want to help her then that’s what you’ll do. Now stop wallowing in your own self-pity and do something constructive.”

Jonathan grabbed the notebooks from the bedside table and made his way downstairs leaving Harry with his thoughts.

Harry stayed where he was for a while feeling slightly indignant and then he realised he felt like that because Jonathan was right, he was wallowing in self-pity. It was as though he'd been shaken really hard and some of his feelings had come out and sprinkled like snow around him. He mulled over what Jonathan had said, some of it felt uncomfortable as it settled but he soon realised he was right.

After a short time of formulating his thoughts he joined Jonathan downstairs. He found him in the sitting room at his desk reading Gabrielle's notebooks.

Jonathan looked up at Harry as he shuffled across the room. "Dad, I'm sorry I spoke to you like that. It wasn't helpful and who am I to say how you should be dealing with it all? I have no idea what you must be going through or have had to endure over the years and it was wrong of me."

Harry moved slowly across the room and perched himself on the arm of the chair nearest to the desk.

"It needed to be said. I have been wallowing in self-pity and it's time I pulled myself together. I feel better

actually, like I've been shaken out of it. You're right, what we do from here on in is the most important thing now."

"Well, I'm glad you've taken it that way."

"Found anything of interest?" Harry nodded to the open notebook.

"Not yet. I'm not sure we're going to, but I'd rather keep myself busy. You never know it might churn up some sort of clue to where she is."

"Where on earth could she be, I just can't understand it?" Harry shook his head and then a thought struck him. "What about that place she was going on about? The one she stayed in years ago; the secure unit. What the bloody hell was it called?"

"Hellesdown. I've already told DS Delton about that."

"Oh." Harry felt deflated. "Did he say anything else to you about the Tailbys?"

"Not really. Just that they're examining a letter Mr Tailby had written which was found in their house. It appears to be slightly cryptic."

"In what way?"

“Well, it doesn’t make sense. He says it could be taken one way or another. It’s not clear.”

Harry sighed. “You don’t think he hurt her, do you?”

“In all honesty Dad, no I don’t. For a start how would he know where she was? And anyway, DS Delton said they’d searched the area and there was no sign of any other bodies other than theirs.” Jonathan saw Harry flinch at his words and he wondered if he’d said too much. “Don’t panic, they’ll find her.”

“Hang on a minute. Weren’t they found at home?”

“No. Weren’t you here when DS Delton said? They were found in a clearing in the small wood at Wolverton by a dog walker.”

John’s threat floated through Harry’s mind bringing the nausea back into his stomach. “Are they absolutely sure they’ve searched the whole area?”

“Yes, Dad. It’s not a large place to search. What’s wrong?”

“When John threatened me that day he said we’d find Gabrielle hanging from a tree with a suicide note attached to her.”

Jonathan's stomach turned over, but he didn't want to show his father any kind of reaction other than a calm one. "Did you tell DS Delton this when you spoke to him?" He held his breath hoping for the right answer.

Harry nodded. "And I also told the police officer who came to take my statement. It doesn't mean he hasn't left her somewhere else though."

"Stop worrying. It's all just a coincidence. It just so happens that the two events occurred at almost the same time."

They both stared at one another, the same thought running through them both.

"No. She couldn't...wouldn't have?"

"What? Killed the Tailbys? No Dad."

"How can you be so sure it's a coincidence?"

"Look, in my experience it's not uncommon for a mental health patient to go wandering and they're usually found safe and well somewhere that's familiar to them."

"But she's been missing overnight." Harry couldn't help thinking about her suffering the elements and whether she'd survive them.

“She was getting better, Dad. I called the hospital every day remember, and they told us how she was progressing positively. She wasn’t in the state she was when she left here.” Jonathan didn’t know if this was entirely true, but he was prepared to say anything to make his father feel better. “It’s very likely she booked herself into a hotel or B&B. The police may even find her at her old house or with one of her friends. I’m sure she’s fine, she probably just needs a little time away from everyone and that’s probably all it is. People often feel embarrassed or unsure of seeing family when they’ve been somewhere like that. She had come to the end of her twenty-eight-day stint and was getting ready to be discharged and that can leave some people feeling a bit detached from everything. They can feel like they’ve lost their dignity.”

Harry nodded, feeling slightly comforted and reassured. “I ought to be out there looking for her or doing something at least.”

Jonathan sighed. He was beginning to feel like he was on a perpetual loop repeating the same things over and over again. “Let the police do their job, Dad. If they’d wanted us to help with the search they would have said.

They don't need to be worrying about any extra missing persons, so just sit tight. She could turn up here any minute as I'm sure she will, and you wouldn't want to miss her, would you?"

"No, of course not. Will it help if I go through the stuff stored in the garage?"

"You can but I went through it all when I packed it up at the safe house and I have all her diaries and notebooks here which I think are the only things that might give us a clue."

"Have you been through all the boxes you stored in her bedroom?"

"Yes, they're all done. There really wasn't much to go through so it didn't take me long."

"Why do you think John did what he did?" Harry suddenly changed the subject. His mind had been like an unsettled moth since he'd heard the news and he hadn't dared allow it to land on what he'd been told; he was so shocked by it. It had all felt so surreal at the time and his first concerns had been Gabrielle. It was as though he was hearing it for the first time and it made him go cold."

“Who knows, Dad? All in all, they were a very strange couple. Maybe he thought Ellen was guilty, I don’t know. You must remember he was an alcoholic and they come in all shapes and sizes, and there’s no telling what he was capable of or what went through his head. Anyway, we don’t know if he did anything yet.”

“Did he hang himself?”

“DS Delton couldn’t tell me how they were found. They can’t leak details like that, certainly not before the pathologist’s done a report.”

“I think he did it because of Ellen. He told me that day on the bench he wouldn’t have her name dragged through the mud.”

“You didn’t tell me that. It sounds like a bit of an admission to me. Why would he automatically think that Ellen would be accused just because the police might discover Gabrielle was innocent?”

“That’s what it felt like when he was telling me. I might be wrong, and it could be wishful thinking, but it was as though he’d expelled something he’d guarded for years and wasn’t going to allow anyone to uncover. That

reminds me, did you tell DS Delton about Gabrielle's diary?"

"Yep, he's taken the notebook with him as evidence."

"What did he say about it?"

"Nothing much; he just said it was very helpful."

The conversation suddenly seemed pointless to Harry because none of it was bringing Gabrielle back. He just hoped Jonathan was right and she would turn up at the house or be found at one of her old haunts. But this didn't stop him feeling panicked and the hours passed so slowly, it was almost physically painful.

Eventually having had supper in front of the television that neither of them could concentrate on they both went up to bed feeling dog tired but wondering how they were ever going to sleep with everything that was running through their minds.

Harry had a peculiar night filled with strange dreams as his mind danced on the edge of slumber until he finally slept properly as the sun began to rise.

The sound of knocking at the front door, which turned into loud banging some time later, brought him

back to the surface of consciousness. He was far too disorientated to register what it was at first and before he could get his tired, creaky body out of bed he heard Jonathan race downstairs to answer it.

He hauled himself from his bed as quickly as his body would allow and ran his hands across his face and head to wake himself up. He pulled on his dressing gown and made his way downstairs to see who was at the door, hoping beyond all hope it was Gabrielle or at least news of her whereabouts.

He heard what he recognised as DS Delton's voice in the kitchen. He opened the door, expectant of some good news.

Jonathan was sitting at the table, his face chalky white.

Harry looked from one to the other, not wanting to hear what had been said or was being said.

"Sit down Dad."

"No, what's happened?" His hand clung to the door handle as though it were the only thing holding him up.

"A body was found washed up on the shore this morning. The ocean and the tides have rendered it beyond

recognition, but we can tell it is a female. We're waiting for the DNA results to see if it matches your daughters. I'm sorry Mr. Rochester.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

TWELVE MONTHS LATER

Harry sighed deeply as he sat on his bench overlooking the sea as though he'd completed a momentous task that had lasted for years.

It was the first time he'd walked down to the sea unaided, apart from a stick, since he'd suffered a stroke almost a year ago, his stressful past having finally caught up with him. He didn't remember much about it except that the last thing he'd been doing was having a nap in his favourite armchair. Apparently, so he'd been informed, he'd slipped into a coma and was asleep for quite a few

weeks; the prognosis hadn't been very good due to his age and the severity of the stroke. But he'd proven everyone wrong and woken up wondering where the hell he was. On reflection he likened it to hibernating like a tortoise; warm and pain free. When he'd first woken up he'd felt amazingly refreshed and recuperated once he'd become fully conscious, which had taken him a couple of days. He soon became aware that his new-found replenishment was internal, when he realised he couldn't move his left arm or leg and talking was hugely tiring and difficult. The words were there in his head, but he couldn't formulate them properly, as though they were being scrambled in his mouth.

With consciousness came flashes of the past and with it the old familiar anxieties and emotional pain. He missed those days when he'd just woken up in hospital and he'd felt as though his life had begun again; a clean slate with no past. He could remember who people were, but he had very little recollection of past events at first, and then it was as though someone had switched on a television

screen in his head; the pictures passing from black and white to clear colour.

Back then he'd been made to embark on a rehabilitation programme, which was extremely painful and tiring and made him feel irritable most of the time. Even trying to lift a cup or a spoon at first exhausted him. His biggest hurdle and goal had been to walk to the sea and sit on his bench. The thought of this had made him cooperate better with his physiotherapist, because it became the most important thing to achieve in his new life. He'd taken so much for granted, even past achievements, over the years and now this one thing which, he thought, must seem ridiculous to anyone else, meant the world to him.

He refused to be taken there in a wheelchair when it was offered to him, and vowed he wouldn't sit on his beloved bench until he could walk there. He settled for seeing his dear old friend through the windows of the house until the time eventually came when he felt strong enough to make the journey.

The day had finally come, and he'd gulped in the sea air as though he was desperately thirsty. He'd been tucked

up for months like a chrysalis, with very little contact from the outside world. Today was a huge achievement and a sign of his increasing recovery. The physiotherapist had told him the movement in his limbs would get easier once he was walking again. His speech and memory were another matter, and as good as they were ever going to get. He could speak easily enough, apart from when he was tired, but he sounded as though he had a slight foreign accent, which was quite comical to Nancy and she teased him over it as she did his memory, which was very temperamental. All in all, for a man of his age he was recovering extremely well.

A tear escaped from his eye and he caught it with his good hand, not wanting anyone to see he was crying.

Jonathan looked across and smiled at him. “Are you warm enough, Dad?” He slid across the bench, so he could pull Harry’s coat collar higher up around his neck.

“Don’t fuss, I’m alright. It’s not that cold. I want to feel the fresh air on my skin and through the few wisps of hair I have left on my head.” He chuckled.

“What time are we going to the church?”

“In a few minutes by the look of it, here’s Nancy with your wheelchair.” Jonathan stood up to help his daughter get the chair as close to the bench as possible.

Nancy kissed Harry on the cheek and saw the tears resting in the creases around his eyes.

“Come on, Gramps. Don’t upset yourself.” She whispered into his ear.

“I’m alright, dear heart. The wind from the sea makes my eyes water.”

She nodded, unconvinced, and turned to her father to give him a hug. “I wasn’t entirely sure what flowers to get. Are these okay?” She tipped the large bunch towards Harry, so he could see. There were white lilies, soft pink roses and deep purple irises.

“They’re perfect and her favourites. Thank you.”

“I thought they were what you said, but when I got to the shop I wasn’t sure if you’d asked for gladioli, but I couldn’t find any, so I got irises.”

“You won’t get gladioli this time of year and I did say irises. Did you bring the pot for them to go in?” Harry looked round sharply at Jonathan who had been relegated for that task.

“Dad, you’ve asked me that about five times. Yes, I’ve got the pot.”

“Righto, just checking.”

“Did you get the food for later, Nancy?”

“Yes, Dad and I’ve dropped it off at the house. Can we get moving I’m cold?” Nancy shivered pulling her coat tighter around herself.

“I am here you know?” Harry said to them both, feeling as though he were being ignored.

“Sorry Dad.” Jonathan rolled his eyes causing Nancy to laugh as she began to help him manoeuvre Harry into his wheelchair.

“I’m glad you brought this; I’m exhausted.”

“Well there’s no way you’d have made it up that steep hill to the church and then back home again, Gramps.”

“One day I will though.”

Harry nodded a farewell to the sea as he always did, and relaxed back into his chair as Jonathan slowly pushed him up the road. They all walked in silent contemplation, enjoying the unusually warm spring sunshine.

As they reached the top of the hill they could see the church in clear view, its steeple casting a shadow across the graveyard. Harry had always been fascinated by the many emotions a religious building could conjure up. It looked eerie and foreboding but at the same time serene and noble.

Jonathan pushed the wheelchair the last few yards down the path to the grave. Clearly out of breath, he stretched his arms in front of himself and wriggled his fingers; they were so stiff from gripping the handles of the chair.

“I thought you were fit, Dad?” Nancy grinned.

“I am, but that’s no mean feat pushing him up that hill. I’d like to see you do it.”

“He has got a name and he is not that heavy.”

“I know you’re not, Dad, but you’re over six foot.”

“I don’t mind pushing Granddad home.”

“I bet you don’t, it’s all downhill.” Jonathan looked at Nancy as they both suddenly fell in with the same vision of her not being able to hold onto the wheelchair and flying off down the hill and over the cliff.”

“Best not, hey Dad?”

“No.” They both laughed.

“I’d love to know what’s so funny. That’s the trouble when you’re in a wheelchair – you get ignored. People talk about you as though you’re not there.”

“Sorry Gramps.” Nancy nodded at Jonathan and then at the bag hanging on the chair, containing the bottled water and the pot they’d brought, letting him know it was time to fill them up so she could arrange the flowers. She didn’t want to talk through it; she wanted to prepare it all quietly so that Harry could have some peace while he looked at the grave.

“Oh right.” Jonathan eventually caught on and got on with the task at hand.

They tidied the grave and arranged the fresh pot of flowers on the stone slab which was set in the ground.

Silence fell as they paid their respects; tears rolled down Harry’s face causing Nancy to shed a few. She knelt next to his chair and reached for his hand.

“I wish Gabrielle could have been here.”

“We know, Gramps.” Nancy squeezed his hand hard.

“Where is she anyway?”

Jonathan and Nancy looked at one another and shook their heads in disbelief.

“Dad, we’ve told you a hundred times, she had to stay behind and meet the photographer for the article she’s written for the local magazine. It was the only day he could do it.”

“What article and what local magazine?”

Jonathan and Nancy rolled their eyes at one another.

“The article she wrote about your shell museum? She’s written it for that glossy Norfolk based magazine.” Nancy smiled at him and tried not to laugh.

“Oh yes. I remember.”

Not long after he’d become fully conscious and eventually able to speak, they’d been extremely concerned about his patches of memory loss. But then it had improved as his brain became more active. It wasn’t that bad, and they soon learnt that it was worse when he became fatigued. They got used to the fact that in some ways he wasn’t the same person and even though it was painful at the start they were just grateful he was still alive. Gabrielle and Nancy had learnt to make light of it, but

Jonathan became irritated when he'd been asked the same question repeatedly, causing him to be short tempered.

"I'd like to go home now."

"Are you okay, Granddad?"

"Just tired, dear heart." He sighed and took one last look at Emma's grave.

"It looks lovely, Dad. I'm sure Mother is very proud."

"It's a bit plain compared to a lot of the others." Harry looked around him at the various graves and Jonathan and Nancy followed his gaze.

Dotted here and there were memorial sites covered in cuddly toys, plastic flowers and an array of brightly coloured bits and pieces.

"Nan's grave looks beautiful, Gramps and I'm sure it's just how she would have wanted it."

"You don't need to go over the top." Jonathan grimaced at some of the sights around him. "A few of them look like something off the Generation Game."

Harry laughed while Nancy just looked at them both, perplexed. "The Generation Game?"

"You're far too young to remember, dear heart!"

“It was a game show on television hosted by Bruce Forsythe and there was a conveyor belt with various items on...never mind.” Jonathan waved the explanation off and set about manoeuvring Harry’s wheelchair around in the right direction. Nancy shrugged, not really interested in pressing her father for further details.

“Don’t you want to stop at The Nelson for a drink like you usually do?”

“Not today, son. We’ll toast her birthday later, once I’ve had a nap.”

“Okay.”

It was partly tiredness that was causing Harry’s eagerness to return home, but they all knew it was mainly because he wanted to check on Gabrielle and make sure she was there. He panicked if he was away from her for too long and worried constantly that something might happen to her; that she’d have another breakdown and wander off.

He’d never forget or let go of what happened and how he’d felt last year when she’d gone missing. The days that had passed when they were waiting for the formal

identification of the body washed up on the shore was excruciating and he didn't want to revisit the experience.

He'd suffered a stroke before he'd been able to hear the news that it wasn't Gabrielle after all, and had been a forty-nine-year-old woman from the next village who'd suffered from mental illness for many years. She'd attempted suicide many times, unsuccessfully until she'd ended up on the shore not far from Harry's house.

When Harry had woken up he was not entirely aware of his family. He'd kept asking for Emma and didn't appear to know anyone who was present around his hospital bed. Then reality became clearer as he reached full consciousness and he began to remember the events running up to his stroke.

The day he remembered Gabrielle properly for the first time, he'd just woken up from a nap and she was sitting by his bed with Jonathan. He'd stared at her, his mouth opening and closing as though he was trying to say something, but the words wouldn't come out. His eyes filled with tears and Jonathan saw the recognition in his face. Harry reached out his good hand to Gabrielle and she held it tight in her own as she cried.

Jonathan then began to explain to Harry what had happened to Gabrielle all those months ago. That she'd left the Psychiatric Hospital feeling much better, if a little confused, and had made her way back to the safe house to clear her head. Realising it was all locked up she'd booked herself into a Bed and Breakfast until she'd felt ready to come home. She'd arrived home the day after he'd been taken to hospital, completely unaware of the worry she'd caused.

Harry never wanted to go through that again and had consequently become very protective, not just of her but of Nancy and Jonathan too.

Not long afterwards Jonathan had sold his house as part of his agreed divorce settlement with his estranged wife, Anna. He and Nancy had moved into Harry's temporarily, which had worked out very well as he was able to help Gabrielle with Harry's care. Catherine was always on hand to help as was Nancy when she was home from university.

Harry reflected on this now as Jonathan pushed him through the fresh spring air billowing off the sea, and for the first time in his life he felt fulfilled. The house seemed

to sing again with its new residents coming and going, and he felt like living again and making the most of the time he had left.

Whilst Harry had been having his physiotherapy treatment, Gabrielle and Jonathan had secretly organised the opening of his shell room as a museum. He'd seemed to dismiss it whenever it was mentioned, and they'd been worried he wouldn't like the idea or be angry about what they'd done because once it was open to the public there was no going back. Nancy had pressed them along, assuring them that the many discussions she'd had with him over it had all been positive but that he felt too old to do it himself.

They were glad they'd pursued it because he'd been completely overwhelmed and touched by the whole event and totally oblivious beforehand that anything had been going on around him. He'd been shocked at the amount of local support and interest that was shown, with many people telling him they felt privileged to be able to view it.

And now, here they all were as Jonathan wheeled Harry into the sitting room, a family again, about to

prepare a special dinner in honour of what would have been Emma's eighty second birthday, and even though he felt exhausted, he was happy.

PART THREE

CHAPTER ONE

Rebecca Banford put down her pen and sighed out a breath filled with a myriad of emotions. She felt relieved that she'd finally finished the book she'd always wanted to write but she was sad at the same time. She always felt slightly morose when she'd completed a novel because she was saying goodbye to all the characters who had become like well-known friends to her. But this was different, these characters were personal to her; real people. They were her family even though she hadn't known them properly since she was ten years old. She only knew her brother had a child because she'd paid for the local

newspaper to be sent to her address every week for many, many years and had seen the announcement. “*Dr. Jonathan Henry Rochester and Anna Marie Rochester proudly announce the arrival of Nancy Emma Rochester*” was what it had said, and she could even recall how much she’d weighed. She’d held her breath every time she’d opened the newspaper and peered at the births, deaths and marriages page.

She sat at her computer and began typing up the last two chapters she’d written in long hand and then began the process of reading it through from start to finish. She worked at it solidly and it was early evening by the time she’d read the last page and decided it was time to pack up; her eyes tired and gritty from staring at the computer screen.

She disconnected the tiny memory stick that now held her most precious piece of work and placed it in her old Craven “A” tin for safe keeping. She’d brought it from Mr. Jim’s antique shop not long before he’d died. It reminded her of him every time she took it from her bookshelf. He always seemed to have a roll up on the go

and she liked to think that he'd smoked this Virginia tobacco.

It was a small red tin with a tiny black cat printed on the top of the Craven "A" emblem and every time she opened it, even all these years on, it smelt of a musky type of old fashioned perfume with a hint of tobacco, which always had the aroma to her, of dark chocolate and raisins, although she had no idea why.

As she closed the lid and placed it back on the bookshelf she felt as though she were releasing a toy boat into the sea, and the bitter sweet memories flooded in now as she let it go. She shook them away, not wanting to think about them anymore that evening, having been consumed by it all in the months she'd been writing the book. She busied herself turning all the lights on in the house, which always made her feel safe, and wandered upstairs and into her bathroom for a shower before she made some supper.

She'd promised herself a glass of wine and her favourite dinner of Welsh rarebit once she'd completed her project, and that's exactly what she was going to do as soon as she'd slipped into her pyjamas and made her way back downstairs.

And here she was, at the point she'd been imagining for the last few days. It was a simple treat, and probably not one at all to most people, but it was something very special to her. One of the chefs she'd had a teenage crush on at Hellesdown had shown her how to make it properly and she'd loved it ever since.

Since she'd turned off her computer she'd constantly been questioning over and over how she was feeling because she was unexpectedly calm; peaceful almost. It was as though she had relinquished something that had been with her forever and she felt herself missing whatever it was. It was a bit like she'd left a bag behind somewhere.

While she was cooking she found herself reaching up to touch her hair as if maybe she had really cut it off and had forgotten she'd done it. It was a strange feeling and not dissimilar to when she'd given up smoking many years ago. Weeks into her abstinence she'd found herself missing something but not quite knowing what because the thought of a cigarette had repulsed her.

She sat down in her sitting room with her supper and a glass of wine and waited again for her feelings to change but there was nothing and she wasn't sure what she was

expecting to happen – a thunderous burst of rage or a massive flood of tears – she just didn't know. All she knew was, at that moment in time she felt cleansed in some sort of way and for the first time in her life she sensed a kind of freedom.

She knew she was taking a risk writing this book because if anyone happened to get their hands on it her entire identity would be revealed. Not that it was likely, because she hadn't written it to be published or read by anyone; it had been a completely cathartic experience for no one else but herself.

No one could ever know she was Gabrielle Rochester. Not even her literary agent, who had given her a pen name to write under, knew her secret. She was surprised she'd hidden her identity from the media for all these years considering she was a published, well known author and they were like hungry foxes waiting patiently for someone to reveal where she lived.

She'd had to write it though. Every time she'd settled down to another book her mind had been filled with this one until she felt her head would overflow with words and she'd have a nervous breakdown again. So, she'd written

this alongside one that had to be sent to her literary agent and now she felt, although it was possibly too early to tell, that it had been a major part of her healing process. She liked to think the story was as close to what may have happened had Harry survived, hoped more than anything.

She went into the kitchen with her empty plate and put it into the sink. She fetched her Craven “A” tin from the bookshelf again and pulled out the letters her father had sent her before he died. She wanted to read them and see if they stirred up any kind of emotion. She didn’t want to just accept how she was feeling in case it wasn’t real; she’d spent so many years feeling guilty, scared and ashamed. She was anxious that it was the calm before the storm because it felt so alien to her not to be carrying around these heavy emotions like carrier bags full of tins.

She thought she should have felt more contented about it, but she wasn’t because deep down she still knew the truth. She’d been convicted of killing two children and her family had disowned her. Writing a story based on her life and what may or may not have happened didn’t change anything at all.

Tears fell from her face as she read the last letter he'd sent about how he was looking forward to seeing her. She remembered how fretful she'd been when she'd written back asking for a date and then heard nothing from him. She'd called him at home several times but there had been no answer. She'd gone over in her mind why he hadn't replied again and again until it nearly drove her insane, but she'd been unable to concentrate on anything else. She'd comforted herself with reasonable excuses until more days had passed and the enormity of rejection had hit her again, as it had done when she was ten years old, only this was harder and clearer because she fully understood it all now. In the end she just accepted he had changed his mind and didn't want to have any contact with her anymore. She wished she hadn't tried to organise a meeting with him and wondered if that was what had made him decide to cut off all contact with her. She'd wanted so desperately to push things along and meet up with him, but as soon as he became silent she wished she could have gone back to their chats over the phone. She kicked herself for not being satisfied with just that.

Then the local paper she always had posted to her address dropped from the mail slot; the thud on the floor seeming louder than normal. And there it was – an announcement in the Death Column:

Henry James Rochester passed away peacefully at his home, aged eighty-one years. Much loved by his son, Dr. Jonathan Rochester, daughter-in-law, Anna Rochester and granddaughter, Nancy Rochester. Forever remembered and sorely missed by all his family and friends....

She'd stared at it for quite some time not really registering the news. A tiny voice inside her head kept saying "what about me?" She tried to push it aside as grief overwhelmed her and she fell into absolute devastation. She spent the next few days shut away in her house – not that she ventured out much anyway – but she completely switched off from everyone. She thought she was used to feeling lonely having lived under a false identity and never being able to tell her friends who she really was as though a stranger were living her life. But when she read about

her father's passing she realised she'd never felt quite as alone as in that very moment and it scared her so much she feared it would suffocate her.

She wrote Jonathan a short letter offering her condolences and asking him if she could attend the funeral. She posted it to Harry's address not knowing where her brother lived and hoped he would get it in time, although she had a good idea what the answer would be. He'd written her an even shorter, painful note back telling her to stay away from him and his family otherwise he'd call the police.

In some ways she'd wished she hadn't asked him, as then she would have felt she could pay her respects from a distance unnoticed and unexpected, but she couldn't risk being seen anywhere near the church or the graveyard, not when she considered she was under licence. There was no point in making life any more difficult for herself or for anyone else. So, in the end she paid her respects in her own way and spent most of the time crying for what they could have had.

There was so much warmth in those letters and she gripped them in her hands now, remembering that tiny snippet of affection shared with her father.

She hadn't wanted to finish the book because she'd wanted to stay in that make-believe world, but she knew it wasn't healthy for her and could ultimately be quite detrimental to her mental state. She had to be thankful for the precious months she'd had of talking to him on the telephone and the letters they'd shared between them. Her healing time was over for now and she needed to move on.

She raised her glass to Harry, kissed his letter and placed it back into the tin with the memory stick and carried it up to bed with her; she wanted to keep it safe by her side.

CHAPTER TWO

She slept surprisingly well considering the thoughts that were running through her head, and it was a deep rest borne of exhaustion and she felt better for it.

Again, once she'd woken properly she sat in her garden room watching the rain fall and searched for more complex feelings but there was nothing except the calmness from the night before. She still felt pain from her father's passing but none of the other knotted emotions she'd carried around for so long were apparent.

She moved around her home almost in slow motion, performing tasks that had always been done frantically; one merging into another. But now everything just seemed peaceful as though there was all the time in the world to

do anything she wanted and there was a quiet about the house she hadn't noticed before.

Then the phone rang startling her from her serenity; breaking the flow of silence and everything began to speed up again. She let the answering machine get it; she didn't want to talk to anyone.

"Hello Rebecca, its Rosa. I need to come and see you...it's important. Can you call me back please as soon as you get this message? Thanks...bye."

Rebecca frowned clicking the answer machine off once Rosa had hung up. She hadn't heard from her in a long time.

She called her straight back and arranged for her to come over later that morning. Rosa wouldn't discuss anything over the telephone, saying she needed to speak to her in person.

Rebecca went over and over what it could possibly be about while she went for a quick run and then back home for a shower. The only conclusion she could come up with was that it had something to do with her licence. Rosa had sounded quite serious, so she wasn't expecting good news; she could always tell when she was calling to

arrange something socially. She wondered if someone had recognised her locally and she was going to have to be moved to a safe house. She'd been through that before, many years ago. The Home Office had been obliged to inform the Chief Inspector of the local constabulary in the area where she was housed. The Chief Inspector had then informed the local Bobby who patrolled the area, so he could keep an eye on her and make sure she kept to the regulations of her licence. Unfortunately, the police officer in question hadn't kept it to himself, as he was asked and had shared the information with his wife who'd eventually decided to tell some of her neighbours. It had turned into a horrible witch hunt, resulting in her having to be removed from the area.

As horrible as the ordeal was it had been a blessing in a way because she was then relocated all the way back to Norfolk, only an hour or so round the coast from her father. The Home Office had felt the media and the public wouldn't look in the obvious places and would in no way think she'd be back in her home county.

She hoped this wasn't what Rosa was coming to tell her because she'd lived in the same place for over twenty

years, had made friends there, a life of sorts. Even though Harry had passed on she still wanted to feel close to him and be near her childhood home.

She paced her kitchen before Rosa arrived, turning the kettle back on every time it boiled, looking out of the window to see if she could see her car, even checking her hair in the mirror, which seemed a ridiculous thing to do, but she was nervous.

When Rosa eventually arrived, Rebecca was shaking from head to toe.

They embraced, and Rosa said nothing to reassure her, which unnerved her even more.

“Leave the coffee. I need you to sit down.” Rosa fixed her large dark eyes onto Rebecca’s crystal blue ones and led her into the sitting room.

Rebecca suddenly felt like putting her hands over her ears as she had done as a child. Tears filled her eyes and she couldn’t help her legs from shaking when she sat down.

Rosa pressed her hands onto Rebecca’s knees to try and calm her. “It’s okay, it’s okay. Just listen to me.”

Rebecca snatched a tissue from the box she kept on her coffee table. "I'm alright, just a bit emotional today. Go on."

Rosa took a deep breath. "Ellen Tailby passed away a few weeks ago. She left a sealed letter addressed to her solicitor that she'd requested be opened after her death." Rosa paused to let Rebecca digest this news.

"Go on."

"The contents of the letter are basically a confession to the murders of her two children, Alexander and Thomas."

The colour drained from Rebecca's face and it felt like the life drained from her body also, as the adrenalin rushed through her so fast. Her heart pounded even harder and more tears began to fall down her face. She was so shocked she had to ask Rosa to repeat what she'd just told her.

"There has to be an appeal to make it all official and to prove she was guilty. The police have reopened the case and have already begun an investigation. It turns out her medical records are filled with incidents as far back as when she was a child."

It was a while before Rebecca spoke. She was trying to digest what she was hearing, and it was as though she'd misheard what was being said.

"What do you mean incidents? What incidents?" Rebecca's voice was choked with yet more tears.

"Well, she was a self-harmer when she was younger. She took various medicines and sometimes even small amounts of poisons."

"What does that prove?"

"Nothing yet but she had several still births and quite a few miscarriages, some late on in pregnancy. It's being suggested she may have had Munchausen's Syndrome by Proxy or bipolar."

They both sat quietly for quite some time. Rebecca stared at the floor, digesting what had been said and trying desperately to remember what had happened all those years ago.

"Why did no one find this out at the time? Why didn't anyone help me?"

"I don't know, Rebecca. It was such an unusual case and I don't think anyone knew how to deal with it properly."

“Is that supposed to make me feel better?”

“No.” Rosa took a deep breath. “You have to remember Rebecca that you never denied it. It was as good as a confession.”

“No, this isn’t right.” Rebecca stood up. “I’d like you to leave now, Rosa. You can’t come here with this. I killed those children. Christ almighty, I was told I’d done it. I can’t be led to believe anything else, it’s the foundation of who I am, it’s dictated my whole life. Please Rosa. You’re my friend and I love you, but I need you to go.” Her voice was becoming dark and low.

“I wouldn’t be here, Rebecca if we didn’t believe there was enough information to prove you were innocent. I’ll go if you want me to but just give me a chance to tell you what I’ve come here to say.”

“I can’t remember much about it, but I did it, you can be sure of that. I wrapped them in their eiderdowns using some rope I found under the stairs. I was trying to secure the blankets around them by tying them on because they felt so cold. I managed to suffocate them in the process, Rosa. I know in my heart I didn’t kill them in cold blood but then I can’t be sure of that either anymore. You have

no concept of what death means when you're ten. I have a vague recollection of a fleeting thought that I needed to put them to sleep to make them feel better and they'd be back to normal by tea time." She sat back down to try and calm herself, realising she was rambling. "That's not a normal thought process for any child."

Rosa reached out and touched Rebecca's leg. "You didn't kill them. Ellen Tailby has said how she'd given them an overdose of medicine that morning. She'd realised she'd gone too far, you happened to be passing and she called you in to baby sit telling you she needed to go to the shops. It was all set up for you to take the blame."

Rebecca frowned, remembering the story she'd written in her book about the murders and how she'd toyed with the idea she might be innocent. Something stirred in her, a flash of a memory but it was gone as quickly as it arrived.

"But I remember pushing them both into the under stairs cupboard because I knew I'd killed them. They were so, so tiny."

"She said in her letter she thought they were already dead before she left you with them."

It wasn't clear at first, but the memory returned and sharpened within her mind's vision.

"Are you okay, Rebecca? Do you want me to get you anything?"

"No, no... I'm fine. She asked me to sit with them because they were poorly. Asked me to play doctors and nurses with them, make them better. They can't have been dead, I could have sworn they...moved or spoke."

"They may well have done because they weren't actually dead when she left them. She says in her letter that when she got back she found them lying in the hallway where they'd fallen out of the down stairs cupboard and you'd gone."

Rebecca clamped her hand to her mouth. She clearly recalled now the fear she'd felt at what she thought she'd done and how she'd nearly injured herself trying to hide them under the stairs. She'd been so frightened and the only thing she could think of doing was hiding them, so she didn't get into trouble. Their faces flashed in front of her now, grey and lifeless, their lips chapped and purple. She shuddered at the memory.

“She said they’d begun to stir, obviously becoming conscious from what she’d given them. She panicked for whatever reason and strangled them both with the rope and then proceeded to push them back into the cupboard. She then phoned the police and reported all of you missing. It is a very detailed account of what happened. Unfortunately, we will never know why she picked you.”

Rebecca sat for quite some time, silently turning it all over in her head and then she suddenly remembered what she’d recalled and written in her book.

“Do you know something? I’d let her dog go a few weeks before that and she’d been furious with me. They kept him outside in all weathers with an old piece of rope tied tightly around his neck. I caught her beating him for barking and I hated her for it, wanted to take the stick and give her some of her own medicine. I’d bought a tin of dog food with my pocket money and fed it to him. She caught me just as I’d cut the rope from his neck and he’d run off.”

“Could be. I don’t think we’ll ever know why. She was a very sick woman.”

“You might be right it sounds churlish when I say it out loud. But I do remember when she called me over to

baby sit she said it would be a way of making up for what I did. Her dog never came back you see.”

The whole chain of events had suddenly become clear in her mind as though a film were being played in her head. She’d never allowed herself to think about it after it had happened, she’d been so ashamed. Every time any of them had come into her head she’d hummed them away, not wanting to see or think about it all. Eventually the memories faded.

“I think there’s going to be a lot of things come to light now this has been uncovered.”

Rebecca blew her nose, her hands still shaking. “Do you know, Rosa, I would never speak ill of anyone, especially not the dead, but I hope it was worth it for her. I hope it was worth taking my life away from me and my family. She dictated my whole future. I hope she rots in hell. That’s an awful thing to say, isn’t it?”

“Not under the circumstances, no. I’m not sure I’d have much compassion for her.”

The enormity of it all began to hit her, and she started to cry again. It wasn’t what she’d been through her entire life that was hurting; it was all the years she’d lived

without her family, especially her father. She didn't regret her life because in lots of ways she was extremely privileged. She'd had a good education; she was a successful writer and ultimately a good person in spite having served a sentence for a double murder. None of that mattered to her; it was the lost years of not seeing her father, time that could never be replaced, and now it was too late. She sobbed for him and for herself.

Rosa went over to her and held her tight, tears escaping her own eyes.

"I'm sorry I asked you to leave." She cried, blowing her nose again.

"Don't mention it. It must have been such a shock." Rosa rocked her friend, trying to comfort her. She pulled the throw from the back of the sofa and wrapped it around Rebecca's shoulders; she was shivering so much from the news. She then went into the kitchen to make them both a strong coffee.

Rebecca sipped the hot drink, grateful for its bitter but soothing taste. She wondered if she was going to suddenly wake up or realise it was all just something she'd

written in a book. But the still, heavy, quiet atmosphere told her it was all very real.

“Did Ellen’s husband know?”

“He does now. He’s being interviewed by the police.”

“What I mean is, did he always know what she’d done?”

“I don’t know, I really don’t. Hopefully the police will get to the bottom of it.” Rosa shifted in her seat and placed her cup on the coffee table. “I have something else to tell you.”

“I can’t cope with anything else, Rosa...”

Rosa held up her hand to silence her. “It’s nothing horrible but you need to brace yourself.”

Rebecca took a deep breath and leaned back into the comfort of her sofa, poised for what was to come.

“Your father’s solicitor has been trying to trace you for quite some time. Obviously, it wasn’t straightforward, under the circumstances but he got in touch with the police in the end and they referred him to us. Well, to get straight to the point your father has left you his house and all its contents in his will.”

Rebecca sat forward, unsure she'd heard her correctly. "What, the Shell House?"

"Yes, the Shell House."

CHAPTER THREE

The next few months seemed to pass in a blur for Rebecca; the time moved so quickly. She was busy sorting out all her things, getting ready to move into the Shell House, a book she'd written (alongside the private one about her life) was about to be published, and her appeal was fast approaching. She didn't seem to have time for anyone or anything else, and she was glad of the distractions because it stopped her thinking too much.

She couldn't believe the news of the appeal and its details hadn't somehow been leaked to the press. It made her feel nervous and she was constantly anticipating Rosa calling to inform her that it was all about to hit the headlines. She prayed it wouldn't for many obvious reasons, but especially because her new book was soon to be launched.

Every time she ventured out she felt like she had a banner with her real name around her torso, and it made her feel as though she was in a perpetual dream where she suddenly realised she was naked.

She was aware over these months, of the varying emotions which flitted in and out of her mind like unsettled butterflies. And she knew that ignoring them might not be the best idea, but she couldn't help feeling like this had all happened to someone else.

She was tired of working through her emotions; she'd spent most of her life listening to therapists telling her to dig deeper and analyse it all. She just wanted to move forward and writing a book about it all had helped her immensely. Rightly or wrongly, she detached herself from it until it all felt like it had happened to someone else, to Gabrielle Rochester. She didn't feel like her anymore. She was Rebecca Banford.

She visited the Shell House on several occasions during this time. It had felt very strange at first and almost like she was trespassing, but after a while the guilty feelings subsided.

She'd written to Jonathan at the surgery before her first visit, telling him of her plans, but she had heard nothing back. It had stung her that he didn't reply, but she was sure he would have read the content, and this eased her conscience about going to the house. She had toyed

with the idea of trying harder to find out his home address and writing to him there, or even visiting him, but she didn't want him to feel pressured by her.

She appreciated how difficult the whole situation must be for him after all, she'd been left their father's house and all its contents. She knew he'd received a substantial amount of money, but she was sure it wouldn't have meant anything to him, not like the house did. She had wondered at first if he would contest the will but apparently Harry had drawn it up years ago and there were many clauses set in stone that the house was to be hers. It had shocked but also moved her that he'd organised it well before they'd been back in touch.

Then, some weeks later, she'd decided to write to Nancy instead, having remembered Harry telling her the name of the university she attended. It was rather a short letter explaining without going into too much detail, just in case it fell into the wrong hands. It had proved to be a more difficult task than starting a new book; she had to be so careful with what she wrote, and it was almost cryptic in its content. She knew Harry had told Nancy he was in touch with her and she'd expressed an interest in meeting

her. This made it slightly easier, but letter writing wasn't Rebecca's strong point.

Harry's words were confirmed because a few days later she received a letter from Nancy telling her when she'd be back from university and how much she'd like to see her. They arranged to meet at the Shell House a couple of weeks later.

They'd heard so much about one another from Harry that when they met it was as though they'd known each other for years.

Nancy was charming and full of life, just as Rebecca had imagined her to be and not far from the character she'd portrayed in her book. She was so unlike what she imagined her brother to be and, knowing what she knew about Anna from the conversations she'd had with Harry, she wondered how they'd produced such a lovely young woman.

She felt sad about Jonathan but tried not to dwell on it too much, being powerless to change it and not wanting to waste too much time fretting over it when she had so much else to think about.

She'd half hoped Nancy would bring him with her on her visit, but she came alone, filled with uncomfortable excuses about his behaviour, which Rebecca had casually brushed off, not wanting her niece to worry about it.

All too quickly and just after her new book came out the press uncovered her identity and found out who she was. It had been inevitable with the appeal literally days away and she felt tired and nauseous from it all. Rosa kept assuring her it would all be fine, but she knew she wouldn't settle until there was a verdict.

She had often wondered what she would have done with the Shell House if Ellen Tailby hadn't left a confession and she was guilty, as she'd always believed. She suspected she would have handed the house over to her brother. This hadn't settled with her very well, once she'd given it some thought, because it would have gone against Harry's wishes. Then she'd decided she'd probably sell it and donate the money to a good cause. She knew she wouldn't move in there if her appeal was rejected, because it just wouldn't feel right. She didn't dwell on it too much because she was sure from what she'd been told that the verdict would be positive.

There had been many blurry memories and muddled thoughts in her mind after Rosa had told her the news, but they became much clearer as time passed on. Eventually she began to believe she was innocent, but she wouldn't be completely convinced until the legal process took its course.

She likened it to having believed in religion all your life and then suddenly finding out God doesn't exist, and seeing it all from a completely different perspective. She felt as though she was forcing herself to be left handed when she'd always been right.

There had still been that doubt in her head and she knew there had to be a trial to prove her innocence, not just to her but to everyone else.

The trial date arrived, and Rebecca was acquitted in court. It shocked her as though she hadn't been expecting it at all. She was bombarded by journalists and was relieved a week later to move into the Shell House with the anticipation of a new life. Journalists hounded her there also, but she managed to get an injunction in place, which gave her a small amount of privacy. The freedom

she now felt was as though she'd been paralysed for years and had suddenly regained the use of her limbs. She could have listened to the results of the appeal a thousand times over, she was so elated. This news inevitably, brought with it a deep sense of loss and she'd never felt so sad and yet so happy at the same time.

CHAPTER FOUR

Rebecca pushed open the windows in the shell room with the extendable pole. The room felt like it had been closed shut for several months; the atmosphere was stagnant and musty. She began to spray and polish the glass cabinets as she felt the warm, late summer breeze flood in through the open doors and windows.

She paused to look around, thinking what a peculiar but pleasant attachment it was to the house because it seemed so separate from the main building. Harry had told her during one of their long telephone conversations that he thought it had been erected some time after the actual house was built and was intended for a place of worship. As she looked round now she could see why. It had its own entrance to the front, which was a large arched wooden door studded with iron. The pitched ceiling was covered in rafters reaching down to the windows which were high up the white washed walls, offering no visibility other than the ever-changing sky above. It had the cool air and calmness of a chapel, and even though she wasn't religious, she felt strangely comforted.

“Knock, knock?”

Rebecca turned to see Nancy standing at the door.

“Come in, come in!” She beckoned to her as she descended the small step ladder she’d used to aid her in opening the windows.

“Oh, Aunt Gabrielle!” Nancy almost ran to throw her arms round her.

Rebecca hugged her hard, still feeling strange at being referred to by her original name.

When she’d talked with Harry, either in correspondence or on the telephone, he’d referred to her as such and she’d never had the heart to correct him, although it had felt strangely normal. She thought now, this was probably because it was coming from her father.

She was still undecided as to what she should be called, swaying more towards Rebecca because she’d been called that for so long, but she now felt a pang of guilt for her parents, who had carefully chosen the name Gabrielle. Before her appeal she hadn’t had the choice because Rebecca Banford was her legal identity. She found she had so many more choices now, and some decisions were proving to be quite difficult.

“Those journalists don’t give up, do they?”

“They’ll soon get bored. How would you feel about calling me Rebecca?”

Nancy thought for a few seconds. “Aunty Rebecca?”

Rebecca laughed. “If you like. It feels like this is all a new start, I’ve been known as Rebecca for so long and I think Gabrielle carries too many bad memories for me to return to it.”

“I prefer it actually. Whatever was Gramps thinking?”

She laughed again. “I don’t know, I think I was supposed to have been named after an angel or something. That’s what he used to tell me when I was little anyway. When did you get back?” Rebecca quickly changed the subject, not wanting to dwell on the whys and wherefores of being named Gabrielle.

“A few days ago.”

“Did you have a good time?”

“It was okay.” Nancy shrugged.

“Hang on a minute – I thought you weren’t due back until the weekend?”

“I wasn’t but there were a few squabbles amongst the girls....”

“Do you think there were too many of you? I know you said you were worried about it. It was only a small holiday cottage, after all.”

“Yeah but it wasn’t just that. I came home early because I had a call from my Mum. Has Dad been round?”

“Not to my knowledge. Is everything okay?”

“Not really. My Mum’s left him.”

Rebecca sat on the step ladder; memories of what she’d written in her book flashed before her. It was beginning to feel like she’d psychically mapped out their futures, which she knew was absurd. “Oh no. Are you alright?”

Nancy screwed up her nose and Rebecca suddenly caught a glimpse of herself at that age; she’d inherited her deep brown hair and pale blue eyes. They looked more like mother and daughter than aunt and niece.

“Yeah, kind of. I don’t really feel anything about it but maybe I should. I think I’ve always been expecting it; they’ve been at each other’s throats for years.”

Rebecca stood up and put her arm around Nancy’s shoulders, guiding her from the shell room and into the

house so she could make them both some tea. “There’s no should or shouldn’t about it. It’s probably a bit of a shock.”

“Not really. They got worse after I left for Uni, so it was inevitable. I can’t believe he hasn’t been round to see you or at least called.”

“Why would he just because your mum’s left.”

Nancy’s cheeks turned slightly pink as she pulled out a chair at the kitchen table and sat down.

Rebecca nodded. “I see. Your mum didn’t want him to see me. It’s alright, you don’t have to explain.”

“I just think it was more Mum’s influence over him making decisions, although he is a stubborn git.”

“Well, I don’t want you to worry about it. I’m sure he’s got much more important things to think about than rushing around to see me. He must be terribly upset.”

“He’s not really, just a bit quiet and grumpier than normal. I’ve just stayed out of his way.”

“You know you can always stay here if you don’t want to be at home. I know you spent a lot of time here with Harry and I don’t want you to think that’s changed because he’s not...this is still your home.”

Nancy looked up at Rebecca as she placed two steaming cups of tea onto the table. “I miss him terribly.” Tears began to roll down her cheeks. “That’s partly why I came back early from my trip. Mum’s phone call was a good excuse to leave but the truth is, I just didn’t want to be there. I can’t believe I still feel so sad about his death.”

Rebecca reached across the table and held her hand. “There are no set rules about grieving and you were very close....” She paused, trying desperately to compose herself.

“I feel alright a lot of the time and then it’s like a massive wave looming over my head threatening to engulf me.”

Rebecca smiled. “I know what you mean. That’s a good way of putting it. And it’s also true what they say about waves – go with the rip current and don’t swim against it. It might carry you away for a while, but it’ll deliver you safely back to the shore. You listen to your Auntie Rebecca, she knows what she’s talking about.”

Nancy sniffed and wiped her nose with a tissue she had tucked in her sleeve. “That’s surfing talk. Do you surf?”

“I have done but not for a long time. And no is the answer to your next question, I’ll stick to my running thanks.”

They both laughed, pleased that the atmosphere had lifted.

“Now then, tell me what we’re going to do to spruce up the shell room? Are you going to open it up to the public? As a museum I mean?”

“Yes, once it’s all been cleaned and repainted. That was one of Harry’s conditions in his will – that I was to open it as a shell museum, which is what I fully intend to do.”

“He would have really loved that.” Nancy sipped her tea, trying to stem the fresh wave of tears that were threatening to trickle down her cheeks.

“That’s why I want to make the room extra special, so that wherever he’s watching from he’ll be really proud.”

“Every time I go past the sea front I swear I see him sitting on his bench out of the corner of my eye.”

Rebecca wrapped her arm around her stomach feeling a wave of grief rise to her throat and fall into her chest,

turning into a blanket of snow as it landed around her heart. The story she'd written had still lived on in her head and she held onto it tightly, allowing herself to believe she had spent that time with him; got to know him again.

"I feel his presence here a lot, especially in the evenings, but then maybe that's just my imagination."

"No, it's not. He loved this place. I bet he's here all the time when he's not on his bench by the sea."

They smiled at one another. "Have you sorted out any of his things?"

"Not in any great capacity. Well actually I haven't at all apart from outdated tins of food and various items I found in the larder."

"I should imagine that took you all day! I sometimes wondered if he thought there was going to be another war!"

"It was a bit like that, yes!" Rebecca laughed. "I don't know, I just can't settle to clearing it all out. It's everything he created, his whole life and I don't want to disturb any of it. I know it'll have to be done eventually. I actually thought your dad might like to sort through some of his things."

“He did say he was going to come and see you, have a talk. I thought he would have been round while I was away. He’s useless.”

“He’s got enough on his plate right now, I should imagine.” Rebecca was just pleased he’d said he’d come and see her. It was a start and eased her worry over it all.

“I’m sure he’ll come around at some point.”

“I can’t make him do anything and I’m not about to pester him over it. I still feel bad that I got left the house; that must have really hurt him. I think it’s only fair that he has the chance to sort through Harry’s things. I’m not in a hurry; I can’t bring myself to do it anyway.”

“They say that it helps the grieving process, something to do with acceptance? You might feel better if you make a start.”

Rebecca let out a sigh. “Well, you know, I’ve spent a lifetime following advice and orders from therapists. I’ve decided to do what I think is best and right now that’s to just settle into this beautiful house and leave things just as they are, for now.”

“I read it in a magazine, so it’s probably a load of rubbish anyway.” Nancy shrugged and sipped the last of her tea.

“I thought so.” Rebecca laughed.

“Hey, it could be the film set for when they put your book on the telly!”

“That is not a bad idea.”

They were quiet for a while as they sat at the kitchen table drinking more tea, both deep in thought.

“I’m sorry for what happened to you.”

They stared at one another for a few moments.

“That’s a very kind thing to say but don’t be sorry for me, I’m fine. Really.” She reached across the table and patted her hand again. “We must look forward, not dwell and become bitter. Now come on, we can’t sit here all day. I need you to help me get the shell room ready for decorating. Let’s see what we can get done before I have to go out.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Rebecca knocked for the second time on the old blue door; its paint curled and chipped from the varying weather it had endured over the years. She was about to walk away when she heard a muffled voice which she thought was coming from behind the door.

“Hello?” She called and waited for a response. Then she saw a figure out of the corner of her eye and turned to see John Tailby coming towards her, a garden hoe in his gnarled old hands. She stepped back slightly.

“Yes? What do you want? You’re not one of those damn reporters, are you?”

“No, no I’m not.” She was slightly taken aback by his appearance, having expected a wizened old man, even though she’d described someone completely different to that in her book. The man standing before her now was neither an old man nor a face plucked from her imagination, and she barely recognised him from when she was a child. He’d filled out somewhat, having been extremely lean in his younger years. He’d grown a beard and obviously age and life had weathered the colour to white flecked with grey, making him look very different.

“Who are you then?” His manner was abrupt, and she’d begun to think better of her visit. Then she saw the recognition in his face as he drew closer to her.

“I’m Rebecca Banford.” She gingerly held out her hand to him.

He stared at her for a few moments. “You’re not though, are you? You’re Gabrielle Rochester. I’ve seen your picture in the paper.” It was as though he were making a flat statement.

“I’m not here to cause any trouble. I just wanted to talk to you.” Rebecca lowered her hand realising he wasn’t going to take it.

“You better come indoors. How did you manage to get around here without a load of reporters following you? You’ve been in all the papers.”

“I got in my car and drove to the next village and walked from there. Sunglasses and a cap come in handy. They’re dying off a bit now, thankfully.”

John nodded without much expression and turned to walk through his garden gate which led to the back of his house.

She followed him but slowed down her pace, giving herself time to think about whether she should go inside with him. She continued regardless, telling herself she was being ridiculous.

“You’ll have to excuse me,” he said as he reached the porch that led to the back door, “but I’m a bit mucky. I’ve been gardening early this morning, since it was light.”

“It’s fine. I shouldn’t have turned up unannounced.” If she didn’t know any better, she would have thought he was a retired version of the village idiot. His voice with its strong Norfolk accent carried a heavy monotone making each word he spoke thud to the ground.

“It’s a beautiful garden.” She peered round while she waited for him to take off his Wellington boots. She was glad that he no longer lived at the address where the children had died; she didn’t think she could have handled going in there if he had. It was hard enough entering this house knowing it was where Ellen had lived for many years.

“It’s bloody hard graft and I’m getting too old for it now. Do you want a cup of tea?”

“Yes, thank you. That would be nice.” She followed him into his kitchen.

She could see from her first glance he was a full-time gardener; the house was cluttered and neglected.

“Excuse the mess. Don’t get much time for cleaning.”

“You can’t do it all. I should think your garden takes up every spare minute and then I should imagine you’re exhausted,” Rebecca said, feeling extremely uncomfortable, “... what with all the vegetable patches and flower beds. It won’t look after itself, will it?”

He looked at her as he warmed the teapot with the first of the boiling water.

“Don’t stand on ceremony.” He nodded for her to take a seat at the kitchen table, which appeared to be creaking under the clutter of paperwork and books.

Rebecca pulled out a chair, aware she was rambling and wondered what she was so nervous about. She was fifty-five years old and, yet she felt like a teenager again.

“I suppose you want to talk about Ellen?” John sighed as he poured the tea into two small china cups with mismatching saucers which he’d taken from the dresser behind him.

“Yes and no. I don’t want to bombard you with questions if that’s what you’re worried about?”

“There’s not much that worries me anymore.”

She waited for him to add something else – he seemed to have paused mid-sentence – but he just continued to sip his tea.

Rebecca suddenly began to wonder what she was doing there. All the things she had wanted to say seemed pointless now, disappearing into the atmosphere like the steam from their tea.

She'd wanted to tell him she didn't hold any animosity toward him and that she understood how utterly devastating it must have been for him. But all these things seemed patronizing and pompous in her head now.

“I didn't know, if that's what you're wondering?”

She looked up from her tea, slightly startled by his sudden outburst. “It must have been a terrible shock for you. Especially finding out she'd been ill for all those years.”

“Oh, I knew she weren't right, don't get me wrong. You can't be married to someone for all those years and not know.”

“You don't have to explain things to me. I'm not here to pry.”

He waved her comment off with his hand. "I've got nothing to hide my dear."

"Yes, but it's actually none of my business."

He carried on as though he hadn't heard her. "She was always trying to hurt herself. You know? Cutting her arms and legs or overdosing on some sort of medicine she'd brought from the chemist. She seemed to know just how much to take so as not to kill herself. Sometimes I wished she had done."

Rebecca didn't really know how to respond to what he was saying so she decided it was best to keep quiet and listen.

"That's an awful thing to say about your wife, isn't it?"

Rebecca shook her head, stirring her tea to distract from how uncomfortable she felt.

"I think that's why she had so many miscarriages." He looked her straight in the eye as though he was waiting for a response but then he continued. "I never ever thought she did it to kill the babies, I just thought she took something for her morning sickness and didn't realise what she was doing."

“And that could possibly be what happened.” Rebecca was trying to make him feel better knowing that her words held no truth and sounded useless when she said them.

“I never ever thought she’d harm our children though. You might think I was stupid to not see it, but I didn’t.”

“We don’t see things when we love someone. We don’t want to believe it.”

“I stopped loving her years ago.”

He was silent after that and Rebecca lowered her head and stared at her tea cup, suddenly feeling very sad. Two people who had lived in the same house for all those years had managed to lock themselves in their own separate prisons, feeling unable to break free from one another. And because of it all Ellen had made her a prisoner also; had changed the course of her entire life because no one noticed Ellen was ill. She thought now of the still births and the miscarriages Ellen most certainly caused and it made her feel bereft for what she could have had if she’d been able to have a normal life. She’d never allowed herself to think about ever having a proper relationship and children because she’d always believed she was a child

killer and couldn't trust herself. Even knowing in herself that she would never hurt another soul, there was still that doubt there because of the label she'd grown up with. It made her feel an immense hatred towards Ellen that she knew she must deal with before it ate her away.

John poured more tea from the pot. "My garden was my sanctuary; that's what kept me sane all those years. She stayed in the house and I lived outside. Funny really, would have just been easier to leave her."

"I'm sure it didn't feel like the easier option at the time."

"I must have loved her I suppose, in some sort of way. I pitied her more than anything and I stayed because in those days when you got married that was it. You'd made your bed and you'd got to lie in it."

"She must have been a very troubled lady."

"Troubled is not the word for it my dear. She had one of those split personalities, some sort of disorder, as the police told me. I can't remember what they called it now. She had something wrong with her anyway. She could be the most wonderful, kind-hearted person in the world and then it'd be like the devil had possessed her. I thought that

was how all women were when I was younger and then you learn different.”

“They said at the appeal she had bipolar.”

“That’s it. I couldn’t remember the name, some such rubbish those psychologists have come up with I shouldn’t wonder.” He sighed. “I think that’s why she got the cancer in the end. Something was eating away at her for years.”

“How are you managing here on your own?” Rebecca tried to change the subject, not wanting to talk about Ellen anymore.

He looked at her for a moment as though he were trying to work out if she was being serious and then he let out a laugh. “I’ve been looking after myself for years. I hate to say it but it’s a blessed relief.”

Rebecca nodded, finding it bizarre that all the things she’d planned to say seemed insignificant and pointless. She wondered if perhaps she’d just needed to see him, reach out to him in some way.

They left the subject there and talked some more about the garden and then Rebecca decided it was time for her to go home and she got up from the table to leave.

“Thank you for the tea.”

He stopped her on the way out of the door. "I'm sorry about what happened. What Ellen did to you."

Rebecca stopped and looked at his tired face, suddenly feeling overwhelmed when she realised there were tears in his kind blue eyes. "Please don't." She grabbed his arms. "It really wasn't your fault."

"I am so very sorry." His words tumbled out in a sob and Rebecca pulled him towards her and embraced him.

After a few moments he patted her back and moved away, not being used to too much human contact.

"I'm being a silly old fool."

"No, you're not." Rebecca wiped the tears which had escaped down her own face. "Can I come and see you again?"

"Of course you can my dear. Door's always open. I might come and see that shell museum of yours when it's up and running."

"You would be very welcome." Rebecca patted his hand and left him to his gardening.

She put on her sunglasses and cap and plodded down the steep hill to the sea front, pausing to take in the bracing

salty air. She walked towards the benches, suddenly remembering what Nancy had said about Harry's seat and how he liked to sit and look over the sea.

She strolled slowly passed them now trying to guess which one he'd earmarked as his. Then she spotted the plaque with her mother's name engraved on it; this was unmistakably his bench.

It caused her heart to beat a little faster as she felt herself fill up with pride that this was her mother and there was a bench dedicated to her. Underneath her mother's name the plaque read "*Emma's favourite lookout*".

She sat down on the bench, feeling her freedom properly for the first time since the appeal. She stared across the sea as far into the distance as she could until the sky seemed to merge into the ocean. She closed her eyes and breathed deeply, trying to imagine Harry sat on the bench with her.

The wind picked up and she raised her face to the sun, letting the cool air ruffle her hair. She was just about to get up and make her way home when she felt the weight of someone sitting down next to her, but when she opened

her eyes there was no one there. She felt Harry's presence so keenly that she was convinced it was him.

When she arrived back at the Shell House she wandered through all the rooms as she often did, unable to believe she was there and it was hers. She felt as though she saw the rooms for the first time whenever she looked at them, because they always appeared different to her.

Nancy's comment about the film set flitted across her mind, making her smile as she arrived back downstairs and went into the sitting room. It was the only room she'd described perfectly in her book and it could have easily passed for a set in a museum or a film studio. It was just as it had been before she'd been sent away; even the furniture was the same and positioned in the exact places.

She looked around feeling as she always did, like she wasn't there; it was as though she were imagining it all. She tried to take in each area Harry had created and envisioned him sat in his favourite chair by the fire, reading his newspaper and smoking his pipe.

She walked carefully over the various rugs that overlapped, leaving patches of bare floorboards, and stood

by his desk so she could take in the breath-taking sea view from the window.

She'd barely moved or touched anything of Harry's since she'd been there. It was partly because she didn't feel ready and she'd also felt it was something she would like to do with Jonathan. She looked across his desk now at the neatness and order of everything; the letter holder, the lamp and a diary were all perfectly in line with the studded leather top.

She was suddenly drawn to the plain black book which had a shell placed on the top of it. She perched on the edge of the desk and picked it up, desperately trying to remember the name of it. Then it came to her, as she recalled a memory of her father showing one to her on the beach when she was a child, telling her it was a Saddle Oyster. It had been his favourite type of shell because he liked the feel of it in his hand and it helped him concentrate when he was working.

She lifted the diary now and began flicking through the pages, thinking it was for jotting down appointments and occasions. She turned the pages back to the beginning when she realised it wasn't what he'd used it for. It was

filled with writing dating back to when they'd first got in touch with one another; notes of their telephone conversations and their letters.

She read a few paragraphs and slammed it shut, tears threatening then spilling down her face. She hugged the book to her, feeling his presence again. She placed it back on the desk, not feeling ready to read it just yet.

Moving round to the other side of the desk, keeping the shell in her hand as though it were a comfort blanket, she sat in the old Captain's chair. She opened the diary again and without reading it she found the blank page after the last entry he'd made. She pulled a pen from his letter stand and wrote the date at the top of the paper.

Underneath she wrote:

My name is Rebecca Banford, only it isn't the name I was born with....

And she continued from there, writing the real story of her life.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gayle lives in Norfolk with her husband. She writes her books from a caravan in the garden and draws her inspiration from supermarkets.