

Vladimir's Daughter

Michael Oldham

extract

Chapter 1

Was it cold that morning? I suppose it was. The petals on the snowdrops had long turned brown and shrivelled, the daffodils had faded, and the tulips were wisely anticipating longer, warmer days before coming into bloom. In the hedgerows, the pussy willows were more courageous already imparting a slight sheen to the almost imperceptible green that heralded a welcome change to the season.

But whilst the promise of spring and warmer weather was tantalisingly close, there was still a penetrating bitter chill in the gusting wind. Spume from the surf crashing up onto the broad shingle beach was flicked indiscriminately into the air. As for the sea, it displayed none of the characteristics that might have rendered it more inviting. It was a cold blue grey, illuminated by the diffused light of the sun, which was struggling to penetrate the early morning haze. The opaque glow reflected off the watery undulations to give the appearance of burnished, rippled, stainless steel.

I shivered, shoved my hands deeper into my pockets, and lowered my head into the collar of my coat until only my nose and the tops of my ears braved the chilling breeze. The knitted woollen hat added insulation to my prematurely thinning hair that no longer sufficed to protect my head even in sunny weather. I trudged on, head bent low, ploughing my uneven gait through an unstable accumulation of shingle, finding only occasional relief traversing harder areas where my progress was temporarily recorded by the ephemeral imprint of my boots on patches of damp sand.

Behind the high water mark, where dried kelp intermingled with cuttlefish bones and brightly coloured remnants of plastic ropes as well as other man-made detritus, fragile cliffs rose up to disappear into the mist that was languidly spilling over from the hinterland. At the base of the cliffs, detached blocks of rock appeared haphazardly deposited. The more ancient had been smoothed by the action of sand and water, whilst others, more recent, were still quite angular and stubbornly but ineffectively trying to resist the forces of erosion. In amongst them, there were clusters of smaller, rounded stones that were trapped in groups by the larger boulders. Everywhere, there were fossils. On the western beach, ammonites had been trapped in time in the wave cut platform, a limestone shelf that stretched out into the sea, and others, too large to carry, were half exposed in rounded boulders.

I already had a collection of fossils that was becoming out of hand. To stumble across the well preserved remains of a sea creature that lived millions of years before, and to marvel at the complexity and cunning geometry of nature, seemed to compel

that each portable discovery should be picked up, examined and then confined to a pocket to be transported home to join several hundred of its compatriots. Soon, I knew that I would have no choice other than to make some kind of selection on quality and size, throwing out those which did not meet the decided standard.

I looked up from the beach. The mist, spilling lethargically over the edge of the cliff, descended in a ghostly, slow-moving curtain, which evaporated before reaching the beach. It was replenished constantly by the mass of cold air behind it, sliding down from the hinterland and pushing it over the cliff edge. Behind, the undulating landscape of South West Dorset was submerged in a dense, slow moving sea of mist.

It had been like that when I left the cottage earlier that morning and I imagined that from the higher ground above, it would have been difficult to determine where the coast began, as the real and apparent seas merged to engulf the land. Later, as the radiant heat of the sun began to burn off the mist, I knew that the day would undoubtedly improve, although the temperature might well stay below the seasonal average. For the moment, however, it was grey, bitterly cold, and wholly uninspiring.

My early forties had overtaken me with a series of circumstances that provoked what could only be described as an early mid-life crisis. At times, I found the changes in my life difficult to come to terms with and I had recently developed the habit of taking an early morning walk along the beach. I recognised it as a kind of therapy.

Often, I rose just after dawn, when the day promised everything, and set out across the field to discover the beach again. It was rare that I didn't find it invigorating. Normally, it was deserted at that time of the morning. At the time, I must admit that I much preferred it like that. Socialising was never a skill that I had really developed and coupled with my other problems, having to pass the time of day with strangers in trivial conversation would have only reinforced my sense of remoteness and the seemingly artificial, fragile transience of my existence.

Thus, without really planning it, the exercise had somehow become an essential element of my life and general well being. Apart from the physical activity, which after years of relative inactivity was having a beneficial effect on my stamina, I also benefited greatly from the visual stimulation and the distraction. Without it, especially if I was forced to remain in the cottage, I felt curiously vulnerable, unusually agitated, and very often quite unable to settle. I just had to get out and walk whenever I could.

The discipline of the revitalising start to the day also gave me time to reflect on my work. Surrounded by the forces of nature, I had even found inspiration. At other times, preoccupied by the raging state of the sea, I was released from my introspection simply by the noise and power of the spectacle. The added interest of flotsam and jetsam that was so often distributed along the high water mark after a storm, as well as the sea birds that scurried in front of me, searching amongst the debris and leaving haphazard tracks in the damp sand, helped fulfil my need for distraction.

More recently, as I was beginning to come to terms with the abrupt changes in my life, this early morning walk had also started to change in character. No longer did I have a sense of running away from things, although what I had been running from was no more than the spectre of my over-active mind. My promenade was an activity that had become familiar, and in its

familiarity, it simply became relaxing; and that I recognised as progress of a sort. When it was like that, I just walked. In the deeper recesses of my mind, I was nowhere; not on the beach, nor engrossed in my work, nor distracted by my recurrent troubled emotions.

It was just over six months earlier when I had moved to the cottage, not long after my wife had suddenly left me. When asked, I told people locally that I was separated from my wife and trying to rebuild my life, although to be quite accurate, we had never actually married. Many couples don't get married these days, and those whose marriages are so solemnly vowed, seem to experience no greater security in their relationships than others that are founded on no more than a habit of cohabitation. Ours, quite evidently, unfortunately, was one such relationship.

Maybe, I mused occasionally, had we been married, we might not now have been separated. However, it was like many such idle thoughts, and I now mostly understood that it was an entirely useless speculation. Nevertheless, despite the obvious futility of it, obsession drove me to speculate further. Perhaps, I also mused, if we had decided to have children, and succeeded, we might still be together.

However, Madeleine had never wanted children. Too much of an encumbrance, she had said, it would cramp our style. Certainly, if we'd had children, and then broken up, as we did - what distress would have wreaked its unsettling psychological distress on our unfortunate offspring? She was right in that respect, it was better that we didn't have children. At least that disappointment and awful responsibility was avoided; no one else had suffered from the abrupt termination of our relationship.

On reflection, our relationship had probably run its course in any event and, whilst we were comfortable together, we had both needed something new to stimulate us before we crept quietly and inexorably into middle age, mediocrity, and complacency. Neither of us would have tolerated such a life very well. It was time for a change; Madeleine was right, a new stimulus and a new direction in life were needed.

Therefore, when Madeleine was offered the possibility of a post with a branch of her law firm in Sydney, she left. It was just like that. One month she was there, sharing the rent, doing the Saturday morning shopping at the market with me, cooking some evenings, sleeping in front of the television, and then - and then she was gone! Making the decision had seemed to be absolutely no problem for her.

She made it perfectly clear that there was no question of my following her and then, as if she had not been my partner for the last ten years or so, she just walked out. It was worse than bereavement; at least death might have had some sense of finality about it. It was more like being in limbo. There was of course the profound sense of loss, but nothing to mourn, except my own hurt, culpability, and sense of failure.

I was angry at times, but expressing it would have spoiled the last few days of our relationship, so I largely suppressed my feelings. Our separation, as Madeleine had called it, whilst definitive, lacked something; irrevocability perhaps. Perhaps I still hoped that she would return. Perhaps, I thought, we would both see our separation as a terrible mistake.

However, after she left, although we had solemnly promised to stay in touch, we didn't. I didn't hear another word from her. No card from Sydney, no telephone call to say that she had arrived safely, not even a letter asking if I could

send things on to her. When she left, she took what she wanted with her. It seemed remarkably little after ten years. What was left, she told me to chuck.

I remember kicking a pebble on the beach that morning. It was a futile sort of gesture. I was angry again. Not so much that I had lost her, or that my life had changed so much, more that I was thinking about it all again. Why did I do it? I wasn't really a masochist, but it was like self-torture, self-flagellation. I asked myself - did I really want to wallow in this self-induced state of despondency?

'Just let it go!' I said aloud, as if by doing so, it would have more force, more conviction. The words echoed in my head as they always did and the hollow resonance of my sudden futile wave of anger didn't help. I remember that uncomfortable, agitated feeling, as well as experiencing nausea and a slight movement of my guts as I looked for somewhere to run and hide. It was another panic attack; I recognised it immediately.

I breathed deeply, sensing the cool air enter my lungs and remember thinking, just let it go, as I closed my eyes, willing myself to be calm and manage my anxiety. Walking more earnestly, I tried to empty my head of all the negative thoughts that had invaded it. Slowly, I rediscovered my equilibrium. Calmly, but desperately, I tried to hold on to it. It was some time since I had had such an attack and it had taken me completely by surprise.

After Madeleine had gone, I couldn't afford to keep the flat that we had shared in Chelsea. I had thought of finding a suitable tenant and had even interviewed some prospective candidates, but none of them seemed suitable - most were at least fifteen years younger than I was, or weird, or both. Finally, it occurred to me that London was no longer the place where I wanted to be. Visiting some of our old haunts seemed devoid of the magic that they had once held. In addition, they seemed to have transformed overnight into empty, soulless places, frequented mostly by drunks and layabouts, or by quiet courting couples that only had eyes for each other. I had become an observer, a voyeur, and felt like an alien on all counts. It was time to move on, time to leave London, time for a new start, time to do something more useful with my life.

My uncle's cottage in Dorset seemed like a good idea and to my relief and surprise, he was highly delighted with the suggestion that I should move in for a while. The cottage was rarely used, other than for holiday lets, and apart from providing him with a small income, it had actually become something of a burden to him. We agreed on a suitable rental, which included me undertaking certain repairs and improvements, and I moved in the September after I resigned from my teaching post at the Secondary school in Pimlico.

In a way, it was a huge relief, although I harboured other real anxieties about how I would make ends meet. The plus side was that I was no longer responsible for teaching music to teenagers whose attention span was less than that of a gnat, and who, apart from lacking the most basic civilities, also lacked any motivation to improve themselves. In all, Dorset was therefore more than a refuge; it was deliverance. Thus, moving to the cottage overlooking Charmouth on the Jurassic coast, gave me the opportunity to reflect on my life and to start again.

I was astonished how quickly my advertisement in the local paper generated so much interest. I was surprised that so many people were interested in learning the piano. Maybe, I conjectured, it was the range of music I offered to teach that attracted attention. It's quite possible, because within no time

at all I had a few pupils of all ages and abilities, wanting to play anything from hymns, to Chopin nocturnes, to Thelonius Monk.

In addition, I was able to take on some peripatetic music teaching in schools in the locality as well as doing a little composing. To my great satisfaction, things were beginning to fall into place again. As one door closes, another always opens; it was just as my father used to say. Surprising really, most things that my father had said to me had gone straight over my head, but that particular dictum, I remembered well and, thankfully it seemed to hold true.

Apart from the cold and the mist, that early morning in March, there was an unusual amount of human activity on the beach. I noticed some people descending from the car park as I was returning to the cottage. By then, the biting wind was in my back and my head was up. I observed them in the distance as I walked.

They were probably about two or three hundred metres away when I first spotted them. At about the same time, I heard the low, dull, rhythmic throbbing of a diesel engine and the roar of the exhaust as the boat rolled in the languid sea. Offshore, evidently, there was a large motor cruiser, and the low drone of its engines was becoming increasingly intrusive. Then, as it emerged from the mist and moved nearer to the beach, a dingy was launched. Quickly, its outboard engine burst into life and it sped towards the beach, only slowing as it reached the breaking surf. Normally, as I told you, the beach would have been deserted at that time of the morning, so the spectacle began to intrigue me.

As I got closer to where the boat had come ashore, two men ran across the shingle towards it. One of them immediately climbed into the dingy and moved towards the stern to join the man operating the outboard motor, whilst the other got very wet manoeuvring the boat off the beach and back into the surf. Then, as the outboard motor was engaged again, this time in reverse, he launched himself awkwardly into bow. Even before he had properly settled himself in the boat, the dinghy turned rapidly into the surf, drenching him and then headed directly towards the cruiser bouncing through the undulating sea.

I remember thinking at the time that it was rather curious. They certainly weren't fishing and it hardly seemed like an easy location to pick someone up. They could have brought something ashore, it was possible even that they could have been smugglers. Cigarettes, booze, illegal immigrants, drugs, there was a whole range of possibilities, although I finally concluded that my imagination was running wild, and that their activities were probably wholly legitimate.

I think, in the end, I decided that they were probably a group of scientists, most likely geologists, and oceanographers studying the coastal drift of the rapidly eroding Dorset coast. There were many such studies going on at the time. Not surprisingly either; there had been some spectacular landslips on both sides of Charmouth during the previous few years and the erosion would inevitably continue to eat menacingly and destructively into the coastline. I had learnt in the few months that I had been there, that the Dorset coast was one of the most rapidly changing landscapes in the world and that there were several coastal settlements threatened by the extraordinary rate of erosion. Finally, I started to forget about the dinghy as I left the beach, skirting the River Char as it wound its last few shallow meanders to disappear before reaching the sea.

Although, I remember that as I reached the small car park at the end of the road that descended to the beach, I turned round to take a final look at the motor cruiser. I could see that the dinghy was already being lifted onto the davits on the stern of the motor cruiser. Then, as the men climbed aboard, the boat turned, increased speed, and headed out of Lyme Bay and into the English Channel. Behind it, a broad wake quickly spread out, as it ploughed through the sea. Soon, it was out of sight and consumed by the sea mist. The only reminder of its presence was the throb of its powerful motors reaching out from the fog bank that cloaked the horizon. I turned and walked away and not long after, the eerie rumble ceased altogether.

Crossing over the wooden stile by the car park, I started up the narrow muddy footpath that traversed the field, climbing diagonally in the direction of the cottage. As the path rose, the cloud base seemed to descend and the mist became somewhat thicker. The long grass on either side of the path drooped across the way weighed down with a heavy burden of water droplets. A myriad of spider's webs criss-crossed the field and on each fine strand were precariously threaded innumerable droplets of water. I knew that by the time I reached home, my trousers would be saturated from the knees downwards, and my feet suddenly became much colder as the dampness penetrated my boots.

I plodded on, already relishing the prospect of a hot bath, and climbed over the stile at the top end of the field. From the top of the stile, I could see the thatched roof of the cottage. It looked ragged and was in need of some serious repair. I imagined that the roof would need to be ripped off and completely replaced. With luck, the roof timbers would still be in good order, but somehow, I doubted it. It was something that I would have to discuss with my uncle. Another job to organise in the spring.

Of course, the main attraction of the cottage was its location. It was close to the beach and reasonably well sheltered from both westerly and southerly storms. As a building however, it wasn't much. It was poorly constructed, small, and desperately in need of modernising. It was surrounded by a garden, most of which was overgrown.

In the autumn, when I had first moved in, I had spent several days clearing an area to the west of the cottage, but it needed a lot more work to it. It was infested with couch grass and ground elder and I had it in mind to apply a liberal dose of weed killer on the new shoots in the spring to eradicate the problem. Afterwards, I would cultivate it, find some local farmer to obtain some manure, and start a vegetable patch. The idea of growing my own onions and courgettes appealed greatly after years in a flat in London. I had even played with the idea of keeping a few chickens and having fresh eggs. A second-hand bookshop in Dorchester had a section on country crafts and I found a very informative book published in the late forties that described the practice very well, if not a little quaintly. Perhaps something to think about next autumn, I mused.

After the stile, I cut down the narrow path to the cottage. All thoughts of chickens, vegetables, boats, and Madeleine had evaporated in the mist, as ideas of comfort motivated my last few steps towards my new home and a long soak in a hot bath. I had nothing pressing that day; at least, that was what I thought at the time!

And then the second curious event of the morning struck me as I turned through the open gate, and went up the stone

paved path to the cottage - the front door was wide open! I was shocked and a moment's confusion ensued as I tried to remember whether I'd closed it or not. I didn't think that I'd ever left it open before! Living in a city, it was a habit to lock things up.

However, I will admit that I was sometimes forgetful and distracted at times. I supposed that it was quite possible that I had left it open, but unlikely nevertheless. Instinctively, I think I stopped for a moment. I was slightly baffled and took a moment to survey the scene. I remember shivering and then continuing towards the door, half-expecting someone to greet me - my uncle perhaps.

Inside, everything seemed normal, except it felt cold, deathly cold. With the door left open, all the heat had escaped from the interior. I closed the door, removed my boots, and walked through to the kitchen.

And there she was.

Madeleine!

Her eyes were staring vacantly into space, her mouth frozen in a wide grimace, her body slumped against the wall and so much blood spread on the worn linoleum tiles from the gaping wound in her neck that...

For an instant, time stood still. I froze. Then, I recoiled, stepping back into the hall catching my breath. It was like something from a horror movie. I remember trying to lick my lips, but my mouth was already dry, and coughing nervously. Yes, I do distinctly remember coughing nervously before I plucked up the courage to peer gingerly round the door into the kitchen again.

I thought for a moment that I had dreamt it; it seemed so unreal. Unfortunately, it wasn't a dream. The stark reality of the scene was overwhelming - it was Madeleine, and she was clearly quite dead. It was obvious that she had been murdered; she couldn't possibly have inflicted such a terrible wound on herself. However, I had some lingering doubts if it was really Madeleine; there were things about her that were not quite the same. Her hair was short and dark. Madeleine had long blond hair, and her eyes - they seemed to be a different colour. She also seemed thinner, at least, thinner in the face.

I began to get more accustomed to the awful scene and studied her in morbid fascination. It was Madeleine. What the hell was Madeleine doing there? How did she know where I lived? Who had killed her and why? There were a myriad of questions that were competing with each other to get into my mind and I had no answers.

Then, before I had anytime more time for further reflection, the police arrived.

They must have known about the murder long before I discovered Madeleine's body. They must have been on their way whilst I was still making my way across the field from the beach. All those questions that had entered my mind in the first few minutes of my dreadful discovery were now on the lips of my visitors and I still didn't have any answers for them.

Unfortunately, and possibly predictably, they didn't really believe anything that I said. More accurately, as it transpired, they really didn't want to believe me in any case as they had other theories which were much simpler and more compelling.

Chapter 2

Detective Chief Inspector, DCI Donald Wrigglesworth was originally a native of Lancashire. He had been brought up in a small village north of Wigan and never lost his strong Lancastrian accent. His formative years in the police force had all been with the Lancashire Constabulary. He had spent the greater part of his professional life in Manchester and perhaps subconsciously, or not so subconsciously, he was preparing for his retirement when he applied for the post in Dorset.

The interview panel at the Dorset County Police Headquarters, at Winfrith, had seemed to be particularly keen to ask him questions about his motives for moving to Dorset, suspecting that he was looking for a move that would help him slide into gentle retirement; he wouldn't have been the first.

However, his credentials were impeccable. His experience dealing with organised crime was extensive, and his work with the Home Office's Policing and Reducing Crime Unit placed him head and shoulders above all the other candidates. Any residual doubts were swiftly cast aside when the chairperson, a redoubtable woman, also from the north, made her position clear. DCI Donald Wrigglesworth was appointed to the post, much to the resigned disappointment of the Chief Constable who thought him a rather dull, pedantic, plodding example of outdated policing.

Wrigglesworth was of course delighted with his appointment, but moving to Dorset was not without its problems for him. Generally, property was considerably more expensive on the south coast than it was in Lancashire and the stress of commuting between Dorset and the North every weekend made him irritable. Finally, he found something suitable near Bridport and quickly moved his wife and his dog to join him. And, as it turned out, it was a very good choice, because it was in Bridport, towards the western edge of Dorset where the Chief Constable finally decided to exile him, having tired of his irritating bumptious nature, his continual references to how they would have done things in Manchester, and his relative inability to solve even the simplest of crimes.

He was at home in bed when the phone rang to tell him of an anonymous call reporting a suspected murder in Charmouth. It was less than half-an-hour down the road from where he lived and he was soon dressed and on his way. He was not the only one. A police car that had been on early morning traffic duty on the main road heading south looking out for speeding motorists was also diverted to Charmouth. The two uniformed officers arrived at the cottage only a few minutes later than the Detective Chief Inspector.

DCI Wrigglesworth knocked on the door of the cottage. I opened it. It was the first time that we met and, unfortunately, it wasn't the last.

To be honest, I didn't like him from the start. He was a tall, overbearing, supercilious man, who never seemed to listen to anything that I said, except when it suited him. Initially, I thought I might be mistaken in my belief, because he seemed to be able to retain a huge amount of information in his head. He never seemed to take notes and whenever it appeared that I might be contradicting myself he was in like a shot, cross questioning me remorselessly until he felt that he had thoroughly exhausted that particular point.

Later, my opinion of him changed in so far that I thought that he probably retained very little in his head, except that which he wished to retain. I say this because despite our lengthy discussions, we seemed to go over the same points repeatedly. I think he must have been hoping that by a process of wearing me down we would eventually arrive at his preferred version of what had probably happened. A version that he would feel comfortable with, regardless of whether it had any relation to what really happened.

I was still staring at Madeleine when I heard the knock at the door. It made me jump. I don't know why, but I suddenly felt very guilty that I should have a dead person in my kitchen, as if it was my responsibility that my ex-wife, well, ex-partner, was sprawled on the floor. Thankfully, DCI Wrigglesworth was in plain clothes, otherwise it's possible that when I opened the door I might have panicked and either slammed the door in his face or tried to run past him. I shudder to think how he might have reacted.

'This is Elm Cottage, is it not?' he asked politely.

I think I just nodded. I don't remember replying. I was standing at the door still dripping from the knees down looking up at him, wondering whom he was and why he might be knocking on my door so early in the morning. I didn't have to ask, he introduced himself.

'My name is Detective Chief Inspector Wrigglesworth,' he said, flashing his warrant card in front of my face.

'How, how did you know?' I stuttered. I was amazed and I must have looked completely stunned by his presence.

'Ah,' he quickly concluded, 'then, it wouldn't have been you that telephoned then?' His accent betrayed his northern origins.

'No, I know nothing about any phone calls. You clearly know more than I do. I've only just arrived back home and found, and found...'

'And found what?'

'The body in the kitchen.'

'Really! Do you know who it is?'

'It's my wife!' I was still shocked and thinking about the phone call. 'You must have known about this before I did! I've only just come in,' I repeated. 'When was the phone call made?'

'I'll ask the questions,' he said, giving me a disdainful glance as his body language indicating that he was about to enter. 'I think I had better take a look, hadn't I?'

'Yes, of course,' I said, kicking my boots off, and moving away from the door. 'I've only just come back from a walk on the beach and...'

I ran out of words to say and I showed him through to the kitchen. Stepping inside, seeing her again, an icy shiver ran down my spine. I thought that I would have been more accustomed to the sight, but I wasn't, it shocked me again and a wave of nausea engulfed me. Wrigglesworth pushed past me. I retreated into the hall shivering uncontrollably. It was probably a combination of shock and cold, coupled with a small

dose of fear, and probably I would have been much better keeping my boots on.

'Who is she?' Wigglesworth asked again, still regarding the body.

'She was my wife.' I answered.

It was a reply, which I regretted soon afterwards. It was one of those little inconsistencies that Detective Inspector interrogated me about each time he ran out of other questions to torment me with. It was probably at that point also that he first appeared to suspect that I was the most likely culprit.

'And you are?'

'John Ranger.'

'What was her name?'

'Madeleine.'

'How did it happen?' he asked.

'I have no idea. It's the first time I've seen her in nearly a year.' It was clear even then that he didn't believe me for one moment.

'Were you divorced?'

'No; in fact, we weren't exactly married?'

'What then?'

'We lived together for ten years or so.'

'So she wasn't your wife, or your ex-wife?'

'Yes.' I thought that was the right answer to his question.

'She was then?'

'No.'

'So she wasn't?'

I wondered which might be the best way to answer Wigglesworth's question without confusing him further.

'She was neither my wife, nor my ex-wife.'

'Why didn't you say that to start with?'

It was a fair question and something I should have confronted myself with sometime before, but wholly avoided. I think that in psychological terms it's described as *denial*. I didn't bother responding to his question and there was a brief silence while Wigglesworth looked at me as if I was an idiot. That was probably fair also, I certainly felt like one. Then he continued.

'And you say that the last time that you saw her was about a year ago. Is that correct?'

'Yes.'

'What's she doing here then?'

'I have no idea.'

'I find that very difficult to believe.'

'I find it very difficult to believe that not having seen her for a year, I suddenly find her lying dead on my kitchen floor.'

'Are you trying to be funny with me?' Wigglesworth asked accusingly. It was quite intimidating and it probably didn't help that it was another of his questions that I didn't bother to answer.

'Do you mind if I change my trousers?' I asked. 'They're very wet and I'm getting quite cold.'

'Have you got blood on them?'

'No, certainly not.'

'Have you been trying to wash them then?' he suggested.

'No! I've just walked back across the field on my way home. It was very wet. You can see in the hall that my boots are sopping and my socks are wet through as well.'

'You'll have to wait until I have a uniformed officer, or forensics here; can't have you destroying vital evidence. Just stand there in the hall and drip. You'll have to be patient.' Wigglesworth crouched to examine the body. He was careful not to touch anything.

'Nasty,' he said. 'The head's half severed. Looks like a professional job; someone knew what they were doing. Tell me, what's your line?'

'Music teacher,' I replied.

Wrigglesworth coughed; it was a sort of embarrassing cough. My answer was certainly not the kind of response that he had been hoping for. I had the impression that he would have been highly delighted if I had said - *butcher*. However, I didn't, and his first theory was beginning to nose dive. Nevertheless, it was clear that he wasn't going to let it go.

'Ever work in an abattoir - you know as a student, or something?' he added.

I was amazed that he suggested such a thing, but I think he had already made up his mind that I was definitely implicated in Madeleine's murder in one way or another.

Fortunately, I didn't have to wait that long before the police car arrived and the two uniformed police officers joined their esteemed colleague in the kitchen. One of them then escorted me upstairs where I was finally able to change. He followed me into the bedroom carrying a large plastic sack.

'Take your clothes off and put them into the sack,' he said.

I stripped down to my pants and went over to the chest of drawers to get a clean pair. Until that point, I hadn't really considered that I might be the subject of a police investigation. As far as I was concerned, I was a wholly innocent bystander. As far as Wrigglesworth was concerned I was suspect number one, and there wasn't a number two to divert his attention.

When I opened the drawer, there was another surprise. It was full of Madeleine's clothes. All my clothes had been moved and it took me sometime to find them. The police officer that had accompanied me must have thought that I was deranged as I opened and closed drawers and cupboards trying to find my clothes. Eventually I changed, but by then, I was shivering violently, despite the number of layers that I piled on. Downstairs, I heard the Chief Inspector instructing the other police officer to check around outside. With all the clothes that I had been wearing in the bag, the police officer and I descended the stairs.

'Take him into the sitting room,' Wrigglesworth said to the officer, completely ignoring me.

It was as if I was beginning to become a spectator of some awful play. None of it appeared real. I knew that it wasn't a dream, although the word 'nightmare' came to mind quite frequently. It wasn't long after when the other police officer came back into the hall.

'Sir,' he shouted.

'Go on,' Wrigglesworth replied.

'There's another one in the garden, sir.'

Another one what, I thought? Then, before I had a chance to ask, another group of people arrived led apparently by a scene of crime officer, who apparently wasn't a police officer. Various specialists in forensics and photography accompanied him. I was soon completely isolated from what was going on. Various people came and went, now and again I heard someone say something like - *was it him, or, did he do it?* As I assumed that they were talking about me, I felt like proclaiming out loud my innocence. In the meantime, I was also still trying hard to imagine what Madeleine was doing there in my cottage, as well as pondering the other question, which really intrigued me. How did she know where I lived?

Wrigglesworth came into the sitting room.

'Who's the man in the garden?'

'What?'

'Which of the words was giving you difficulty,' he said sarcastically, 'was it *man*, or *garden*?'

I think I looked at him with a kind of tired expression. I wasn't in the mood for playing games and I had absolutely no idea who the man in the garden was.

'Who is the dead man in your garden?' Wigglesworth said slowly and methodically, as if I was hard of hearing.

'I didn't know there was a dead man in my garden,' I replied, 'so, how can I answer your question?'

Apparently, Wigglesworth did not like my attempt at basic logic.

'Being funny again are we then? Should I assume that you do not wish to co-operate with us, Mr Ranger,' he demanded, clearly irritated by my inability to make his job easy. God, he was hard work!

'I would be delighted to co-operate with you if you listened to what I told you and were able to consider for one short moment that I have nothing to do with what has happened here.'

Wigglesworth apparently wasn't able to consider such a thing and turned on his heel.

'So, who is the man in the garden?' I shouted after him. He didn't reply. Not long afterwards, I was escorted into the garden to regard the corpse.

I know nothing about violent crime, but it was obvious to me that he had been shot; twice, in fact - once in the body and then in the head, the latter at very short range. Even I could recognise the scorch marks on his temple and the dark, ragged hole where the bullet had crashed into his brain, bringing a quick and definitive end to his existence. I wondered if he was conscious when the gun was aimed at the spot just above his eyes and what he was thinking before the trigger was pulled.

Needless to say, I had no idea who he was. I had never seen him before. What he was doing there, and why he died, was as much a mystery to me as it was to Wigglesworth, except Wigglesworth seemed to think I was the key to solving the crime.

I can't remember the conversation that preceded my being taken to the police station for further questioning, but I do recall that I was quite happy to leave the cottage and, I do remember thinking that at least it might be warmer in the police station. I was still shaking with shock, shivering with cold and trembling with fear. Overall, my minor panic attack earlier that morning seemed nothing in comparison to the symptoms that I was then experiencing.

The two police officers that had arrived soon after Wigglesworth gently eased me into the back seat of their police car, ensuring that I did not inadvertently damage my head on the doorjamb, in the process. The journey to Bridport took less than twenty minutes.

We were soon out of Charmouth and up the hill towards Golden Cap. We passed through the village of Chideock and shortly after, descended the hill to Bridport. The radio barked from time to time, but apart from that, the voyage was conducted in silence. When we arrived at our destination, after the most perfunctory of formalities, which included removing anything that I might harm myself with, I was taken to a cell and locked in.

It was the first time I had experienced being incarcerated as such, but, the starkness of the cell, despite being uninviting, was a kind of a refuge from the very confusing drama that was unfolding around me. It also gave me time to reflect although

none of my projected scenarios seemed in the least encouraging.

* * *

Later that morning a young woman police officer opened the door of the cell and entered bringing in a mug of tea; outside, stood another police officer. She asked if I would like something to eat.

'Yes,' I replied with some unrestrained enthusiasm. 'I certainly would, I'm starving; like what, for example?'

'Toast and jam?'

'Sounds perfect.' As she turned to leave to fulfil this urgent humanitarian mission, I stopped her and asked her another important question, which had been at the forefront of my mind. 'Do you know if I'm under arrest?'

'Sorry,' she replied, smiling sympathetically. 'I've no idea, you'll have to ask someone else.'

I knew that I hadn't been charged with anything and I certainly hadn't been formally cautioned, so I presumed that if had wanted to, I could perhaps have insisted on leaving. However, it was a situation that I was unfamiliar with; I didn't know what my rights were. Nobody took the trouble to explain anything in full. Nevertheless, as I had nowhere to go, the thought of returning to the cottage with the police crawling all over it certainly didn't appeal and, as I was willing to cooperate fully with the police in their inquiry, because I had nothing to hide, I didn't pursue the point.

Unfortunately, the toast arrived at the same time as Wigglesworth and I was taken out of my cell to an interview room. Somehow, the toast failed to follow me. I listened to my stomach complain as I sat down on one side of the desk. Wigglesworth sat down opposite me. He was accompanied by a younger plain-clothes officer, who sat down next to him. Wigglesworth introduced him as Detective Sergeant White. I would have said he was at least ten years younger than Wigglesworth. He was also smaller and thinner. Next to Wigglesworth, he looked a rather like a weasel and was wholly dominated by the presence and stature of the senior officer. Wigglesworth knew it.

On his own, White might have been more imposing, and I imagined when he was out of the influence of the older man, he was probable someone who also threw his authoritative weight around, as much out of frustration and a sense of inferiority as anything else. Between them, however, they represented an intimidating and humourless pair. I could see that we were in for hours of fun together. In the few interviews that we had I don't think that I ever saw either of them smile.

'Your full name?' Wigglesworth asked, taking a ballpoint pen out of his pocket. In front of him was a pro-forma that he was going to methodically fill in.

'John Peter Ranger.'

'Date of birth?'

'The tenth of March, nineteen sixty-five.'

And then, address, father's name, mother's name, grandfather's name, grandmother's name, brothers and sisters, religion, and so it went on.

'You won't object to our taking your fingerprints to help in the process of elimination.' It was a sort of rhetorical

question and didn't really require an answer, it seemed reasonable to me that they would need to do such a thing. My fingerprints would in any event be all over the house, so eliminating me from their inquiries did seem to be not only wise, but probably also the quickest way out of there. 'They will be destroyed of course if we don't require them after the inquiry.' I think I may have believed him.

It's interesting nevertheless, it doesn't matter how innocent one is, there is still a sentiment of guilt being 'in custody' and a more general and insistent feeling of fear. Part of it, I am now convinced, is the unfamiliarity of the situation, but more is associated with both the sense of lack of control and, also the worry that, despite even their best efforts, those in control will get it completely wrong. It was something that I later became more familiar with - but I'm jumping the gun rather.

My sense of culpability and fear increased as the day progressed with the growing belief that those in control weren't even attempting to apply their best efforts to solving the crime but rather, that they were keen to arrive at a quick and uncomplicated solution that seemed to suit them.

We discussed the man in the garden. Not once did they indicate that they believed me when I said that I had never seen him before. Wrigglesworth asked me repeatedly what the relationship was between my ex-partner, the man in the garden and me. Evidently, he suspected some kind of amorous and acrimonious triangle and, rather too quickly in my opinion, settled on this as probably providing the motive the horrible crime. Despite my frequent denial of any such thing and, being unable to furnish them with a response to their liking, my lack of knowledge was taken as non-cooperation.

'Was the man in the garden Madeleine's current partner?' Wrigglesworth asked flicking the end of his ballpoint pen with a very graphic display of frustration and irritation.

'Who knows?' I replied.

'You're not being very helpful, Mr. Ranger.'

'I'm doing my best.'

'I'm afraid your best is really not good enough, Mr. Ranger. We'll find out everything in the end, so you might as well tell us now. It will be easier for you in the long run.'

'When I tell you that I have never seen the man in the garden before, which of the words, *never*, *man* or *before*, did you have difficulty in understanding.'

It wasn't very clever to turn Wrigglesworth's form of sarcasm back on him and I could see that it irritated him greatly. I noticed the slight trembling of the lips of his colleague, DS White, and thought for a moment he was going to break into a smile. However, before the moment's amusement overtook him, Wrigglesworth banged his fist down on the desk with such force that both White and I both jumped.

'Don't get smart with me!' Wrigglesworth shouted. 'I'll have you locked up in someplace where you won't see the light of day for twenty years.'

I looked at White who pulled a strange kind of face, somewhere between a grimace and a wince.

'Look Inspector,' I began, trying a tone that might indicate conciliation.

'Chief Inspector,' he shouted.

'OK, Chief Inspector, I'm doing my best to help you, but if you don't believe anything I say, when I'm telling you the truth, how do you ever expect to make progress?' I thought that I was trying to help. Clearly in Wrigglesworth's eyes I wasn't.

'I don't need you to tell me how to do my job. Just answer my questions, without making up these ridiculous stories!' He stared at me with an expression that dared me to tell him anything other than what he wanted to hear. 'What did you do with the gun?'

I put my head in my hands. This interview was going nowhere. There was no longer any point in replying to his questions.

'I think it's time I had access to a lawyer, if you don't mind, that is,' I said. 'I am not prepared to answer any further stupid questions until I have some legal representation. Moreover, I would like to know exactly what my current position is. Why am I being detained? Are you intending to arrest me - if so, on what charges? If I am not going to be arrested, am I free to leave, if I so desire? Can I simply write a statement of what I know about this crime, sign it and bugger off? Madeleine worked for a big law firm in London - can I contact them? Can I phone anyone else?'

Wrigglesworth glared at me.

'Your situation is covered by the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984, which prescribes how we deal with you and what your rights are.' Then he turned to White. 'Get the Custody Record, bring him a copy of Code C and tell him to read it. When he's read the Code, ask him if he wants a solicitor and then we will see where we are going to go from there. In the meantime...'

'In the meantime,' I interrupted, 'I haven't eaten this morning and it's now midday and I'm getting very hungry. Do think you could arrange for some food.'

'This isn't a restaurant,' Wrigglesworth said, and then turned to his colleague. 'Take him back to his cell, feed him, then give him the papers to read, and let him make one call.'

Back in the cell, examining the scratched messages and obscenities on the wall, I wondered whom to call. My dad? He wouldn't do anything. He'd have probably forgotten by the end of the afternoon in any event. My sister? She was on holiday in South America. Friends? There weren't any locally. What about Madeleine's firm? Presumably they knew that she was back in the UK and even if they didn't they could easily contact their office in Sydney. Anyway as a law firm, they might be able to advise me what to do. I also knew their number by heart. Sometimes I used to phone Madeleine to change our arrangements for meeting in the evening. It was rare that I ever got through to her, she was usually as they said, 'in conference' or 'in court', but she always phoned me back.

I was taken to a room where I was allowed to make the call. The phone rang briefly before it was answered.

'Cummings and Cummings,' the voice was bright and helpful.

'Hello,' I said, 'this is John Ranger. Is there anyone I can speak to concerning Madeleine McGrath?'

'You can leave a message with me and I will get someone to call you back.'

'OK; hang on a moment. What's the number here?' I asked. The police officer gave me the number and I repeated it over the phone.

'Can you tell me what the message is?'

'Yes, OK, well, Madeleine's been murdered. I'm being held in a Police Station at Bridport in Dorset. There was someone else murdered as well, a man, I don't know who he was. I think I may need some kind of legal aid, or well, advice, or representation at any rate, can you arrange for someone to contact me?'

'Of course, Mr. Ranger, I'll make sure someone contacts you, but please be patient, it may not be this afternoon.' Abruptly, the phone went dead.

I replaced the telephone. Afterwards I was led back to the welcoming ambiance of my cell. Waiting for me was a copy of the document that Wrigglesworth had arranged for me to read, and more importantly, a plate of chicken pie and chips, already going cold. I ate the food before I started on the document. It was over sixty pages long, dealt with procedures, the mentally ill, rights and responsibilities of the police and their detainees. I think I concluded finally that I was a detainee.

As I read the document, I kept reflecting over the events that morning which seemed stranger and stranger the more that I thought about them. I wondered if the men in the dinghy had anything to do what had happened. Frankly, I was unable to make head or tail of anything.

I also think that I had been left '*to stew*', in the hope that I might be more co-operative when the questioning recommenced. I spent all afternoon alone in the cell, was served with tea, mid-afternoon, and variously reread the document, catnapped and mused on my present, extremely unsatisfactory, situation.

Chapter 3

It might seem now that it was somewhat clever of me to contact Madeleine's firm. It wasn't at all. It might have been intuitive I suppose but it just seemed like the obvious thing to do at the time, and actually, when it came down to it, I didn't have many options. Effectively I was killing two birds with one stone, if you will excuse the expression under the circumstances. Apart from letting them know that she was dead, which I felt that I should as I presumed that she was still working for them, with luck I would get access to some London lawyer who might begin to sort this mess out for me.

I waited all the rest of that day for a telephone call. As the evening came and went, I began to feel abandoned, frustrated, and increasingly desperate. I was given blankets, allowed to wash, and settled down for the night. Sleep didn't come easily and when it did, its welcoming arms held me only fleetingly. I seemed to fall out of them on several occasions, waking with a shock and bouncing back into a reality that seemed more like a particularly bad dream.

At seven, just after I had managed what seemed the best sleep of the night, I was awakened with a knock on the door and a mug of tea. A little later, I was allowed to wash. I felt unkempt and dirty and I really needed more than a sink to wash in, I needed a hot bath, or a shower. I would also have liked to shave, to brush my teeth, and to comb my hair. When breakfast arrived, relief though it was, pessimistically, I thought that it might be the highpoint of the day. However, I was quite mistaken, because whilst I was sitting on my bed eating breakfast, feeling distinctly rough, I had a visitor.

There was a quiet knock on the door as it opened and in he walked. He was dressed in a dark suit, nodded deferentially at me, and sat down at the only chair in the cell placing a small briefcase at his feet. I started to put my breakfast on one side.

'Don't get up,' he said, raising his hand to stop me. 'Finish eating your breakfast, and then we'll get going.'

Of course, I assumed that he was probably my lawyer and I quickly finished eating whilst he occupied himself looking around the small room reading some of the scribbled comments on the wall of the cell. When I'd finished, he stood up, walked over, and held out his hand.

'Rupert Balls,' he said as we shook hands. 'You must be John Ranger.'

'Yes,' I confirmed, relieved at last that I would have someone to assist me in this rather unexpected and worrying predicament. 'Are you my lawyer?'

'Not exactly,' he replied, half avoiding eye contact. His response was not what I had anticipated and it rather caught me off guard.

'Who are you then?'

'Let's say that I'm one of Anna's colleagues.'
'Who's Anna?' I asked, completely nonplussed by his reply.

'Ah yes, of course, I'm sorry, you only knew her as Madeleine.'

'What do you mean, I only knew her as Madeleine, she was Madeleine, wasn't she?'

'Well, she was and she wasn't.'

'I don't understand.'

'Well no, you won't really. Still, I'll explain later, whilst we're on our way. We have a lot to do and we should really get going as soon as possible.'

'What?'

'Yes, we should make a move.'

'Are we leaving here?' I asked stupidly.

'Yes,' he nodded. 'Now.'

'And the police, have they decided to let me go having finally come to the sensible conclusion that I was actually telling them the truth?'

Rupert Balls cocked his head on one side as if he didn't really understand the question.

'Has Chief Inspector Wigglesworth not raised any objections about my leaving?' I asked, trying to make it clearer. 'He seemed convinced that I was in the centre piece of some torrid *crime de passion*.'

'I couldn't possibly imagine what his view might be. Anyway, he's not here at present, and, in any case, it's out of his hands now. I have the authority to remove you and the local Bill will be told very officially and very firmly that they must keep their noses out of this affair from now on.'

'Oh well, that's good, then,' I said thinking only of my escape.

'Well, it is and it isn't.'

I wondered if Rupert Balls, whoever he was, always spoke in riddles.

'What do you mean?'

'It's much too complicated to explain here. I'll tell you a bit of it on the way.'

'Where are we going?'

'To your cottage first.'

'Good, I'll be able to pick up some things; and, afterwards, where are we going then?'

'To the hospital morgue, to look at the bodies.' A chill went down my spine; it was probably the part of the excursion that I would quite happily avoid.

'And, after that?'

'London.'

London is a big place. I speculated for an instant if he was going to be more specific and enlarge on his statement. I could see that he wasn't and I didn't bother to enquire any further.

So, after collecting the things in my cell, a jumper that I wasn't wearing and the copy of the - '*Code of Practice for the Detention, Treatment and Questioning of Persons by Police Officers*', I had no intention of being caught out again, we left. At the desk, I collected the rest of my belongings, few that there were, signed some piece of paper, and left the Police Station with Rupert Balls, who showed me to his car.

As it transpired, the timing was all very unfortunate because, just as we drove out of the police compound, Wigglesworth was driving in. Perhaps it was simply mischief rather than spite, but I waved cheerily at him as we passed. In my hand, I saw that I was still holding the document that I had

been given to read and realised it was probably a public copy, rather than a private copy. In effect, I had probably just committed a minor offence in stealing it. Waving it at him wouldn't endear him to me in any way. He glowered as we passed each other. He looked confused and cross. I knew instantly that my leaving without his approval would completely spoil his day, imagining that he had most likely spent half the night uselessly rehearsing the countless variations of - *and what did you do with the gun, Mr. Ranger?*

We were soon out of the town and onto the Bridport bypass. Less than a quarter of an hour later, having reached Charmouth, we headed up the track towards the cottage.

The weather was much improved and quite different from the previous two days - clear blue sky and only a few clouds. The Dorset landscape looked particularly splendid. I was uplifted by the improvement in the weather, and felt more optimistic and less depressed, although the sense of relief at having been freed must have played a significant part in my recovery. Nevertheless, the events of the previous twenty-four hours still left me feeling in a state of complete bewilderment.

When we arrived at the cottage, I saw that there was a cordon of yellow tape with black diagonal stripes surrounding it. I was also surprised to see that there was a Police Officer on duty and could only imagine that someone must have been there all night. After getting out of the car, my saviour for the day, Rupert Balls, walked up to the Officer and produced some kind of document. The Police Officer made us wait while he contacted Bridport for instructions. Whatever it was that his pass or identity card described, or whatever arrangements were now officially in place, it transpired that there was no problem in gaining access to my home.

Once inside, I showed Rupert Balls into the living room.

'Try not to disturb anything, John,' he said. 'I just want you to think very carefully about anything that you might have that belonged to Anna.' I must have looked at him quizzically again. 'Madeleine if you prefer it.' I did prefer it. Anna was a complete stranger!

'Like what?'

'A book, a CD, a DVD, a photograph.'

'That's rather more difficult than you can imagine. We lived together for over ten years. Much of what remains of our relationship we bought together. I'm not sure that I could distinguish now what is genuinely mine and what might have been hers.'

'Is there anything that she might have had a particular attachment to that she knew would be safe to leave with you; a sort of keepsake, if you like, something she might have left with you after she went?'

'I'll think about it. Anything else?'

'Is there anything different in the cottage?'

'Some of her clothes, which weren't here before yesterday,' I replied. 'Would you mind if I asked you a question?'

'No, fire away.'

'Who are you?'

'I told you.' He smiled.

'You know what I mean, you don't have to play games with me.'

'That's where you are quite wrong.' He smiled; it didn't reassure me in the least. 'Let us say that, for the present, Madeleine and I worked for the same firm. Would that satisfy your curiosity?'

'Hardly,' I said. 'Why do you call her Anna?'

'Because that was her real name.'

'What does that mean?'

'She was born Anna Kazakova, of Russian parents, in Moscow in 1960.'

'No she wasn't!'

I was utterly convinced that he'd got it all wrong. 'She was Madeleine McGrath, she was Scottish, originally from Glasgow, and she was born in the same year as me. She was orphaned when she was in her first year in university, her parents were killed in a car crash.'

'If you don't believe me I can prove it to you.'

'Are we talking about the same person?'

Rupert Balls walked over to a photograph of Madeleine and I and pointed at it. 'Is this your Madeleine?'

'Yes,' I replied.

'Well, you have to believe me, it's also Anna.'

Suddenly I felt quite disoriented again. We had lived together for ten years and I didn't even know her real name. She was Russian, not Scottish and she was five years older than I thought she was. Balls was studying the photograph.

'But she had a Scottish accent,' I said, clutching at straws.

'She went there when she was five. Where was this taken?' Balls asked, changing the subject again.

'St. Petersburg.'

'When you were there three years ago?'

'Yes; how did you know that?' He didn't answer my question.

'Do you have any other photographs of that holiday?'

'Perhaps; but you haven't answered my question yet though.'

'Anna and I worked quite closely together over the last five years on various assignments.' I wished he would stop calling her Anna. 'She generally told me something of her holidays. Whose idea was it to go to St. Petersburg?'

'I don't know. Mine possibly. There was a concert package that I was particularly interested in going to as well as doing some sightseeing. It was in the middle of August, school holidays, so I think I suggested it to Madeleine.'

'Who organised the trip?'

'I did. She'd seen some package deal that included the concert and thought that it might interest me. It did, so I arranged everything. Come to think of it, it was her idea.'

'What about the other photos?'

'I think I still have some in a box under the bed.'

'Shall we take a look?'

Balls followed me up the stairs to the bedroom. I looked under the bed. There was nothing there. Perhaps the police had taken the box away for examination. Balls seemed to doubt it, but it was quite clear that he was disappointed.

'Tell me what happened yesterday morning.'

'I've already told the police so many times I'm sick of telling the story!'

'Just tell me one more time.'

'I got up just before 6.00. I dressed in jeans, thick socks, polo neck tee shirt, thick sweater, put my walking boots on, fleece jacket and went out for my normal early morning walk along the beach. I can't remember if I closed or even locked the door on the way out. I normally would. However, I had doubts when I returned, because I saw that it was open.'

'How long were you out?'

'Just over an hour.'

'Where did you go?'

'First, I went down across the field to the car park by the coast, then, along the beach towards Golden Cap. I scrambled over the rocks for a while before I started back. Returning, I had the breeze on my back and it was much easier. There was a boat, quite a large motor cruiser stooing around in the bay, and there were some men on the beach.'

'How many?'

'Two or three.'

'What were they doing?'

'Getting into a dinghy. Once they were through the surf, they headed out to the motor cruiser. By the time I got back to the car park, the boat was disappearing into the sea mist. When I got back to the cottage, as I said, the door was open. I found Madeleine with her throat cut in the kitchen.'

I took a deep breath before I went on.

'It was awful - I still can't believe it, it doesn't seem real. The police arrived almost immediately. Someone had let them know. I know because they mentioned a telephone call. Quite frankly, I don't understand it - any of it. I hadn't seen Madeleine in over a year, not since she left to take up the post in Sydney. In some respects, I didn't expect to ever see her again. Seeing her like that was a horrible shock. Do you think she here on holiday?'

'It's a good question, but I doubt it,' Balls said as I was reflecting what a stupid question it actually was.

'I take it you don't know then?'

'I can honestly tell you that I'm not sure what she was up to, or why she came here.'

'How did she know where I was living?'

'I don't know exactly, but it wouldn't have been difficult for her to trace you.'

'So why did she come here? Why did she install her clothes in the chest of drawers as well, as if she was intending to stay for a while? And what about the man in the garden?'

'Perhaps she was trying to escape, find somewhere to go into hiding. I suspect however, that she came here either to find or to hide something.'

'What about the man in the garden; why was he shot? Did she shoot him?'

'I'm not sure that I can answer any of your questions at the moment.'

'If I'd been at home when she arrived would I have been killed as well?'

It may seem strange but it was the first time that I had really considered that particular prospect and my knees went suddenly very wobbly.

'You all right?' Balls asked, noticing that the colour had drained from my face.

'I think I need to sit down.'

Balls helped me into a chair. I put my head between my knees whilst he continued to ask questions.

'If Anna wanted to hide the photos of your trip to St. Petersburg and she didn't have much time where do you think she might have put them?' He was clearly very keen on pursuing this subject.

'No idea!'

'Come on; you can do better than that!'

'It's a small cottage, there's not a great deal of choice for hiding things if you didn't know the place.'

'What about the furniture? Do you have the same furniture that you had in London?'

'There's the piano.'

'Yes, the piano - that's certainly a possibility. We'll start with that.'

'And, there is also a piano stool.'

'What's so interesting about the piano stool?'

'The underside of the lifting seat falls out. Madeleine knew about it. It needs to be wedged in to keep it in place.'

'Let's have a look at it; show me.' And so we examined it straight away. I removed the matchstick that kept the panel in place and lowered the panel. There, sitting on the panel, was one of the photographs that had been in the box.

'Well now, let's have a look at that,' Balls said, stretching out to pick it up. He chuckled.

'Do you want to let me in on it?' I asked.

'It wouldn't make much sense to you.'

'None of this makes *any* sense to me, so a little more nonsense isn't going to overtax me.' I remember him smiling like a Cheshire cat as he slipped the photo into the inside pocket of his sports jacket.

'You'd better get your things together.'

'What do I need? Where am I going?'

'Just a couple of changes of clothes, I can arrange for the rest of your wardrobe to be collected later if we need it. Sponge bag, shaving kit, that sort of stuff - just the essentials.'

Whilst I packed a suitcase, he mooched around, his hands behind his back, leaning forward to peer closely at things taking care to keep his paws of everything.

'Do you have any theories what happened to the other photographs?' I asked. 'Do you think that the police might have taken them?'

'Unlikely.'

'Why do you say that?'

I hated the silences that came between us when he didn't want to be drawn any further - the feeling of exclusion from a great secret was overwhelming.

I had the impression that not only did I not belong to the club, but that I was so badly qualified, or attired, that there was no way that I would ever be let in. What was clear, however, was that Rupert Balls was not going to let me out of his sight and that whatever it was that he had in mind for me, was certainly going to happen. There was a kind of inevitability about it and so I resigned myself to whatever was in store for me. I consoled myself with the thought that it was probably infinitely better with him than being banged up with Wrigglesworth before heading for a long spell in jail through another miscarriage of English justice. I knew that there was no one who could confirm my story, I didn't have an alibi, and although it seemed that the police had failed to find the gun, it was just as likely that they would and that somehow they would probably try to implicate me in having used it. In fact, I wondered if I was being set up - but couldn't come up with any reason why that might be. I reflected again about the men I had seen on the beach.

'It's unusual to see any activity on the beach when I go for a walk in the morning. Sure, sometimes, there's an odd angler packing up his gear having probably been there overnight, but yesterday morning there were at least two men getting into a dinghy and a third driving it. I didn't think much of it at the time but do you think that they might have had anything to do with what happened?'

'Why do you think they might have had something to do with the incident at your cottage?'

'I don't know. Perhaps because it was unusual.'

'Did you tell the police?'

'Off course I did, and more than once.'

'And what was their reaction?'

'They seemed to be completely disinterested with the information. It didn't seem to fit in with what they thought happened.'

'Why do you think that was?'

'Perhaps they thought that I was making it up. Maybe they thought what I was telling them was a red herring.'

'A red herring,' Balls repeated and laughed. 'Yes, a red herring.' I didn't see the joke in the statement; he obviously did and wasn't going to let me in on it. 'And, they were leaving the beach when you saw them?'

'Yes, they motored out to a large motor cruiser that was stooging around offshore.'

'You didn't see the name of the boat, did you?'

'No.'

'Are there any houses that overlook the beach?' Balls asked.

'Yes, one or two and then there's also the pub, which is very close to the beach.'

'Do you know any of the residents?'

'Well, I've met the publican and his wife several times and there's an old boy who lives quite high up the cliff, Rear Admiral something or other, most people call him George. I think his name is Brace something or other. It's an unusual name.'

'Bracegirdle, maybe?'

'Yes, that's it,' I confirmed, impressed that he had fallen on the name so quickly.

I don't know why, but Rupert Balls suddenly became very keen on visiting the Rear Admiral.

And so, as soon as I had what I needed, we got back into his black Audi, reversed down the lane until we could turn round, and then headed across the valley towards the pub and the coastal footpath that climbed to the Rear Admiral's house.

Rupert Balls was about the same height as me, of average build, if anything perhaps a little heavier than I was, more solid, if you know what I mean. He looked as if he was a sporty sort of person and I could well imagine him playing inside centre. He was rather thick set as well, the kind of face that looked like that of a rugby player who had been bashed fairly frequently. It was a sort of rugged look and his comportment described an air of calm self-confidence. However, I still didn't know anything about him and continued to assume that he was a lawyer of some sort - one of Madeleine's colleagues, as he said.

Rear Admiral Bracegirdle was highly delighted to have unexpected visitors. He told us that he often felt deprived of human contact, especially outside pub opening hours and admitted to us that during the summer, when the coastal footpath was more heavily frequented, he would often engage passers-by in a conversation over the hedge. If they looked interesting, he would invite them in for tea. Once there, they were usually trapped for the remainder of the afternoon.

When Rupert Balls showed his identity card, or pass, or whatever it was, he laughed. 'I didn't expect to see any of you chaps ever again!'

'Well, no, I don't expect you did. Still, you will appreciate that the matter we're about to speak of is quite serious and shouldn't go outside these four walls.'

'You can count on me in that score. I am familiar with the Act as you probably know.'

'I recognised your name immediately, sir.' The Rear Admiral smiled.

'How are you tied up with these people, John?' The Rear Admiral asked looking at me. 'I thought that you were a music teacher.'

'I am a music teacher and I haven't a clue who these people are, or what you're talking about.' George Bracegirdle raised his bushy eyebrows as much in disbelief as anything.

'If you say so, who am I to suggest otherwise.'

I think that it was probably then that I realised that Rupert Balls was probably far from being a lawyer. What he was however, I didn't learn until sometime later.

'I'll tell you why we called in to see you,' Balls began, and then went on briefly to describe the recent events to him. The Rear Admiral didn't interrupt. He listened attentively. As Balls was finishing, he came to the crux. 'There was a motor cruiser lying offshore yesterday morning at dawn, or shortly afterwards. I don't suppose that you were up at that hour?'

'I'm always up at that hour. I often watch John going for his walk along the beach. If my knees weren't so arthritic I'd join him, but I can't manage much these days, so I watch him instead with some degree of envy. Yes, I saw him yesterday, and the three men in the dinghy and the motor cruiser.'

'Did you see where the men came from?'

'One man came ashore from the cruiser with the dinghy and met the others on the beach. I don't know where the others came from. Nevertheless, they were very efficient in re-launching the dinghy and getting off the beach. I looked at them through the telescope in the conservatory. They weren't locals, so, I can't help you much on identifying them. The cruiser however, was called *Rode Zeebrassen*, which I believe is Dutch for Red Sea Bream. The cruiser was registered in Rotterdam. I imagine this might be useful to you.'

'More than you can imagine,' Balls said, but he didn't let me in on the secret. Although I did appreciate rather better, his amusement at my use of the term *Red Herring*. In fact, innocently, I hadn't been that far off the mark.

We spent the next half-an-hour or so talking to George, who whilst appearing very knowledgeable on a variety of subjects, was unable to provide more information on the matter, in question. On the other hand, in that half hour, I probably learned more about George, than I ever had from our brief conversations in the pub. That Rupert Balls should recognise his name instantly suggested that he was someone with a reputation of some sort. However, why should a lawyer be so well acquainted with a retired Rear Admiral? That was, if Balls was a lawyer, which I was beginning to doubt, as well whether the Rear Admiral actually served in the Navy.

As we said good-bye, George asked us where we were going next.

'Dorchester Hospital Morgue,' Balls replied casually, and again, that icy feeling seemed to chill the blood in my veins.

George just nodded. He seemed to know what the score, which was more than I did.

Chapter 4

Rupert Ball's Audi didn't look at all lived in. There were no sweet papers, no grit on the carpet, no maps, no scraps of paper. I suspected, not without reason, that it wasn't his.

'Hire car?' I asked, not so much curious, more trying to make conversation.

'Pool,' he replied succinctly.

Then I asked him the question that had been on my mind for some time. 'You're not a lawyer, are you?'

'No, not at all.' He almost laughed but rather successfully stifled it.

'So, what was your relationship with Madeleine?'

'She wasn't a lawyer either,' he said, 'if you really want to know.'

It was very confusing. I had lived with the idea that she was a lawyer for well over a decade. 'But I remember her telling me about some of the cases that she dealt with. She specialised in planning law and often had to attend public inquiries. She was away for days on end sometimes!'

'It was part of her cover.'

Oh dear, *part of her cover* - what did he mean by that? It wouldn't take a genius to sort out the rest.

Nevertheless, I was beginning to think that this person, with whom I had lived for so long, was someone that I didn't really know at all. The firm of lawyers that she worked for was genuine, however, it existed, I'd seen it, and I had even waited outside their offices for her.

'But, I used to ring her up at her place in Lincoln Inns Fields. I know that it was a firm of lawyers because I walked past it several times. I even met Madeleine outside on a few occasions. They are called Cummings and Cummings. Well, they are the lawyers I rang that brought you down here, so there must be a connection.'

'I know. They are a bit of a front for us. We have an arrangement with them. We use them from time to time. They pass on telephone messages and they also deal with certain kinds of business for us.'

'But Madeleine was qualified as a lawyer, wasn't she. She showed me her degree, she got a first; or was that made up as well?'

'No, you're perfectly correct, her degree was genuine. She was one of the best students in her year. Yes, she obtained her law degree, but she never practised as lawyer. She was recruited when she was at Glasgow University School of Law and began working for the firm immediately she left.'

'Who recruited her and what did she do then?' I asked rather naively.

'I can't tell you.'

'Why ever not?'

‘Official Secrets Act.’

And, if anything is a conversation stopper, that is. I knew it wasn’t worth pursuing any further and fell into silence as we descended the hill towards Winterbourne Abbas. Dorchester was only five or ten minutes away and unfortunately the conversation never really got going on that subject again.

Dorchester is an interesting and rather unusual small town. It has hardly any ribbon development stringing out from it, largely because the Duchy of Cornwall owned most of the land around it and at one time wasn’t very keen on development. As a result, it appears quite tidily self-contained by neat agricultural farmland in the surrounding chalk downs.

It’s a settlement that dates back two thousand years and lies just to the north of Maiden Castle, which was the largest Iron Age fort in Europe at the time of the Romans. Despite its massive earthworks, which look like giant folds in the landscape, a sort of seismic ripple that extends out from the plateau of the settlement within the fort, there are conflicting archaeological thoughts whether it was ever used to resist the Romans. Vespasian’s second and eighth Legions, which were in the locality in 43 AD, were mostly engaged in founding the town of *Durnovaria*, providing such basic services as a secure water supply as well as a waste management system. Within a relatively short period of the town being founded, the hill fort was abandoned, commerce perhaps being pragmatically rather more attractive, than war.

We drove in through the new development of Poundbury on the west side of the town. It had commenced several years earlier but there was still a huge amount of building to be undertaken before the new quarter to the town would be completed. The development, which was being undertaken by the Duchy of Cornwall, suddenly much keener on development, had attracted some controversy in the earlier years, most of which had subsequently died down. From what I saw, it looked like a very attractive place to live and work. Considerably better in every respect, pastiche or not, than the rather grim housing estate that we then drove past on the way to the hospital.

‘You don’t have to come with me if you don’t want to.’ Balls said. ‘I have to go look. I may have to identify the bodies. Part of my job unfortunately.’

‘Can I stay in the car?’

‘Yes, but I will have to handcuff you to the steering wheel. I can’t afford you going adrift, if you see what I mean.’ He smiled.

It wasn’t quite a disarming smile, but did indicate some embarrassment, or guilt, in having to restrain me. I quickly concluded that it was probably safer to stick by his side, rather than being left, tethered like a goat to his car.

We made our way to the hospital morgue. Rupert Balls introduced himself and produced his magical pass again. We were immediately admitted.

‘Been expecting you,’ the white-coated man said. ‘Follow me please.’

He took us to where the two bodies were being kept in cold storage. My skin crawled just thinking about what we were about to see. I could feel the colour draining from my face.

‘You can sit in the corner if you prefer. There is no obligation for you to look at the bodies,’ Balls said.

I didn’t really know what I wanted to do. A curious combination of emotions affected me. In a way, I wanted to see

Madeleine for a last time, to say a sort of final good-bye to her. I hadn't had the chance in the cottage when I had found her; the surprise of finding her had been too shocking. I really didn't want to see the terrible wound that had been inflicted on her. Even the thought of it turned my stomach. On the other hand, I felt that I needed to face my fears. I didn't want to be cowardly about it, succumbing to averting my eyes in the presence of death, rather than acknowledging the reality of it.

'Thank you,' I finally said. 'I'd like to see Madeleine.'

As it happened, it wasn't as bad as I thought it would be. I suppose mentally I had already prepared myself for it and also, because of the changes in her appearance that I have already mentioned, she was already somewhat alien. She had of course been cleaned up and although the wound was evident, it didn't look quite as awful as it had in the cottage when it was surrounded by copious amounts of freshly spilled blood. Her skin looked waxen, it had a non-vital, bluish, ivory dullness about it. She looked serene, despite the wound, and I was relieved by the fact.

'Can you identify her as Madeleine?' Balls asked quietly.

'Yes,' I replied, 'I can. Is it Anna?'

'Yes,' he sighed. 'It's a shame that it should end like this.' He paused and then asked with an air of genuine sorrow, 'enough?'

'Yes, thank you.'

'Thank you,' he said to the assistant.

'Do you want to look at the other one that came in, the man?' the man in the white coat asked.

'Please,' Balls replied. 'I don't suppose he's been identified yet either, has he?'

'Not as far as I am aware,' the man replied.

One drawer went back into the rather large filing cabinet and another was pulled out.

'Do you know who he is?' the white coat asked as he pulled the sheet back

Rupert Balls leaned over to examine him. I regarded him closely; he wasn't someone that I knew, although there was something familiar about him. Balls nodded; he recognised him immediately.

'When will the autopsy be carried out?' Balls asked.

'They are both programmed for this afternoon.'

Balls pulled the sheet back over the man's head.

'Thank you.'

The deep stainless steel draw slid almost silently back into the wall.

'Sergei Kazakovo - Russian national.' Balls said without emotion. 'If you have the papers I will sign a formal identification for you.'

I didn't say anything at the time, but my mind was already conjuring with yet another discovery. Did Madeleine have a brother, or was the name just a coincidence?

'I'll need a copy of the autopsy reports. Can you e-mail them to this address?' Balls produced a card, which he handed to the man in the white coat.

'I'll make sure you get copies.'

'Thank you.' Rupert Balls turned to face me. 'Shall we go, John?'

I nodded; I needed to, I needed some fresh air, my self-control was nearly exhausted.

In a way, the journey from Dorchester to London was a strange experience and, as a result, it was one, which I remember quite well.

I quizzed Rupert Balls on all manner of things, succeeding only in obtaining answers to some of my questions and drawing a complete blank elsewhere.

Sergei, it transpired, was indeed Anna's brother. Unlike Anna however, he had been brought up in Russia. They were separated when they were quite young. Anna had moved to the United Kingdom with her parents when she was five years old. Sergei had been brought up in an orphanage in St. Petersburg. For a long time they knew nothing of each other's existence, and Balls was unable to tell me when exactly they found out about each other and subsequently met.

I noticed that I had also begun referring to Madeleine as Anna. Madeleine I had accepted was dead, but this Anna seemed like another character and appeared in a strange way very much alive to me. I wanted to know more about her. Finally, perhaps to avoid my questions, which must have seemed endless, Rupert Balls decided to give me a short history of Russia since Mikhail Gorbachev. I can't remember exactly where he started, but he did mention *perestroika* and *glasnost*. I'm quite sure that he would have made a good history teacher; his narrative was precise, well illustrated, and interesting. I learnt a huge amount that afternoon. When I think about it now, it's quite probable that he had already decided that he needed to prepare me for something, and then, it seemed, was an ideal opportunity to do it. At the time, of course, I had no idea and just listened, fascinated. He explained that he wanted to put Anna's work into context and therefore, instead of having to evade many of my questions, he would describe something about the area in which she had principally worked. And so, he started.

'You have to understand that at the end of the eighties the Soviet Union was dying on its feet. There are those of course who would dispute this but take it from me it's a fact. It was bankrupt, and compared to the Capitalist West, had hardly progressed since the communist revolution, nearly seventy years earlier. Poverty was endemic, living standards and worker productivity were abysmal, and alcoholism, which was rife, was killing millions directly and indirectly.

'Although some very significant scientific advances had been made, and although it maintained a huge army and navy, it was really not much more than a third world country trapped in the past. With worldwide advances in telecommunications, it was obvious that it would become increasingly impossible to continue to lie to their own population. It was evident, just from television images, that people in the West enjoyed a much better standard of living. Nevertheless, lying was endemic. Concealing the truth was normal. It had once been the only way for the party and individuals to ensure their survival, whether they were the ones in power, or whether they were just workers. Even the magnitude of the Chernobyl disaster in the Ukraine was originally concealed for a while from the Soviet government.

'Gorbachev realised....

Read on.....

