

Dead Love

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Chapter 1

'Extract from Nathan Brooke's diary- Saturday 28th June 2003'

She ran. She ran across the towering cliff top, framed against the sparkling azure sky in all her beauty. The sea, far below, gently lapped against the pallid rocks as if to stop and admire my Eloise, with her flowing jet black hair which reflected the early morning sun, her loose pale blue blouse that complimented her suntanned russet complexion and her short tweed mini skirt that showed off her sturdy legs with their receding tan. She was the personification of beauty.

I followed in awe, my feet bouncing off the dry stony turf that was in need of the damp streaming rain that the East coast of England had recently been deprived of. Eloise sprung majestically ahead occasionally with a glance to her Romeo, a flash of the brilliant white teeth that lit up the cliff top already awash with the subdued radiance of the early morning sun.

This thought hit me like a brick wall. How like Romeo and Juliet we were. Two young lovers disapproved of by their families. Maybe I'm exaggerating. My wonderful mother, who I can hear at this very minute clattering away in the kitchen in our out dated wooden farmhouse, isn't bothered who I date and what shenanigans I get up to with them. She is preoccupied with trying to make the vast acres of farmland surrounding us yield the sort of wealth needed to feed and clothe us. Mum is also locked in a feud with Ted Barrow over a bare, barren piece of land on the delicate border between our land and the Barrow's. Basically, far too busy to worry about where and with whom I spend my Saturday mornings. However Eloise's family are another matter. High up on their pedestal on the winding county road that views the picturesque, traditional, postcard village of Wellston-on-Sea. They are very strongly

against the idea of their innocent Eloise being indoctrinated by my sort of hard working people. Where they can lounge about their heated swimming pool all day long without a care in the world, my mother and I are grafting ourselves to the bone trying to resurrect the dying farm. That is when I'm not running along winding, rocky cliff paths with their daughter. There'd be hell to pay if they ever found out that Eloise wasn't really helping the vicar with his flower arranging in the quaint church of Wellston-on-Sea; built 1798.

Eloise plunged herself into the overgrown, prickly hedgerow and so did I. The thoughts of retribution drained away as Eloise's angel-like hands took hold of me and kissed me dexterously on the cheek. The whole world stopped still and faded away as I took hold of her dazzling body. This was the moment I lived for. And in that moment I knew this love would never die even if we were to follow the same fate as Shakespeare's young lovers.

'Extract from Nathan Brooke's diary- Friday 5th September 2003'

The sun had gone in. Metaphorically as well as literally. Eloise bounced along the cliff path. I tried to keep up but I was tired. Tired of it all. Eloise was no longer the sweet girl I had started to love. She was now an obsessive mad creature, no longer desired. The solitary problem was I could never tell her. I couldn't devastate that once lovely and innocent girl.

Even then, however, there was the niggling feeling that, that wasn't the single problem. I remembered all the emotions I had felt about Eloise just over a month ago. Now though they had transferred themselves as if by some mystic force of love to this other woman.

She was everything that Eloise had been and more. I entered a daze every time I saw her, every time she flashed her cheeky, encouraging smile. I wanted to be with her. I

wanted to be in the close, sticky contact that we had only been in once. There was something about the way she spoke. Something about every little intricate thing she did.

Still Eloise bounced ahead. Now she was framed against the amethyst coloured clouds which held the threat to a long awaited thunder storm. She was oblivious to all my inner feelings. Suddenly she spun around with brisk athleticism. This no longer gave me a buzz but it was in that deadly moment that I saw my chance of freedom. Eloise, maybe by fate, had come to a stop by part of the cliff that had slipped away in an adrenalin pumping moment some six weeks ago, smashing into the sacred, unbreakable rocks far below. Where she now stood was a dangerous place to be. The path she had come to rest on could subside whenever it felt like making that flight into the dreary, sea green rock pools surrounded by pointing rocks, as if there to protect the shallow pools some immense distance below. Maybe if I was to give her that little nudge needed to send her plummeting down the drop of flat faced shiny rock.

My thoughts were broken into by the shape of a figure coming towards us. I revolved round to see the full beauty of my other woman gently gliding towards us...

Chapter 2

Cyril Lambeth stood stock still behind the bar of The Swan. He looked round his pub with an air of utter satisfaction. The tavern hummed with laughter and chatter but to Cyril everything was peaceful. Cyril watched his barmaid, Martine, serve the thirsty, impatient men desperate for there next pint.

“A very competent and attractive young girl,” he mused to himself.

Martine floated behind the bar smiling at the punters, content in her job. Cyril saw the childish jaw open and

close but the words didn't make it to his ears. He noticed the innocent pale blue of her irises. His eyes drifted down to her slender figure that squeezed tightly into her purple dress. And what a dress! Far too short and far too revealing. But Cyril wasn't complaining.

"Cyril."

The solitary word cut into his thoughts like a knife. As Cyril served the customer he came to his senses and realised, as if for the first time, that 66 year old ex-convicts shouldn't be staring at 15 year old girls. Nor should 15 year old girls be working behind a smoke filled pub at 10 o'clock at night. Well truthfully she shouldn't be there at any time but luckily she was tall and mature enough to pass as 18.

After serving the vulture he turned his attention to the television that was droning on to itself from its elevated position in the corner of the bar. Cyril had never noticed before how out of place the state of the art Panasonic television looked in the Olde Worlde style pub. The fading red and white (now tinged yellow with all the smoke) wallpaper, the worn raspberry carpet and the woodworm ridden bar didn't quite go with the T.V.

Cyril reflected, however, that it was a pleasant pub even if he did have a certain bias. From the bar you could see out of the rotting leaded light windows onto the beautiful harbour of Wellston-on-Sea. The moonlight glistened off the depths of black that were the sea. The motorboats moored for the night rocked gently and thought Cyril, looked just like toy boats in a bath.

Cyril now turned his attention back to the television. The local news was being broadcast. He knew the newsreader because she lived at the bottom of his street. It was nice that Wellston-on-Sea had such a village community and the sense that everyone knew everyone.

"...a tragic accident took place on the cliff path just off the village of Wellston-on-Sea," announced the

newsreader. “A 15 year old girl plunged to her death while playing truant with her boyfriend, earlier today. The police have named the girl as Eloise Smithers the daughter of wealthy businessman Alistair Smithers.”

A deadly silence fell on the pub. Everyone present knew Eloise and the news that she was dead gave everyone a personal sense of loss.

“Our thoughts lie with the family tonight,” the newsreader continued seemingly unaware of the devastation she had just caused, “and our deepest sympathy goes out to them. Her boyfriend Nathan Brooke is said to be helping the police with their enquiries. And finally...”

The newsreader's words drifted away as a shocked hubbub descended on the pub. Cyril stood there shell shocked but he couldn't help noticing the sly smile on the corner of Martine's lips.

Chapter 3

Detective Inspector Aaron Holmes dawdled down a corridor of Ipswich police station, lost in thought, towards Interview Room number 5.

Aaron was a very determined man and this was recognizable from the determined line of his chin. He was a very competent copper and got his results by any means possible. However for people unfamiliar to him he looked more like a criminal than an enforcer of the law. This was probably the result of being brought up on a rough and graffiti covered council estate in the crime covered centre of Ipswich. Aaron had managed to use his background to successful ends by using slightly unorthodox methods of catching villains. Unfortunately his devotion, and it was devotion, to his job had kept him single throughout his life and that was unlikely to change at the age of 50. Aaron was never one to let his age obstruct his duty and had on many occasions thrown himself into life and death situations.

As he ambled down the narrow, claustrophobic and tatty corridor of Ipswich police station he relived the moment that nearly ended his career in the police force. Surprising to him that it was not the moment he was trapped with a gun-wielding serial killer in a derelict and dilapidated warehouse.

“No,” Aaron thought “it was more serious than that.”

Throughout his career Aaron had strived to be as senior in the police force as humanely possible. And to his uncontrollable delight, two years ago he had been promoted to Detective Chief Inspector. Then yesterday Superintendent Charles Winchester told him in his calm bureaucratic tone “I’m demoting you to Detective Inspector.”

The words had stung Aaron like a wasp. “All because of that stupid incident two weeks ago,” he had thought.

As his feet echoed on the cracked tiled floor, Aaron decided to start his flashback right back at the beginning, a whole two weeks ago.

Ipswich police officers had been under enormous pressure to catch a serial killer. Already there had been 5 killings each within 100 metres of one another and each body had been found with the same type of knife in their back. In charge of the case Aaron had instructed his officers to search the radius in which all 5 murders had occurred and to do extensive door-to-door inquiries. Meanwhile Aaron had searched the computerised database (Why did everything have to be computerised? What had been wrong with good old fashioned filing?).

These unconventional thoughts cut into Aaron’s nightmarish flashback of events rather spookily making Aaron question his sanity for a couple of seconds.

Aaron’s mind then continued with its thought process. On the database he had found that Daniel Tyne, convicted of GBH, who lived in the radius of the killings had been released from prison a week before the killings had

commenced. Aaron had taken this information to the Super and had asked for permission to search his house, expecting it to be awarded without the executive eyelids even to have blinked. But he had been inexplicably wrong. Aaron had decided that he must have caught the pompous old fool on a bad day. To make matters escalate into even worse times for Aaron, the Superintendent had decided that Aaron couldn't cope with the pressures of the case and had assigned D.C.I Harry Barnfield to assist Aaron with the urgent case. Truthfully it had been urgent as Eastonshire had been thrown into a panicked turmoil and many people had stubbornly refused to leave their homes. Almost instantaneously D.C.I Barnfield had rubbished Aaron's idea that Tyne was the killer.

Ignoring Barnfield, Aaron had approached Tyne and questioned him regarding the five murders. After their meeting Aaron had been utterly convinced of his guilt. With this absolute conviction in mind Aaron had stormed into Barnfield's office and had demanded that he produce a warrant for Tyne's arrest and he was a danger to the community.

The conversation was crystal clear in Aaron's mind as if it was happening to him at that very minute.

"Look Harry! Give me that damn warrant I know he's guilty, I've been to see him," Aaron had bawled at Barnfield, the saliva flying out of his mouth in a fit of uncontrollable rage. "If you don't then he's going to kill again."

"Calm down Aaron" Barnfield had patronisingly told him as if speaking to a disobedient schoolboy. "We need proper evidence not just the sort of circumstantial fanciful instinct you're working on now. Anyway I told you not to approach the suspect."

"Oh so he's a suspect now," Aaron had retorted, pleased to have scored a point. "I don't know who you think you are. You don't give me my orders! We're level in rank so

get down off your pedestal and start trying to catch this killer.”

Barnfield’s face had clenched and he replied sourly, “What do you think I’ve been doing for the last three days? I’ve been putting in a couple of hours overtime everyday. You?”

“I didn’t know it was a competition,” was Aaron’s smart response.

“Right, I’m reporting you to the Super. You disobeyed a direct order not to speak to Tyne and now you’re pressurising me for a warrant that he’s already refused to give you.”

“You couldn’t give a stuff about justice, you’re just here to prove a point. You’ve always had it in for me. What sort of a police officer are you?

“A better one than you’ll ever be.”

Aaron saw red. He had put up with Barnfield for years and years, had ignored his snide remarks, the insinuations that he was the better officer. Well he was a D.C.I. now and he had really put a 100% in to get there. There was absolutely no way he would stick Barnfield’s discrimination now they were counterparts.

In one move Aaron put the whole of his police career in jeopardy. He punched Barnfield in the face. It was a crisp punch, a punch that relieved him of his built up anger, anger that had resided in him for years. In that moment he felt as if he had settled an enormous debt.

But then the feeling of elation passed. Blood spurted out of Barnfield’s nose and he slowly collapsed backwards as if in slow motion. And immediately Aaron regretted it. It suddenly dawned on him what he had done, as if he had not been conscious before, as if it hadn’t been him. Barnfield crashed into his desk with the splintering of wood. He lay sprawled there for a couple of seconds as if in a daze.

Aaron meekly asked “Are you okay?”

Aaron saw the rage build up in Barnfield's face. He sprung up, his eyes wild like a bull's. For a second Aaron thought he would strike back. But he relented. Aaron saw the mischief light up Barnfield's eyes. It was as if the situation had suddenly dawned on him in its true colours. Barnfield now had the means to expel his rival from the force. It was a once in lifetime chance and he had leapt at it.

Superintendent Winchester had suspended Aaron for two weeks, pending further inquiry.

Those had been the worst two weeks of Aaron's life. Everyday matters had seemed trivial and pointless. Aaron had been plunged into a despairing depression. He had spent most of his time drowning his sorrows in the local brewery but he found no comfort in the bottom of a glass. He dreaded going back to work to hear from the Super that his beloved career in the police was over. He had kept reliving the treacherous moment over and over again. It had become a recurring nightmare.

Yesterday, he had gone back to work. He felt as if he was a criminal awaiting his sentence from the deliberating Judge. The Judge was Winchester and his verdict was unexpected.

Winchester had waffled inconsequentially, lecturing Aaron on how violence was for criminals the very people they were trying to apprehend and it would not be tolerated in the police force. He then changed to a more sympathetic tone, sounding like a nurse trying to reassure an anxious patient. He praised Aaron on his successes over the years and described him as "...a competent and determined detective who had achieved notable successes over 25 years in the police force." He then told Aaron, "Taking this into consideration, I've decided that the appropriate course of action is to demote you to Detective Inspector" in his calm and bureaucratic tone. He really did sound like a Judge passing sentence and this unnerved Aaron. At first Aaron

had been dumfounded but then it dawned on him how truly and utterly lucky he had been. To punch a colleague and only be demoted one rank was a pretty mean feat and it gave him a sense of pride that this had been attributed to his earlier successes.

However on leaving the Supers office he learnt of information that threw a completely different light on things. One week ago undercover detectives had discovered brand new evidence to prove beyond any reasonable doubt that the serial killer was no other than Daniel Tyne.

He forgot the demotion for a fraction of a second and was hit by a wave of elation that made the hair on his arm stand up like that of a hedgehog. He had felt the sensation of victory run all over his body, he had been right all along and that was the proper reason for being kept on in the police force.

Then like a ton of bricks the reality of his delicate situation hit him. He was a D.I. with lots of D.S.'s and D.C.'s under him. He would have no credibility, his orders would have no authority. How could he expect them to have discipline when he had shown a complete lack of it by punching a colleague, a man they probably all respected dearly? He couldn't hope that they would be oblivious to his actions, Barnfield would have made sure of that. "I bet he got great pleasure from that," Aaron had thought despairingly

Should he just resign? No, he never gave in. It wasn't his composition. He would be as determined as ever and he would show Barnfield, he would show everyone in fact that he could become a D.C.I. once again. And he would, if it was the very last thing he did.

This was his second day back and his very first case preceding his suspension. It was his chance to throw himself into the limelight and prove himself to the Super. As he approached Interview Room 5 he decided categorically that it was a very simple case to announce

himself back to Eastonshire Police Force. Nathan Brooke had quite obviously pushed his girlfriend to her death, he had been a nervous baggage when he had been asked to accompany the Constable back to the station. He didn't know why as yet but he would uncover the truth. If Brooke was lying, as Aaron presumed, then he was going to have to watch his back because Aaron Holmes was on the proverbial warpath and nothing was going to stand in his way.

Chapter 4

Nathan Brooke looked around the stuffy, dingy and glutinous interview room that had the stench of cigarette smoke. A little light seeped in through a high, barred stain glass window but otherwise the room was in a gloomy darkness. Nathan thought that the room reflected his mood quite well. He was in shock at the events that had occurred earlier that day. He had convinced himself that the police knew.

He turned his attention to the police officer who sat on the other side of the rotting, old interview table that was positioned in the centre of the small and shabby room. He had introduced himself as D.C.I. Barnfield or something like that. Nathan had been too preoccupied in his own train of thought to take in minor details like that. He studied Barnfield curiously. He was again convinced that he knew, knew everything. He stared harder. He saw the chubby face, the dark brown eyes that seemed to stare straight through him in a disconcerting manner, the rounded chin, the clean shaven features and the black uncombed almost scruffy hair. Oh he knew alright. How could those cunning brown eyes not know?

Nathan had once freed himself from the stare he had found himself locked in, hard enough to make his eyes blur with tears. He blinked quickly to destroy the drops of water

that wanted to seep from his eyes. He couldn't let Barnfield see these, although grief would only be natural.

Nathan cast his eyes around the bare room. The ramshackle table was the only piece of furniture in the room, an old fashioned tape recorder was fitted into the crumbling wall. The tiled floor was cracked in places and the whole room looked as if it might disintegrate at any moment. Nathan pondered on how the funds for Eastonshire Police Force had actually been spent. He then chastised himself for letting his mind wander from the matter in hand. What was the matter in hand?

Eloise was dead. That was it, wasn't it? He was cracking up. How much longer could he keep this up? He saw the empty seat next to Barnfield and decided that he must have been waiting for a colleague before the inquisition could get under way. How much longer?

They sat in silence, a silence so loud that it echoed in Nathan's ears.

The door cracked open like a revolver, cutting into the silence. Light flooded in from the corridor and the silhouette of D.I. Aaron Holmes stood in the doorway.

Nathan could only make out the outline of Aaron until he entered the room and clicked on the light switch. The room was illuminated by a solitary light bulb hanging from the ceiling by a peeling wire. Nathan shielded his face from the intense and dazzling light. To him the vivid illumination of the room gave one a false sense of security and he shivered as a sudden chill crept down the nape of his neck.

"My name is D.I. Aaron Holmes," Aaron explained comfortingly. "There's no need to worry we just need to ask you a few routine questions.

Was he imagining it or had Nathan seen a smile on the corner of Barnfield's mouth as Holmes had identified himself? Immediately he sensed friction between the two officers.

Nathan studied Holmes as he had done with Barnfield, as if he felt the need to familiarise himself with the people who held his future in their hands. Holmes, Nathan contemplated, was probably in his late forties and had a rugged, unshaven face with a determined chin. Nathan felt slightly intimidated by the clear, commanding, grey eyes and quickly moved down to the slightly pointed nose and thin line of the almost inadequate mouth. His greying brown hair was gelled back to reveal a crumpled forehead showing line of extreme worry. Holmes' clothes were well worn but looked expensive as well. The crunchy leather jacket and shabby brown cord jeans suited Holmes' persona very accurately.

Nathan flinched as he was brought back to his senses as Holmes clicked on the tape recorder and it whirred into life with an unreliable clunking sound.

As Barnfield ran sluggishly through the standard preliminaries, Aaron calculated Nathan observably. Aaron glanced at the handsome features that clearly showed Nathan's distress. He saw the dark black hair immaculately gelled back, the thin dark brown slits mastering as eyes, the childish nose, the clean shaven cheeks, the bright red lips and the handsome line of his jaw. His clothes, Aaron thought decidedly, were obviously very much of the cool up-to-date fashion. The trendy, designer label jacket on top of the black T-Shirt with a punk band's logo printed scruffily on the front and finally, looking under the table Aaron could see the baggy jeans, that looked as if they needed pulling up, that had a tatty appearance about them, conceived because of the untidy rip on both knees of the 'designer trousers.' "Fashion these days," Aaron thought disconsolately. Aaron observed interestedly that Nathan's handsome face was wrecked with worry, the lines clearly showing on his forehead and his hands were quivering nervously. If ever there was anyone guilty it was Nathan Brooke.

The preliminaries came to a close. The interview began.

Barnfield made it quite plain from the commencement of the interview that he was superior to Aaron and he was going to command this interview. This annoyed Aaron immensely because this was his personal chance to impress the Super and he wasn't going to have Barnfield stealing the glory.

Barnfield was asking Nathan sympathetically "So if it's not too painful it would be very helpful if you could just run through what happened on the cliff top."

Nathan's head jerked upwards. He asked;

"You think I pushed her off don't you?"

"No of course not," Barnfield reassured him. "We just want to establish what happened."

Slowly and with many stops for hysterical sobbing Nathan ran through the afternoon's events.

At lunchtime (12.30pm) Nathan and Eloise had slipped out of Wellston-on-Sea secondary school and made their way to the cliff path at the bottom of Farmer Ted Barrow's land, he owned the farm adjacent to Nathan's mother's farm. Ten minutes had gone by as they sprang down the path towards their hideout in a prickly but secluded bush. Nathan had happened to glance at his watch as tragedy had struck, that is when Eloise plummeted to her death. The time had been 12.55pm. To Nathan's knowledge nobody else had been present on the cliff so there were no witnesses to disprove or collaborate Nathan's story.

Nathan had rushed back along the path in a blind panic. It had been 1.00pm when Nathan reached the High Street and had phoned the police from the public telephone box. Police cars and an ambulance had been on the scene within minutes. Aaron knew the rest.

The S.O.C. O. (scene of crime officer) had cagily reported to the Constable on the scene that death had obviously been instantaneous and around 1 o'clock. Death had been due to the smashing of the back of the skull. He

had gone on to declare that there was no reason to suspect foul play as the damage had been down to the impact with the rock pool far below. That incidentally was where the body had been discovered by the S.O.C. s who were rather disgruntled at the treacherous trek down the side of the crumbling, normally inaccessible rock face. They had had to force their way through thorny brambles further along the cliff were the drop was marginally less of a plummet.

Nathan's narrative came to a close. Aaron lifted his head symbolising that he wished to ask a question, thus preventing Barnfield from doing so. Aaron asked slowly and tenderly;

“Before her death had you and Eloise had any sort of row?”

“No,” was the sharp response “I didn't kill her. You have to believe me.”

Aaron inclined his head sympathetically. “We know but we just need to ascertain some facts. For instance how long had you and Eloise being going out?”

“A couple of months.” Nathan began to jerk convulsively and tears began to drip uncontrollably onto the wooden table, sounding like a tap dripping monotonously into a metallic sink with an inevitable plopping sound.

Barnfield took over much to Aaron's annoyance. “We'll leave it there for today. Interview terminated at 8.55pm.”

Barnfield rose and clicked the tape recorder off. The whirring sound ceased and Aaron realised how loud it had been. “Aaron,” Barnfield barked, “take Nathan home. His mother is waiting for him.”

Nathan continued to sob, the sound echoed hauntingly around the bare room.

Chapter 5

Aaron's dark blue and battered Vauxhall Astra wound its way around the dark, tree lined country lanes that surrounded the sleepy seaside village of Wellston-on-Sea. The headlights from the Astra illuminated only 20 metres or so of the road so apart from that the rest of the lane was in an eerie impenetrable blackness. The impressive mansions were set off the road at the end of winding gravel drives. At this late hour they had been plunged into the invisible darkness.

Aaron and Nathan sat tense and upright in their seats, each lost in his own thoughts not wishing to interlude with the other occupant of the car.

Aaron was running through the case over and over again in his mind. He was unreservedly desperate to find the correct solution to this relatively simple case. Had Nathan pushed his girlfriend to her death? If so why? Or had she fallen to her death? Or was there another explanation? Had Eloise's death been the work of some as yet unknown quantity? If so why had Nathan lied and alleged that he and Eloise had been alone on that deserted cliff path? Who would he protect?

Nathan however was considering his options. What was he going to do next? He knew he couldn't possibly get away with it, with lying. The police knew, of course they did, it was their job to know. And yet there was no evidence. But then he saw the determined line of Aaron's jaw. Suddenly he was wrapped in a sense of fear. He had to go through with it, he knew the devastating consequences of surrendering. Years and years in prison... No he could never let that occur.

Nathan's mind then drifted away into a comforting and lulling place. As if his mind and gone to sleep. What was he going to put in his diary? Beautiful, exquisite words floated into his mind. He would make today's account very special and tranquil. It was the least that Eloise deserved.

However thoughts of his diary drained away like gushing water down a dirty, slimy drain. He knew that he shouldn't be concerning himself with Eloise. She was dead and that could not be reversed. Anyway it was not her that mattered now...

Nathan and Aaron awoke from their thoughts as they passed what they both knew was the house of the Smithers, Eloise's family. Nathan could not bear to look and Aaron was bitterly reminded that tomorrow he would have to pay them a visit. Even though they were already aware of their daughter's demise, a kind and gentle policewoman had been sent for that delicate and emotionally draining job, it was still unavoidably necessary for Aaron to visit them and hopefully learn some valuable information. But it would be thoroughly unpleasant for everyone concerned and Aaron hoped that they were not hostile towards him. Consequentially he would have to be exceptionally subtle because Alistair Smithers was an important pillar of the Eastonshire community. Aaron knew that he would behave decently however high or low they were up the scale of respectability because there was no escaping the fact that they had tragically lost their daughter.

The Astra came to the bottom of the murky and sinister country lane and out onto the moonlit High Street of Wellston-on-Sea. Aaron's eyes were immediately drawn to the gloomy depths of the sea which lapped up against the sea wall, spray occasionally sprinkling magically onto the High Street. Rowing boats and motor boats bounced up and down on the choppy waters. Aaron sympathised with anyone who might have been unlucky enough to stay the night on one of the nauseating boats that made Aaron feel queasy just gazing at them.

Nathan gave Aaron no instructions as how to get to the farm on which her and his mother resided but as the High Street came to an abrupt end against a daunting cliff face if

Aaron was to navigate the Astra to the right he intelligently decided that to the left must be the correct route.

Aaron's Astra glided silently to the left and coasted along the sea front. Aaron observed the elongated and worn concrete structure that jutted out into the ocean and decided that it must be a pier. As the car drove on rusty steel railings were also visible. Aaron then turned his attention to the left side of the street. Seeing the row of houses and shops Aaron realised how dimly lit the High Street was. Only a handful of the buildings were illuminated and there were only a couple of street lamps scattered along the sea front. In contrast the battered pier was lit up by a row of blindingly pallid bulbs, elevated by two wooden masts.

As the car passed the row of terraced buildings Aaron studied them carefully. They were all made out of crumbling burgundy brick. For such a diminutive out of the way village it appeared to have everything required. There was a family butcher's, a Café called 'The Green Parrot', a family bakery, a Bed and Breakfast with too many letters obliterated from its name plaque to be able to identify its name, a Green Grocers, a pub with a plaque swinging in the breeze depicting a picture of a white Swan and the name of the pub; 'The Swan' and finally at the far corner of the street, a grander looking B&B with steps leading up to a black painted door with a shiny brass knocker that stood out like a wasp in a ant hill, the village Library situated in a Tudor building with its wattle and daub walls and a rather tatty but seemingly outsized Corner Shop. Aaron imagined that it was there that village folk could stock up on everyday essentials while exchanging a friendly word with the probably ancient shop keeper. Aaron's mind drifted back to the Corner Shop in his neighbourhood and had often frequented as a child to buy some now extinct sweet for a couple of shillings. His mind then jumped back to his present day occupation of surveying the row of, on the whole, tatty buildings that desperately needed a lick of

paint. Scattered in between the tiny businesses were darkened and unnamed constructions that Aaron guessed were houses.

The car moved along at a snail's pace so that Aaron could unnoticeably observe the ghost town. The only sign of life was a faint humming from inside the public house and the glow of yellowish beam from the two ground floor windows. He could also see people moving about with full glasses of mud coloured liquid grasped tightly in their hands and a couple of men throwing sharp streamlined objects with multi-coloured tails at an obscured board, through mucky and cobweb covered leaded light windows with emulsion coloured paint peeling from the window frames.

The car drove on. At the end of the street the tarmac curved sharply to the left and up a steep hill into picturesque but now darkened countryside. However as the car navigated the tricky bend both occupants froze and remained silent. Where the road cut off and bent harshly to the left, lay the start of the cliff path were the tragic events of earlier that day had occurred and both passengers knew it but neither of them spoke. The winding, gravel and rock strewn cliff path wound away from the road and disappeared from view behind some bristly bramble bushes.

The car passed on, unaware of the tension inside it, meandering its way up the country lane. In acres of barren farmland, to Aaron's right, he could just distinguish a tiny, squalid farmhouse. As they came up to a wooden gate concealing a squelchy and muddy path Aaron wondered if this was Nathan's home.

"Farmer Ted Barrow and his wife Lorna live there," Nathan growled as if answering an unasked question.

The sudden noise unnerved Aaron and he felt a chill down his spine. For the first time it dawned on him that he was alone in his car with a probable murderer. He pressed

his foot down on the accelerator with sudden urgency. There was an unpleasant grating noise but Aaron was still adamant in his mind that his trusty old Astra would last him for many years to come.

Aaron was completely spooked when a little further up the ever steeper hill was a shadowy tower sticking up into the night casting a deadly shadow across the road. As the car grinded nearer Aaron could make out Wellston on Sea's Church. This shocked Aaron as he contemplated that half way up a hill was a very impractical and unusual place for a Church. In the eerie moonlight the Church impressed upon Aaron the image of evil but he was sure that in full daylight it was a pleasant and quaint little Church.

As the autumn wind whistled through the graveyard and the trees' shadows danced across the graves Aaron again found himself thrusting his foot upon the pedal wishing that Nathan's farm would materialise. The car jerked forward rapidly with a creaking like a squeaky garage door.

Unexpectedly the road smoothed out and the car whizzed forward making both occupants of the car slam themselves backwards into the comfort of their seat. Aaron had to reluctantly release the pressure of his shoe from the pedal. And then like a bolt of lightning Aaron heard the words he had been dying to hear.

"It's the next turning on the right."

Two hundred metres down the road and through the darkness Aaron saw the light, a rickety gate blocking the way to the muddy gravel drive leading to the shadowy farmhouse with a couple of rays of light shining through the rotting downstairs windows. Nathan jumped out of the car, renewed by a sudden energy. He dashed through the soggy mud and unlatched the gate with a clicking. Aaron saw a stream of golden light shining out of the warm farmhouse door and a blackened shadow came dashing out to greet Nathan. Nathan slipped from the minute gap in the gate and clicked it back into place. This action

demonstrated that Aaron was not welcome better than any words could have expressed it.

As Aaron dejectedly threw his car into reverse he saw the two shadowy figures embrace and hug lovingly. He even thought he could faintly hear the sobbing.

Nathan and his mother clung to one another sobbing hysterically.

“It’s alright now. It’s alright.”

“I didn’t kill nobody,” Nathan sobbed.

“I know you didn’t,” his mother reassured him comfortingly. “You’re going to be okay. You know I’ll never let anything happen to you. I’m your mother and your father.”

The floods continued as they slowly, arm in arm, dragged their feet back into the house.

Aaron’s car purred away down the hill with a panoramic view over the blackness of the sea and sky. For the first time since Nathan had silently climbed into his car, he relaxed although his mind still whirred with the thoughts of his most important case yet. And as he passed the farmhouse that apparently belonged to Ted and Lorna Barrow he raised himself off his seat impulsively and swept his eyes down their farmland towards the ocean.

In that second he had realised what a brilliant view that the farmhouse had over the tragic cliff path. That would be another task for tomorrow...

Chapter 6

The tyres crunched over the winding drive bordered by sky scraping evergreen firs that clashed with the autumn coloured gardens at the front of the house, which were scattered with auburn and golden tinged leaves. The lawns were immaculate, vast and mown so short that they gave the impression of being Astroturf. They were surrounded

by delicate and pretty flower beds packed full of winter plants that would be soon to flower in all their snowy glory.

The trusty old Astra came to a halt in front of the massive, square, mansion and Aaron alighted. He gasped in awe at the immense brilliance of the edifice and its contiguous acres. Tilting his head back at the enormous structure made that back of his neck ache so he just admired what was in his eye level.

Every surface had been painted perfectly and there was not one inch of unattractive, peeling paint. He imagined the trouble the family must have gone to, to maintain this but then simultaneously he doubted whether people of their class would downgrade themselves with the keeping of their house.

The cream paint glistened in the weak sunlight. At the corners of the house were large white bricks merged into the surface to give a classy effect. The mansion stood out as being very up-to-date with spotless double glazed windows of the newest variety. Underneath every window was fixed a window box with gaudy and vibrant colours that Aaron thought unusual at this gloomy time of year.

And what a depressing time of year autumn was. Leaves died and rotted on the pavements, the rain drizzled constantly like a leaky shower, the wind screeched through the undergrowth with an eerie sound like a shrieking of an owl and the air had that bitter chill as if preparing you for a freezing winter. As a member of the police force Aaron knew that there were a lot of suicides at this time of year.

Aaron shivered. The Sun was bleached against the striking blue sky but its rays seemed to chill and not warm. Little puffs of cotton wool would dart in front of the Sun mischievously, blocking out its weakened early morning rays. Aaron glanced up and saw that the fluffy pieces of cotton wool were being chased by menacing lumps of indigo, rain laden clouds. Until yesterday rain had been long overdue in Eastonshire but the debt had been repaid

with a blistering thunder storm. . Aaron reflected on the dry drought of a summer they had just experienced. People had flocked to their glorious beaches and had dashed into the sparkling sea in their bathing suits and equipped with surf boards. Aaron had been far too busy to indulge in such pleasures. He had had the unplanned two weeks rest but he had decidedly felt unlike bathing in the glorious waters on the account of the enormous burden he had carried for those two weeks.

But he must move on. “And I must move out of the cold” Aaron decided quickly as he shivered yet again. He skipped up the concrete steps, minding his head on the overhanging witch black lantern that gave him the impression of a cage, and pressed the buzzer inwards. He heard a deep rasping noise echo around the house. Next to him was an intricately arranged hanging basket and he noticed an identical basket on the opposite side of the door.

Despite the fact that this was obviously a very welcoming house, Aaron was very nervous. This was the moment that he had been inwardly dreading. He was going to have to ask some frankly personal questions about their daughter’s relationship with Nathan Brooke, a relationship he doubted they approved of or had even known about it for that matter.

The door was flung open by a squat, broad shouldered butler attired in a classy black suit with a rigid dickey bow. He had a rather hideous black moustache, was in his late fifties and had thinning black hair combed across the shiny crown of his head.

“Yes?” he grunted almost inaudibly.

Aaron waved his leather jacketed warrant in front of the butler. The butler squinted but on thorough inspection of Aaron’s I.D. card he bid that he enter and stood aside to let him pass.

Aaron contemplated that it was a strange and inexplicable tradition of the British detective fiction to always fix the murder on the inconspicuous butler.

“I’ll go and inform Mr Smithers that you’re here sir.”

The butler trotted purposefully off leaving Aaron to survey the gigantic and spacious hall in awe. There was so much in the enormous hall it was difficult to take it all in immediately. He stood on a slippery tiled floor of a chequered blue and white. Directly in front of him lay a wide and winding staircase carpeted with a luxuriously blue chunky carpet that Aaron imagined would have a cushioned effect. The staircase led to a landing, with striking gold wallpaper, which was almost a corridor that encircled the square hall while looking down onto the human sized chessboard. The solid white doors, with intricate patterns carved in, that Aaron could just see over the waist high wall obviously lead to bedrooms. Aaron imagined what it must be like to alight from one’s bedroom and to be on a balcony that looked down in the vast expanse of hall. Neatly tucked under the snaking staircase was a pine table with a modern phone positioned calculatingly at a deliberate angle. The rest of the hall was a vast area of space. Aaron saw little patches of coloured light contaminating the blue and white tiles. Looking up he saw the cause. There was a domed stain glass roof that threw streams of illumination onto the tiles and then made them dance like disco lights. Scattered around the hall were a smattering of doors of the same type as the ones Aaron could see leading to the bedrooms. There were two doors on the far wall, two to the right and two to the left and Aaron noticed the symmetry with appreciation as it gave the hall a certain class not that any more was required, with the elegant wallpaper and the expensive portraits of past Smithers hanging to attention in traditional brass frames. Aaron thought that they were quite impressive even though he had obviously not met the ancestors.

The door at the far back of the left hand wall, which the butler had disappeared into a few minutes earlier was edged open and the butler stuck out his head and beckoned Aaron in, reminding him distinctly of being called out a stuffy and germ ridden waiting room of a doctor's surgery by a nurse, bidding him to follow her and have his immunisation. However Aaron could not accuse the Smithers' hall of being stuffy or germ ridden. It was unarguably the largest and airiest room he'd ever been in.

This was the moment Aaron had been dreading. He had to get it right if he wanted to salvage his sinking career.

He stepped into the grand lounge. The exquisite red carpet with beautiful patterns of yellow welcomed him into a marvellous and yet again spacious room. He would not have called it warm and cosy but that was made up for by the magnificence and splendour of the sitting room. The slippery dark red leather sofa and matching armchairs looked brand new although having the cold air that leather always acquires. A heavy oak drinks cabinet was shoved into the corner of the far wall near to the Georgian white fireplace, beautifully hand crafted with a marble base of cerulean and ashen. A sparkling new TV set was embedded in an oak chest. A jet white dado rail with elaborate carvings in weaved its way around the room splitting up textured and crisp wallpaper. The coving wound round the edge of the ceiling with delicate patterns more impressive than the dado rail. The swirling indents gave the room the grandness that had first hit Aaron as he entered. Over to the far right of the room was a French window that opened onto the veranda. Through them Aaron could see the immense acres of land that surrounded the Smithers' square mansion. The normally rolling green countryside had tinges of orange, russet, burgundy and crimson. Although autumn was a dismal time of year, it did jet an array of colour into the already breathtaking countryside of Eastonshire.

Alistair Smithers was leaning against the fireplace, smoking a cigar. Aaron could immediately see the grief and strain of his face. He looked as if he hadn't slept and that was a very true impression. Although just turned 50 his face was creased in every position. His straw brown hair stuck about and Alistair had obviously neglected to comb it into position. He wore a plain black shirt and black nylon trousers, plainly out of a mark of respect to his late daughter. His chubby face and rounded chin looked stretched and his grey eyes looked hazy. He rocked backwards and forwards against the fireplace and his plump hands steadied himself. Alistair Smithers was, as Aaron was only fully aware, a very powerful and influential man but, understandably, at this moment he was in a terrible state.

On the sofa sat his wife Petula, his son Sydney and his other daughter Teresa. At once Aaron detected that this was an upper class British family with obedient and civilised children that sat prim and proper on the comfortable sofa, which were a rarity in the new millennium but then the Smithers seemed a very old fashioned family indeed.

Petula sat upright on the settee as if in a trance, spasmodically dabbing her eyes with a handkerchief. She wore a black hat which had a black veil attached to it, partially obscuring her face and making it necessary for her to shove her hand right underneath it to be able to dab pathetically at her eyes. She also wore a designer label black skirt that was modestly revealing but still appropriate for the tragic occasion. Her silky tights ran down fairly striking legs towards black stiletto high heels. To Aaron she conveyed the impression of a grieving widow. With her rather flamboyant headwear it was difficult for Aaron to survey her face but her thin bony face with brim glasses and flowing auburn hair reminded Aaron of the miserable assistant in his local library. He guessed that she was a number of years the junior to her husband.

Her children sat on either side of her side of her but with ample distant between their mother to show that affection towards one's parents was not encouraged in this house. It seemed that the children had to bottle up their emotions. Sydney was 17 and Aaron imagined that some girls would find him rather dashing. He wore a woolly black jumper and jeans. With the quaff in his buff coloured hair he distinctly reminded Aaron of Prince William. The intelligent face was streaked with tears and the whites of the eyes were stained red. He saw the long, thin and smooth hand wipe his wet eyes.

Teresa was 14 and her pretty delicate face looked detached and distraught. The clear pale blue eyes bore in the fireplace hoping to seek comfort from the wooden structure. She was attired in a long black dress that seemed a couple of sizes too large for her and Aaron guessed she had borrowed in from her mother. Normally, he thought, she would probably be quite an attractive girl. However her unbreakable stare unnerved Aaron and he felt uncomfortable in her presence. Quickly, though, he snapped himself out of these unkind thoughts as the girl had just lost her older sister who she had probably looked up to dearly. Even so there was something in those eyes that didn't look normal...

The butler had slipped out of the room.

"We've been expecting you," Alistair was saying, "as you can see."

"I'm really sorry to have to intrude on you at your time of grief but it would be helpful if you could answer a few questions about your daughter's relationship with Nathan Brooke."

"Well we didn't know about it until your constable came round to tell us she was dead, yesterday" Alistair barked, suddenly provoked.

"So you didn't know she was seeing anyone?"

“That’s what I said man! But she must have been skipping school for months. And I bet she was pulling the wool over our eyes when she said she was helping the vicar with his flower arranging.”

Aaron was surprised that someone as intelligent as Alistair Smithers had been so naïve to be taken in by this common and comical story.

Petula turned her veiled face towards her husband. “That’s no way to speak about Eloise. It was that low life Brooke boy that led her astray.”

Smithers bowed his head as if accepting the admonition. “I’m sorry. The inspector just wound me up.”

Aaron was struck by a pang of anger and annoyance that they were speaking about him as if he wasn’t there. But he must stay calm, his job was resting on this case. Keeping his cool he replied, “I’m just trying to establish some facts about the cause of your daughter’s tragic death.”

“Well isn’t that obvious inspector?” asked Petula Smithers patronisingly, as if even he should have known that. “Nathan Brooke pushed our Eloise to her death.”

“There is no medical evidence or no motive to suggest that that occurred.”

“Well even if she did slip, in my family’s eyes inspector, Nathan Brooke was responsible for her death,” Petula calmly explained as if talking to a 10 year old. “If he hadn’t enticed her to skip school, a practice most unlike her, then she would never have been on that cliff path to fall to her death. Now if you would excuse us inspector we would like to be left alone. I see no way in which my family can help you to establish what took place on that cliff path.”

“Of course but just before I go I was wondering if it would be possible to take a look at your daughter’s room.”

Coming back to life Alistair asked sharply, “What on earth for? How can that possibly help you to establish what happened to Eloise?”

Remaining calm and official like Aaron explained without raising his voice. "I was hoping that she might have kept a diary. It might contain some information as to how her relationship with Nathan had been progressing. If she talks about going through a rough patch or anything of that nature then there might have been a motive for murder. I know it's very weak to suggest that a teenager killed his girlfriend just because they'd been going through a difficult patch but..." Aaron broke off not knowing what to say next. "So did she keep a diary?"

An embarrassed silence settled on the room. Alistair and Petula shared a glance. The children remained silent.

It was Petula who broke the silence some 30 seconds later.

"I'm afraid, inspector, that you'll have to have a look for yourself. We don't make a habit of snooping around our children's rooms. In this house we value personal space."

"I'll call Carl for you." Alistair pressed a button on the wall above the fireplace. A buzzing sound could be heard distantly in a room across the hallway.

Sydney broke his silence in a cautious and quiet voice. "Inspector, Nathan Brooke will pay for what he did to my sister; one way or another."

Aaron was unable to reply as the door was flung open and Carl glided in but he did see Petula turn her head in dismay to Sydney as if indicating that children should be seen and not heard. Alistair instructed Carl where to take the Inspector and he was duly ushered out of the room by the silent and slow figure of the butler named Carl.

As Aaron stepped into the hall he felt a mixture of emotions; anger, confusion, worry, relief and annoyance. He tried to reason out these seemingly inexplicable emotions in his mind. He was angry at the way he had been spoken to by the Smithers. They had made it very clear that they were of a higher class than him and had spoken down their noses at him (not that he could see Petula's nose for

that over the top veil). Of course they were of a higher class than him but Aaron had no wish to sit up on a pedestal in Snobbery land. He was confused and worried by Sydney's parting and only remark. The possible repercussions of that remark were all too plain to Aaron. He could not afford to let the Smithers take their revenge out on Aaron whether he was guilty of killing their daughter or not. He was repressing some information, that Aaron was convinced of. Aaron was relieved to have got out of the room. Partly because of the snobbish attitudes of Alistair and Petula, and partly because of the disturbed and deeply depressed daughter of theirs. That left annoyance. He was annoyed with himself. He had let himself get wound up in his first case subsequent to his suspension. That could be costly especially with an influential man like Alistair Smithers. If he decided to complain about his conduct then it was the end of the line. He would have to demonstrate more self-control in the rest of the investigation.

Eloise's bedroom door was being flung open by the efficient butler. Aaron stepped in and the door closed behind him as if he was locked in a cell.

The room, however, paid no resemblance to a cell. Eloise's bedroom was a large luxurious room. Aaron's leather shoes sunk into the carpet. The weak autumn light rushed in through the top of the range double glazing, chilling the room with its frosty rays. A shiver ran down Aaron's spine, something which he didn't attribute to the Sun. He hated this part of the job; having to search through the deceased's belongings. They were no longer around to protect their privacy but they should be still entitled to it.

Aaron reluctantly moved further into the room, glancing around as he did so. He felt the vibrant spirit and youth of Eloise. The radiant rose pink walls, the flowing indigo curtains, the cushion like fluorescent orange carpet and the glowing yellow bedspread. Somehow all this clashed with what had obviously been the parent's touches; the heavy

solid oak cupboard, the mahogany desk and dressing table, the rustic brass chandelier lamp (with bright green lampshades) and again the white carving covered coving.

It was a strange house, Aaron thought. The unusual square shape of the house made it look like a dolls house, the outside of the house was well maintained and tremendously modern with all the windows looking brand new but the inside of the house was just a clutter of extreme tastes, bunged together in most unconvincing manner. Eloise's room was the perfect example.

Aaron swung open the oak cupboard door and poked his head into the musty black space. A vibrant row of clothes were hung up inside, like soldiers standing to attention. Aaron knew not why he had done that except for a morbid curiosity. He paced across the room and sunk down in the comfy swivel chair facing the mahogany desk. The drawers creaked open to his touch. He rifled through the papers with meticulous care; schoolwork, a passport, bank statements (rather odd for a 15 year old girl), writing paper and factual books.

No diary.

Aaron accepted, disappointedly, that his hunch had been annoyingly wrong. Then a thought struck him. Maybe if Eloise's diary had a content that would be incriminating to her parent's stern eyes then she might have placed it in a position in which they would be unlikely to come across it. However this was just speculation and Petula had lectured him on how they believed in their personal space.

Aaron placed the bank statements back into the drawer. And then ha bit of luck.

The mahogany drawers were of an exceptional dark brown, with deep swirling indents and a heavy and chunky feel about it. But as he replaced the bank statements he saw the base of the drawer and it was of a light yellow that could not conceivably be mahogany. Quickly he crunched the documents between his hands in a firm grasp and

scattered them onto the desk; empty but for a desk lamp and a stationery holder.

Having rid the desk of its contents the false pine bottom could be seen in full, with its brown swirls indented into the spongy, malleable wood. Aaron dug his chubby nail bitten fingers down the side of false bottom and tried to prise it out. The pliable wood was sharp and rough to his touch with spikes of wood cutting into his fingers.

He withdrew them rapidly and sucked the fingers in which the crimson coloured liquid of blood was seeping out of. Aaron was really infuriated that such a simple task was causing him so much discomfort and costing him so much time. Presently, he realised that there was no point in questioning his talents as a detective as that would only cause him to wallow in self pity; an occupation in which he had recently had a whole two week to indulge in. If he ever questioned his decision to return to Eastonshire Police Force then he was finished. There could never be any doubt.

Anyway it was only a drawer, boded together by a 15 year old school girl wishing to keep details of her secret relationship, with the local farmer's boy, away from her parents. His cool persona returning Aaron thrust the drawer out of the chest, twisted it upside down and whacked the bottom with the palm of his burly hand dispersing the false bottom and a chunky black leather book onto the carpet.

At last! Aaron cast the dissected drawer aside and seized the leather bound book off the fluorescent carpet with eager hands, controlled by an eager mind.

Aaron flicked through the diary with interest. He did again feel a pang of guilt that he was reading through someone else's private thoughts. It was unlike any other diary he'd ever read before and with his work in the police force he had read quite a few. The diary gave a superfluous account of everything that had happened to Eloise in that day with the use of long and complex words. Upon

reaching 1st May this year the whole diary changed. Eloise ceased to mention her daily activities. She wrote passionately and emotionally on how she had fallen madly in love with Nathan Brooke. This then entered a period of doubt of whether her feelings were reciprocated but towards the end of May her writing made it clear that they were. During June they had bunked off school regularly to spend some time in the undergrowth of the fateful cliff path and they had spent there Saturday's there as well when her parents had naively thought she was helping the vicar with his flower arranging. Aaron's hands were quaking. The details had become so personal that he felt indecent to proceed, especially as one member of the relationship, so vividly described was still alive. He started to let the pages drift past his fingers at a quicker rate, just glimpsing at the pages. The last entry was 4th September.

'Extract from Eloise Smithers' Diary- Thursday 4th September'

Rumours are lies; unkind and infectious lies. And once one snotty nosed schoolboy has dreamed up a both unbelievable and incredible lie then it spreads like a forest fire. Crackling its way through every last piece of dry, barren forest, not stopping until every last piece of that forest has glowed with the orange, red and yellow flames. And in its wake follows destruction.

Rumours have been spreading around Eastonshire Comprehensive that Nathan has been seeing another girl. These rumours have reached my ears but I treat them with an air of contempt. I have no time for callous and malicious rumours. Like the forest fire it wants to cause destruction to me and Nathan. But no-one will ever achieve that unattainable objective. We will be together for ever. No-one will ever get their grubby hands on my darling Nathan, he will see to that. Our love will never cease. It will continue to grow in its enormity until the day we die...

These words contained a certain poignancy and Aaron slammed the book shut and shoved it into his inner jacket pocket. Tears welled up in his eyes and he hastily blinked to rid him of this embarrassment.

Promptly the drawer was reassembled and he paced across the spongy carpet towards the door. At the door he stopped and twisted around. He took one final glance at Eloise's spacious and vibrant room. With sadness it dawned on him that except for the vibrancy of the carpet and such there was nothing in this room to show Eloise's personality. No posters of boy bands or pop stars or anything of that nature. Like her inner feelings, Eloise had obviously had to bottle up her personality as well.

What a strange family the Smithers were...

Chapter 7

A draft whistled through the Brooke's farmhouse, casting an eerie chill on the breakfasters in the kitchen come dining room.

Eileen sat on one side of the circular, putrid oak dining table and Nathan the other. Eileen was a plump kind hearted lady with frizzy yellow-white hair with large round glasses sitting on her chubby but rather short nose. The sagging lines of her cheeks had a pink tinge. The inky blue eyes were warm and friendly. The small, petit and pale mouth hid a dazzling white smile. However her face looked plain in the absence of make-up. The baggy olive jeans and the pale sapphire loose blouse were plain and cheap but suited her lifestyle as a farmer. Even before the completion of her breakfast she wore her bottle green, rubber Wellingtons.

Eileen crunched her cornflakes as she skimmed through her letters that the postman had dropped off half an hour before. For farmers the Brooke's were late starters but they

had had a lengthy lie in to recover from the preceding day's events. Nathan sat on the opposite side of the table, dejectedly and staring at his breakfast. Eileen looked at his usually handsome features. Dark black sacks hung under the brown slits of his eyes. His whole face was stretched with worry. His hands then began to quiver in a sort of fever.

"Nathan, are you alright?" his mother inquired, becoming concerned.

As if not hearing Nathan stood up slowly, as if his world was spinning round, his wooden chair screeching like car brakes on the fractured concrete floor.

"I'm going out," muttered Nathan in his grief-stricken daze.

A few seconds later the front door slammed. Eileen winced, not so much at the ferocious noise but more in concern for her son's destination in his troubled state of mind. Eileen remained at the table for some minutes in contemplation of her son's predicament. That Eloise must have meant everything to him and for her to be taken away so tragically had completely destroyed her son. Worse of all, decided Eileen, was the fact that the police had made no secret of their ridiculous suspicion that Nathan had pushed her from that peaceful cliff path.

Eileen came out of her trance and re-assumed her task of sorting through the farm's post. The majority of them were bills, bills she would be struggling to scrape together the money for. Then in the midst of all the bills she came across a large printed and official looking envelope with Eastonshire's council's stamp printed neatly and authoritatively in the top corner. Her curiosity aroused, she ripped open the envelope with the inevitable sticky sound of the seal being broken.

Eileen was fuming. She was going round to Farmer Ted's immediately to give him a piece of her furious mind. She flung the letter onto the table with a slam, along with

the half empty jug of milk, the packet of cornflakes, the bowl of crystal sugar and the two bowls full of soggy, unappetising cornflakes. On marching into the hall Eileen grabbed her comfy but dull green anorak and swung the front door open with purpose.

Before leaving the farmhouse for her vengeful mission she let her mind wander to the whereabouts of her depressed son. But unbeknownst to Eileen she would never know where her son went on that Saturday morning.

Chapter 8

The tyres slid across the squashy, muddy drive leading up the slightly steep slope to the Barrow's quaint little farmhouse. Out of the Astra window Aaron could see the barren land covered with bundles of dry hay leading down to the gravely and precarious cliff path with its abrupt drop into the rough, swirling tides of the ocean. On the horizon where the grey waters clashed with the indigo colours of a threatening storm, Aaron could make of the outline of inadequate yacht bobbing up and down on the choppy waters.

The Astra's dark blue paintwork splattered with mud, it came to a stop outside the farmhouse. Aaron stepped out, his expensive leather shoes sinking into the deep mud. Aaron exasperated a groan of displeasure and squished over to the farmhouse. On his treacherous journey to the front door he cast an observatory glance over the brickwork. The one-storied building was the complete reverse of the building he had just come over from. The red brickwork was shabbily put together seemingly by cowboys. Slate roof tiles were missing and from further observation Aaron could see them embedded into the muddy drive which was scattered with crisp, brown autumn leaves. This helped Aaron to conceive the impression that the Barrow's farm was a shabby dump. The paint peeling windows did

nothing to rectify this notion. The farm seemed to be a tatty L-shaped building surrounded by a number of dilapidated outhouses that smelt of manure and animal feed in the middle of gloriously pretty countryside.

Aaron tapped gently on the ancient wooden door, fearful that it would give way if he was to bang too viciously. The door was flung open by a man who apparently didn't share his concerns.

Aaron figured that the small, meek and rather pathetic man seemingly in his early sixties was Farmer Ted Barrow. His blank grey eyes had probably once been shrewd and astute but now they portrayed confusion and naivety. The thin bone of the nose with the wrinkling and receding skin stood out of the bleak face. The furrowed forehead, the pasty cracked lips and the hanging craggy cheeks depicted a face of hopelessness. The uncontrollable tufts of grey hair stuck out from under the battered and worn tartan cap. Ted was attired in a fawn cotton jacket with an ashen blue shirt under it; neither looking expensive or new. The brown and holy cord jeans were splattered with mud and with the chunky muddy and shabby black boots the hopeless image was again collaborated.

But then the image was suddenly transformed as Ted smiled. The lips stretched apart in an agonising effort revealing yellow tartar ridden teeth which flashed a warm, friendly and pleasant smile at his unexpected visitor, thus echoing Ted's true personality.

"Hello," Ted beamed. "Can I help you at all?"

"You might be able to" was Aaron's equally cheerful response as he flicked out his warrant card with a well practiced, official persona.

Ted's manner didn't flicker on seeing the card. He stepped back and pronounced "You'd better come in."

Bidden into the farmhouse Aaron stepped into the dimly lit hall. The door slammed shut behind him, Ted again not presenting any carefulness to the fragile wooden door.

The bare cracked concrete walls were unattractive and icy to the touch. Although giving the farmhouse a certain traditionalism, they also gave the true impression that the farmhouse and its occupants had fallen on hard times. Aaron trod warily across the creaking, splintered wooden floorboards fearful he might crash through into the gloomy foundations below. In fact the only light in the hallway was a small brass lamp with a holy, faded beige lampshade, placed on a brittle wooden stool, which it shared with a red old fashioned dial phone, adjacent to the concrete staircase, which led upstairs to an equally dark and murky landing. The stairs looked rather dangerous, not just because of the ominous cracks crawling their way from top to bottom, but because of the absence of any railings or banister. The stairs however were only very small and to Aaron's conventional mind they appeared to have been bunged in the corner of the hall as if holding no importance. At the end of the hall was a claustrophobic kitchen with stone workbenches and fading wooden units. Aaron could also see a small, square window, covered in grime and cobwebs and a back door with blue paint peeling from it in slimy layers and a cracked frosted glass window embedded in it. On the left of the hall were two identical wooden doors with bare rectangular panels fixed into them.

Ted flung the first of these doors open and bade Aaron to follow him in. Immediately Aaron twigged that this was the lounge. Unlike the vast, expensive structure of the Smithers' that Aaron had just left, the Barrow's lounge was warm, cosy and welcoming. The flowery patterned but shabby settee, the threadbare raspberry carpet, the faded cherry wallpaper, the solitary lamp that hung aimlessly from the ceiling with its red lampshade that gave a snug, homely dusky pink glow, the vibrant but tatty baroque curtains and the crumbling single pane windows, that looked out on the never-ending waves of the changeable blueness, all added to the inviting ambience of the lounge.

“The police are here dear,” proclaimed Ted.

A lady with flowing, auburn hair lay stretched out on the sofa. Aaron assumed correctly that this lady was Lorna Barrow. Although in her late forties there was still a charisma and splendour about Lorna. Her large gentle blue eyes, her long, slender lips varnished with inexpensive but exquisite garnet lipstick vibrated colour around the room, the perfect dimples of her cheek and the well proportioned forehead, devoid of repulsive wrinkles. The plump but pointing nose somehow conveyed that she was a woman with a definite realisation of what she wanted. From the glued eyelashes and deep purple mascara Aaron interpreted that she was probably very over the top and in all likelihood a man eater. Aaron was unsure where he had conjured up this rather unjustifiable assumption, except for the slight fluttering of her elongated eyelashes as they had made wary eye contact and the sneaky, sexy smile that had appeared on her lips.

The sofa she was spread across was the only means of sitting in the T.V. soap set sized lounge. Quickly Lorna slid her smooth, sexy legs, with bland, old black high heel shoes that her feet had worn themselves into over time, across the tattered sofa to allow Aaron a seat. Aaron gratefully accepted this gracious offer, offered without a single word being uttered. He sunk into the cushioned upholstery feeling at once at home in the lounge of a ramshackle farmhouse that he had never previously set foot in. He turned to Lorna as she spoke and admired the inexpensive elegance of the silky pink dressing gown that she was attired in and tried to predict whether she wore any undergarments, beneath it...

“Is this about yesterday’s unfortunate incident?” Lorna inquired, curling herself into a ball, and to Aaron’s creative imagination, resembling a cat.

A pang of guilt struck Aaron as he noticed that the pathetic Ted had no where in which to sit. Instead he

rocked nervously to and fro by the door, his mind seemingly detached from the present and absorbed in his own train of thought. For a second Aaron considered removing himself from the ample comfort of the Barrow's sofa and offering it to Ted.

He was distracted, however, from doing this kind deed, as he felt Lorna's legs rubbing against the small of his back arousing a tingling feeling all over. Despite his pleasure in this indulgence Aaron became rather uncomfortable at the realisation and remembrance that Ted Barrow was still present in the room. With one quick glance Aaron ascertained that Ted Barrow was still on his own planet and apparently oblivious to the frolics of his wife and then spoke realising that Lorna's question had remained unanswered:

"Yes, I'm afraid it is. I was wondering if either of you were in yesterday because I couldn't help noticing what a brilliant view you have of the footpath. A constable's probably already been round...?" Aaron phrased the last remark as a question and it was duly answered by Ted who snapped out of his daze.

"No. But we were both in yesterday but I'm afraid we were working on the farm all day so we didn't see anything," Ted explained apologetically.

Aaron turned his gaze back to Lorna wondering if she would speak on her own accord. "No I'm afraid that's quite right officer. Can I get you a cup of tea?"

Aaron was about to protest and explain how regrettably he should be taking his leave but Lorna was already half-way to the door.

On his wife's departure Ted became uneasy and shuffled his feet nervously by the door. However, after a moment's consideration Ted sank down into the cheap, padded luxury of the sofa. Aaron was immediately unsure if this action was because Ted needed to rest his weak legs or if he was

willing to indulge some information on his wife's exit from the room or both.

"Did you know Eloise Smithers, at all?" Aaron posed the question carefully.

"Might have seen her a few times in the village and I knew she was the daughter of Mr Smithers, the wealthy industrialist. Ah what it is to have wealth."

"Wealth can't buy you happiness. Money isn't going to help the Smithers in this difficult time. Whereas, you and Mrs Barrow seem very happy indeed?" Again Aaron phrased the casual remark as a question hoping for a gushing response.

He got one.

"Ah yes. We've been married 30 years and it only seems like yesterday. And we're still as happy as we were, oh yes, still as happy 30 years ago, when we got married in the lovely little church in Wellston-on-Sea. Lived here all me life I have."

As Ted flowed like a leaky water main, Aaron could hear the strong Eastonshire accent purring away cheerfully. But as the record built speed until it was going like a Formula 1 car on a slippery surface, Aaron realised that he was going to be spending rather more time in the Barrow's comfy, quaint farmhouse than he had previously anticipated.

The record was cut short. Ted bounded out as his seat as if a sharp pin, or such, had dug into his rear. Aaron then heard the creaking of the door behind him and realised that Lorna had stealthily returned to the fort. In her long thin fingers, with her sparkling painted deep red nails, with smatterings of glittering silver, at the end, was a chrome tray that glistened in the feeble sunlight that penetrated through the grubby windows. On it was small white tea pot with discoloured flowery patterns and three cups of tea to match. Not to mention the transparent jug of frothy milk and the innocent chrome bowl of gleaming sugar crystals. The tray was deftly lain down on the rickety coffee table

and Aaron's tea poured out and milk with two sugars added, the party sipped their tea amidst quiet chatter.

Ten minutes after his arrival Aaron had finished his delightful tea but learnt nothing to assist him with his inquires surrounding Eloise Smithers' death. Aaron thanked his hosts for his splendid hospitality and was ushered into the hall by Ted.

"I'm sorry we weren't able to help at all."

"That's fine. It's not often I get a free cup of tea."

Polite laughter was indulged in and Aaron realised that it was indeed the first time he had cracked his face since his ominous suspension over two weeks ago. Maybe he was regaining a sense of normality. He desperately hoped so, he wanted to get on with his life, and his job and disregard the unfortunate incident. Ted clicked the rusty Yale lock and the door swung open. Aaron was immediately hit by a frosty chill and a gust blew a bunch of dried leaves, swirling ferociously round in circles, onto the bristly door mat. Aaron stepped onto into the bitter morning and bade goodbye to Ted.

The door slammed behind him (no care again being taken). The storm that had before being threatening had now commenced. Trees shook, leaves dashed about the desolated yard, rain pellets fell and smashed into the soggy earth and thunder rumbled contentedly in the distance. The storm had reached Eastonshire. Aaron was apprehensive of what the destruction of the storm would bring with it. Murder?

Aaron's feet crunched through the crisp, decaying leaves. Some were stuck into the stickiness of the wet mud. Aaron strolled rapidly towards his Astra, which the rain pelted consistently, as he was without a rain coat and his clothes were soaking through to the skin. The leather jacket seemed unable to repel the persistent rain. His stroll broke to a jog and he dashed towards his dripping car trying, in vain, to prevent his hair from becoming drenched.

He sunk into the relatively hard driving seat of his Astra with relief. The door shut out the thunderous rain and made it seem so far away, the car protecting him from its severity. The windows were running with the streaks of rain. The whole outside world became a runny blur.

A figure passed by his car. So close he could make out the shape of a woman but no more. As she became smaller and not so magnified by the rain he could see the yellowish hair, an anorak of some shade of indistinguishable green and a pair of baggy jeans in another shade of green. Was it Aaron's imagination he did the figure, just the outline, look vaguely familiar? Ah well, it wouldn't be important...

Chapter 9

As she banged ferociously on the rickety old door, Eileen Brooke wondered if she had seen that car somewhere before. But with the previous day's tragic events and the bombshell news that morning everything else had become a distant haze and for the moment it could not be focused upon her whirring mind.

Innocent Ted swung the ancient bit of timber open. He realised who it was and beamed his friendly smile.

"Ah Eileen come on in, nice to see you."

"Don't patronise me Barrow."

Eileen waved the offending document in front of Ted's gentle face.

"It came this morning."

"Oh yes. We got one two. It confirms what I said all along. Anyway nice to have it echoed officially as it were. Oh don't be standing out here on the doorstep. Come in, have a chatter with Lorna."

"Don't be a prat. You've got the council to take that piece of land off me and give it to you, land that's been in John's family for generations."

“Oh but Eileen we’re struggling a bit just now and that land’s going to really help us through a rough patch. More space to grow crops and with that little extra bit of income maybe we can afford a few more livestock and they’ll have space to graze and what have you.”

“But it’s our land!”

“Not technically, as the letter explains. At some point down the line you’re family must have nicked it off mine. So although it’s been with your family for quite a few moons it’s technically mine.”

“But how can you reclaim it from me Ted? What have I ever done to you?”

“Nothing love, nothing. But what with foot and mouth and all that we’ve been going through a rough patch. You know how it is.”

“Yes I do as a matter of fact. I’ve got a son to provide for not just Mrs Muck!”

Ted was unusually provoked but anger rose through his frail body. “How dare you talk about Lorna like that!”

“You’re nothing but a spiteful greedy pig. You’ve managed without that land for years, why be a selfish rogue now.”

“I think you should go before we ruin our friendship.”

“You’ve already seen to that you...”

Eileen struck him across the face; her hand stinging into the wrinkled skin and catching a particular bony part of his cheek. The slapping noise rang out around the drenched yard. Ted grabbed his face dramatically and was knocked into the open door and strained to regain his balance. He clawed into the door to drag his small frame into an upright position.

Eileen had seemingly ignored the fact she was bathed in rainwater and it literally dripped off her onto the already cloggy ground, until that moment. Her voice softened and the warm, kind hearted Eileen returned as she declared;

“I’d better go. I’m drenched. I hope you’re alright Ted.”

Eileen turned and headed back up the drive, the blue Astra having long gone. Ted raised his bony arm and pointed a feeble finger after her. There was venom in his usually bubbly voice. “You’ll regret this Eileen.”

Neither of them knew how important those words were going to be.

Chapter 10

Superintendent Winchester’s room was incredibly spacious compared with other offices in the under-funded Eastonshire Police Station. One sank into the bouncy royal blue carpet and the light red wallpaper added class to the room. The Venetian blinds let slits of dim, sinister light from the erupting storm flutter around the room. A spider plant sat on the desk its green leaves, streaked with white, frantically stretching to touch the floor. The desk was efficient and everything had a precise place. A little multi-storey tray compartment sat on his desk, a practical system for filing documents. Certain manila coloured folders were piled immaculately on the desk and plastic stationary holder contained the bare essentials of the Superintendent’s writing utensils. Most of the space in Winchester’s office was wasted but equally most of it was occupied by two overlarge, tarnished steel filing cabinets. Everything about the office was official and well organised, reflecting unerringly the persona of Superintendent Charles Winchester.

On one side of the desk Winchester sat upright and executive in his swivel chair whereas on the other Aaron stood uneasily, shuffling his feet in the carpet. Winchester, looking smart and important in his navy blue Superintendent’s uniform with all the gold additions to indicate his status and medals, always reminded Aaron of a war hero. His busy grey eyebrows, craggy forehead and penetrating blue eyes did nothing to disprove this image.

Aaron had served under Winchester for longer than he cared to recall but it had always perplexed him as to the age of the Superintendent. Perhaps it was one of those things he'd never know...

"Right Holmes," Winchester barked, "what have you got?"

"Well we haven't got an awful lot to go on, sir. There are three distinct possibilities; Eloise Smithers jumped off that cliff path to her own grave, her boyfriend Nathan Brooke pushed her to her death or she just slipped on that fragile bit of cliff path. According to forensics a lot of rocks were displaced from the cliff top. Forensics also said sir that she landed in a rock pool quite a distance from the cliff so that would suggest she didn't fall."

"So there was some force involved then. Who's force though; hers or Brooke's? Have you found out anything useful?"

"I found a diary in her room," Aaron removed it from his inner jacket pocket and chucked it carelessly onto the desk. "It's quite interesting reading. There are no signs of depression or anything like that. Apparently she and Brooke were deeply in love. Though in the last entry before her death she does mention rumours at her school about Nathan being unfaithful with another girl. She didn't believe it but it's a lead."

"But would a 16 year-old boy really murder his girlfriend just because he wanted to be with someone else. That sort of thing goes on at schools all the time and they just dump each other. I can't see that he would."

"I'm inclined to agree with you, sir, but it's all we've got so shall I go and have another word with him."

"Yes. He's the only one who can help us and if she did jump then he'd know."

"Do you think that's what's happened, sir? She's jumped because of some reason we're jet to obtain and now he's protecting her memory?"

“Possible. Go and speak to him in the morning.”

“The morning, sir? I can go now.”

“No I want you to write up the report for the case so far. Everything’s got to be done properly; Alistair Smithers is a very important man. You won’t have time today, not after you’ve done the report.”

Winchester waved an airy finger at the old, oak grandfather clock permanently fixed to wall behind him. Winchester was a stickler for time. From the clock Aaron saw that it was coming up to noon. That was ominous, thought Aaron, as he doesn’t go home until five. Surely the report wouldn’t take five hours?

“That’s all.” The dismissive, unarguable words were officially recognisable that the meeting had come to a close.

Aaron moved to the door, opened it, hesitated and then came back into the room. “Sir, just one last thing.”

“What is it Holmes?”

“I don’t want to be rude but why was D.C.I. Barnfield in on the interview?” It had been irritating and perplexing to him and he was glad to get it off his chest.

“Because he was called to the scene as you weren’t available so I thought he could help you with your investigation. You can’t chose who you work with. The unfortunate incident is forgotten and you will work with him. Understood?”

Aaron disapproved of being admonished like a truanting schoolboy but that was just Winchester’s manner. He had suffered it before.

“Yes sir. But where had he swanked off to today?”

“I won’t have this insubordination. I gave you a second chance, remember? D.C.I. Barnfield is your superior officer and we both know why. Now if you must know, he was in court but he’ll be back tomorrow to help you with your investigation.”

“Well I’m not happy with the way he ran the preliminary part of the investigation. When establishing if any witnesses had seen Eloise’s death he neglected to interview the couple living in a farmhouse with a cinema view of the cliff path.”

“You do not question the decisions made by your fellow officers. Detective Chief Inspector Barnfield made the investigations he thought necessary.”

“Face it sir, Barnfield did sweet fanny Adam! He doesn’t know how to run an investigation.”

“GET OUT NOW! Before we both say something we’ll regret. Just remember how important Alistair Smithers is and the consequences of messing this case up. So you’ll work with Barnfield tomorrow and if there’s one sniff of trouble then you’re out of this job. NOW GO!

Aaron meekly receded from the office, anger boiling to the surface like an earthquake, on the verge of erupting. He did not like letting Barnfield win. He was a far better copper than him and he didn’t like the way he had been carried through the ranks by rubbing shoulders with high ranking officers. Whereas, Aaron had had to graft so hard to get to D.C.I. and then to be dragged back down because of Barnfield’s antagonism. Aaron was also annoyed with the officious attitude of Winchester. He wouldn’t let Aaron re-question Nathan until tomorrow for one reason, and Aaron was sure it was immaterial of paperwork. Winchester had decided that to rub salt into Aaron’s fresh and raw wound, he would make Barnfield keep a watchful eye on him, like some pathetic and innocent puppy.

Well if that’s what he wanted then fine. Barnfield could tag unwontedly along like the proverbial spare part and Aaron could still steal the glory. The glory that could restore his lost dignity and pride at Eastonshire Police Station. Maybe even rocket him speedily back up the ladder, in which Aaron’s wrung had snapped away, to the steady heights of D.C.I. He would achieve his goal, he

would breeze over the incident like a car over tarmac and one day it would be buried deep in the muddy depths of canteen gossip. The thought of the horrific trauma of those two weeks drove him. Barnfield wouldn't inflict those torturous weeks upon and walk away unscathed. Aaron was past violence, that just lead to complications and unpleasantness. He'd beat Barnfield and Winchester lawfully and he'd show them that D.I. Aaron Holmes couldn't be pushed aside, his dreams squashed by a damning and pride draining demotion. This case was his break. His chance to make or break. If the dish was broken so was his future as a copper. But then as he barged doggedly down the narrow, sticky corridors, his determined chin thrust outwards, knocking aside P.C. s on his way to C.I.D. he suddenly wondered what had caused this unneeded, panicky concern. This case was basic in the extreme. As he had outlined to the pompous Winchester there were only three feasible solutions and he would select the correct one and polish away any complicating facts.

Anyway what could go wrong? Time was not against them, but the spending of too much of it would unwisely infuriate the Smithers. Then he was once gain struck by the word which gave the ominous premonition of destruction.

Murder.

Chapter 11

Sunday 7th September began like every other day of the monotonous 7-day week on the Brooke farm.

As Nathan lounged, lazily on the tattered mud brown leather sofa he could just distinguish, almost like background sounds on a T.V. programme his mother clattering busily and vociferously around the tiny kitchen cum dining room. Water gushed, pipes creaked, Eileen's feet clicked on the concrete, the radio hummed almost inaudibly and Nathan was lost in his train of thought.

His normally handsome face was dogged; unshaved and unwashed. Sooty black rings hung under his eyes, his hair poked about; frazzled and uncombed. His eyes bore through the rotting window as if searching for condolence in the acres of bare autumnal tinted farmland. Leaves were scattered about the normally unspoilt countryside, making a gaudy coloured mat. Dark red blobs grew on the trees, already beginning to bleach yellow. Nathan was appreciative that the swirling depths of the sea were out of his line of vision. He ceased to want a reminder of Eloise and her plummet towards the rock pool; home of limpets and other creatures implanted and immovable. Nathan pondered whether Eloise's body would have wrenched them free of clinging to the sacred, chapel shaped rocks.

The hum of homely noises had ceased to exist; Nathan had become too enthralled in his own world to hear his mother bustling about.

Nathan jerked violently as if the farmhouse had being rocked by some undetectable force. His mother had rested her large, soiled but friendly hands on his quivering board shoulders.

“Nathan?” the word echoed through his mind as he tried to distinguish the meaning of the apparently unknown syllables. “Are you alright?” Nathan slid his head slowly round to face his mother, and sank slowly like a rocket back onto earth. Life commenced to flow through his veins, adrenalin began to pump.

“I'm just nipping out for a little, while; into the village for a cup of coffee and a chat with Vera. I shouldn't be long. You'll be alright won't you?”

Nathan grunted in the manner accredited to teenagers. A passer-by to this scene would have thought Nathan was just behaving in the normal teenager fashion. Unless of course they knew his tragic, unforeseeable circumstances for which they could only have sympathy. Surely?

Eileen slowly backed out of the room, unsure whether to leave her son in this unbalanced frame of deliria. Grief was only natural but she wasn't sure if she could cope with this detached depression and what damage it was doing to his still maturing brain. Really he was still her little boy. Maybe she should consult a counsellor for him. But she imagined that the cost would be unreasonable and completely unaffordable with the money she acquired; especially with the unexpected turn of events surrounding Ted barrow. Anyway, she intended to seek advice from Vera who knew all Wellston-on-Sea's gossip and had a solution for every contrivable problem of whatever magnitude.

Eileen cast one last longing glance at her son and pitied him. If only she could aid him. Eileen, however, was blissfully unaware that this would be the last time she would ever see her son. Alive.

A draft swept through the farmhouse and then the farmhouse door smashed shut, the cold air still present. A tingling passed through Nathan's body; a tingling which he doubted was connected to the gust of autumn air that had just passed over him. Was this a premonition? Could Nathan really know what was about to occur?

It was 9.54am.

Chapter 12

Aaron lay back. Lay back in his high backed, royal red, leather armchair. Barnfield had really annoyed him once again. He had been sitting in his office for two hours waiting while Barnfield followed up a new lead in one of his many shelved cases. Aaron, meanwhile, had been sidelined.

He glanced round his pleasant but rather poky office; compared with offices of more senior officers. This thought was raw and provoking to Aaron as he had once been a

senior officer. Unfortunately he had always been situated in the same stuffy box room. After his demotion, a few days before, the silver plate with D.C.I Holmes engraved upon it had been swiftly removed and a tacky piece of cardboard pinned at a slight angle to the door had been attached with the words “D.I. Holmes” scrawled in a sickening shade of bright purple felt tip.

Before Aaron had begun to reside in the small office it had been a pleasant place. The lime green wall, the double glazed south facing window with a tiny panel that would slip outwards to relieve the stuffiness slightly, the trodden pale blue Berber carpet and the little pane of frosted glass that allowed the occupant a brief insight into the lively and bustling activities of the outer corridor. One, however, Aaron had begun to occupy the office after being newly promoted to Detective Inspector it had become a junkyard. It was over cluttered and the one metal filing cabinet he had been allocated was bursting at the joins and each battered drawer was overflowing with uncountable amounts of camel coloured folders tightly crammed together. Aaron’s desk was a litter ground of uncompleted paperwork hiding the dirty white BT phone with faded numbers on the buttons. Whenever a call came through Aaron had to bury his way through the untidy mound of papers. Sometimes he would be unable to dig out the phone before the caller had tediously rung off.

The call came through at 11.57am.

Chapter 13

The blue Astra trundled through the sticky mud. It was an overcast and definitely miserable day, specs of rain dropping at irregular intervals. On looking up at the bright white clouds ones eyes would be prone to blur. The brightness of the dull clouds was immense and implausible.

An experienced P.C. swung the gate to behind Aaron's car with its expected clicking sound. The farmhouse was now a hive of activity. Officers buzzed about like wasps each with their own allocated task. Forensics moved about looking, to Aaron, like astronauts in their overlarge white plastic, germ free clothing and with their creased white hoods pulled taught over their heads, just revealing the features of their faces. Aaron guessed that instead of to prevent the contamination of evidence, the hoods were to protect the scientists from the onslaught of rain.

Through the wasps he saw her. Eileen Brooke. Never had he seen anyone so distraught. Half an hour after her gruesome discovery, tears still flowed and she still shook absolutely inconsolable with grief. A kind woman police officer, who Aaron knew but, for some bizarre reason after his the trauma of those two weeks, all names of minor officers at Eastonshire had been washed untraceably from his mind, had wrapped a grey almost dirty but thick and warm blanket around her shuddering shoulders. It would be some considerable time before any useful information could be extracted from her. And Aaron decided she probably would have some interesting information. The people who discovered bodies usually did. With Eileen being the boy's mother as well she was going to be a tremendously useful source of information regarding Nathan Brooke's murder. And it had been murder there was no doubt to that.

Murder. Once again the word smacked into Aaron, now with a certain poignancy as he was wholly convinced that it could have been avoided. But he couldn't make unprecedented assumptions but he would have to ascertain if any of the Smithers had alibis for the time of the murder. But he was jumping the gun. He was yet to see the body and the time of death was yet to have been determined.

Aaron alighted from his car and padded through the mucky driveway up to the farmhouse which had not yet

been within. He glanced around at the picturesque farmland that he had only previously viewed in the pitch black and had been unable to appreciate their beauty. Each field bordered by bushy rows of greenery. As it was autumn the fields were barrens stretches of spiky dead grass; hay. On top of the hay undergrowth were chunks of more straw material; again hay. On the field adjoining the farmhouse was an unlit bonfire. It consisted of a couple of tree trunks, branches, a barrel of hay, sticks leaves, decrepit wooden chairs and a ripped and torn sofa. Aaron doubted whether any of the furniture belonged to the Brookes. They were most probably burning it for friends in the village who were no longer in need of its services.

Then out of the house came the smug figure he had been hoping to avoid but knew it was inescapable that he would have been summoned to the scene of the crime. D.C.I. Harry Barnfield.

“Aaron,” he beamed. “Good to see you.”

The false cheerfulness with the obvious patronising tint in his voice made Aaron comprehend why he had taken a swipe at him just under three weeks ago. He seemed to be relishing in the fact that there had been a subsequent murder and appeared all too aware that Aaron should have apprehended it.

Aaron did not respond

“Come on in and take a look at the body. And cheer up for God’s sakes.”

Aaron felt like retorting:

“It’s a murder scene you disrespectful so and so,” but fortunately refrained, only too aware of the atmosphere it would have created. Not that there would be an absence of tense atmosphere between the pair anyway.

Aaron followed Barnfield into the house like a sheepdog following its master. They passed quickly through the hall with a cheap oil painting hanging on the wall of a blustery cornfield surrounded in a pine dented frame, a few low-cost

discoloured ornaments, probably purchased from a jumble sale, placed on a slanted radiator self above a white radiator with speckles of dirt and a wooden creaking staircase with matching banister and rails (with a couple lying disdainfully on the worn out red hall carpet below) through an unsteady door on the left, which had almost freed itself from the grime covered, brass hinges. This was evidently kitchen cum dining room. The worktop was cracked and bits of the marble had broken away. An old fashioned type of wood had been used for the cupboards that ran round the kitchen, hovering over the worktop. The basic oven and sink were desperately in need of a good scrubbing and so was the table, set in the centre of the compact little room. The small window above the sink, with slimy cobwebs glued into the corners almost as decoration, looked out onto the yard, now a meeting place for P.C. s and S.O.C.O s. Aaron and Barnfield passed through into the lounge; the scene of the crime.

Compared with the kitchen the lounge had a more spacious surface area although it was stretched into a lengthy narrow room. A leather sofa was set back against the right hand wall and overlooked the curved single pane lounge window which was now pierced with a neat, round hole which had long snaking cracks emanating from it and shreds of glass were sprinkled on the carpet. Above the sofa on the white wash walls hung a painting of Wellston-on-Sea. It was drawn from the perspective of standing on the very end of the pier and gazing back towards the quaint village. Aaron thought the incoming tide had been captured very well and could almost hear the swish of waves along the pebbly, golden sand. The picture was framed in a thin light blue plastic and Aaron felt that the sharpness of the unattractive frame ruined the tranquillity of the picture. The room was absent of a TV and the floor was just bare, stained floorboards. At the far end of the room was a small, charming, traditional brick fireplace. In the harsh metal

grate were stacked lumps of sooty, coarse edged coal which emitted the unpleasant smell of coal that always reminded Aaron of an industrial, old fashioned factory that he had visited at school. The grate, which had a hinged door with a little window reminiscent of an out-of-date oven, stood on a red tiled hearth and a heavy, bulky whittled beam was elevated above it, attached to the brickwork chimney. Aaron was surprised that the fire was still in use as he thought that open fires were now completely replaced by gas and electric. Although giving the farmhouse a traditional, Olde Worlde feel he thought it clashed with the plain white walls and non-descript lounge. However in front of the sofa lay a white furry rug now with streaked stains of crimson red. This was where Nathan Brooke lay sprawled.

His arms and legs were spread outwards, making a star shape and his feet were pointing towards the window his head towards the sofa. He reminded Aaron of deaths he had viewed in plays. To Aaron it seemed a very theatrical death and if it hadn't been for the swarming S.O.C.O. s and the blood that blotted out the punk band on the front of his jet black T-Shirt and streamed down onto the comfy rug, then he might not have believed he was dead. Aaron turned to his face. Blood had smudged into the bright red lips and had it not streaked down the handsome features of his face it would have not been visible. The eyes, what did they portray? Panic? Aaron declined to think so. Content? Yes, that suited the state of his twisted face a lot better. With the rolling of the eyes and the contortion of the mouth it was difficult to distinguish anything but the relaxed line of the jaw and the slight smile curled on his elongated lips. Did this mean he was comfortable and calm in the presence of his murderer? But was this just unhelpful conjecture? The features had distorted due to the perforating shot so could they depict anything useful anymore. But if it was contempt Aaron could discern how could that make sense? The shot

had come through the window while Aaron had been standing in front of the sofa (probably rising from the sofa to fetch something) so if Nathan had seen his murderer at all he would have seen them standing at the window pointing the gun at him. From his position Aaron judged that it was likely that he would have. However well Nathan had known his killer, how could he have been relaxed when they were aiming a gun at him?

A flash of light dispersed around the room from an oversized camera in the gloved hands of a S.O.C.O. with a protruding flash mechanism attached on top. The photographing of the deceased had begun. The whining whir of the camera continued endlessly as every possible angle was photographed.

“What do we know?” Aaron asked Barnfield trying to annoy him with a question generally asked by the senior officer.

Barnfield turned his head and the brown eyes bore through him, the look showing his condemnation that ‘he’ had ventured to steal the question from his directly senior officer. “He was killed shot wound to the heart. Shot fired through the window apparently. Make of gun as yet unknown. We’ll have to wait until forensics get the bullet make to the lab.”

“Any sign of the weapon?”

“No, I’ve got officers searching the grounds for it. They’re going to start round the farmhouse and work outwards across the surrounding land.”

“Time of death?”

The chubby features tensed once more. Barnfield’s patience was decreasing at this intolerable role reversal. Normally the lower ranking detectives would be first on the scene and the more senior detective would arrive later and demand information from the fully briefed detectives. It was his fault that he arrived before me, thought Aaron with a smile hidden in the depths of his mind. What had

evidently occurred was that the C.A.D (Computer Aided Dispatch) officer had called P.C. s to the scene and they had informed Barnfield of the crime before Aaron. Possibly as he was the senior officer connected with the Eloise Smithers case. This thought did annoy Aaron unnecessarily but at least he now had the satisfaction of asking the questions as if Barnfield was some keen, energetic but unintelligent D.C. or D.S., the only people Aaron now had authority over.

Barnfield glanced at his bulky gold plated Seiko watch. “Well,” he retorted almost as if replying to someone slightly slow, “it’s 12.25 now and a few minutes ago the forensic examiner Dr. Kensic said Nathan had been dead for little under two hours. He said he’ll give us a more accurate range when he’s finished his examination.”

Aaron turned and saw Dr. Kensic kneeling down by the body with his extra-large, black leather medical bag. The photographers danced around him trying not to inadvertently get in the way of his investigation. With every click the doctor flinched and snorted grumpily under his breath.

“When did Mrs Brooke discover her son?” Aaron continued his interrogation.

“We haven’t got anything out of her yet. She’s too distraught. You probably saw her on the way in?” Barnfield paused waiting for an acknowledgment from Aaron to his statement plainly phrased as a question, but when Aaron declined to respond he continued swiftly on trying to conceive the impression that he had merely being taking a pause for breath and had not just being embarrassed by one of his junior officers. However, he was unable to hide the red glow emitting from his chubby cheeks. “But her distress call came through at,” Barnfield quickly consulted his open notebook, “11.49.” Then the sarcastic enquiry to even out their private duel. “Anything else Inspector?” (It’s

quite unnecessary to substantiate which word held Barnfield's emphasis).

"That's all." There was hostility in his voice. As they retreated from the house and passed the forensic officers hard at work; dusting the walls and any flat surface in reach, Aaron realised how unprofessional he and Barnfield were behaving in a murder inquiry. It suddenly came to him how there was a bereaved mother outside in the forecourt being consoled by a P.C. and inside her farmhouse he and Barnfield were bickering like a pair of adolescent teenagers or maybe younger! He and Barnfield had never got on and 'the punch' had made sure that they never would; by underlining the rift between them, by causing Aaron to despise the man responsible for his demotion and by establishing Barnfield with a command over Aaron. All this to one side, Aaron resolved that this should not affect their working relationship. It was wrong to drag personal differences into a murder inquiry. Maybe a double murder inquiry. That was certainly a possibility not to be unobserved.

Aaron stepped back outside into the chill of the autumn air. The warmth of summer was long gone. It was now replaced by the shivering bitterness in the air. That combined with the murder sent a shiver running down Aaron's spine.

"I'm just gonna have a bite to eat" Barnfield called to Aaron heading down the drive obviously with the intention of either having a liquid lunch in The Swam or a sandwich in The Parrot Café. Although Aaron sighed as he knew it was typical of Barnfield to abandon an investigation to look after himself and that was why there were occasionally lapses in the running of it, like with the Eloise Smithers case, these words did cause a rumble inside Aaron's stomach as if they had reminded his internal organs that it had been hours since he had eaten. He had no intention of following Barnfield, even with his newly promised

amiability towards him, but instead he headed towards his car where his daily packed lunch was kept.

The police officers swarmed him with their newly acquired sticks. They beat their sticks into the mucky puddles, surely not hoping to find the gun in them, some venturing onto the fields and beat their sticks into the straw laden earth. As Aaron climbed back into his trusty old Astra, the only warm and recognisable object in the unknown surroundings of a murder scene, he saw a couple of uniformed officers dissecting the carefully arranged bonfire he had viewed on his way into the farmhouse. The delicately arranged sticks, chairs, the barrel of hay and the sofa were chucked (or in the sofa's case lugged) aside. As the bonfire was disarranged leaves and bits of paper blew aside like dust at the disturbing of a meticulously woven nest or a warily stacked anthill.

Chapter 14

Aaron munched on his cheese sandwiches, little squares smartly piled in his rectangular plastic lunchbox, reminding Aaron of an Ice-Cream container. And while he ate he let his mind wander over the ever complicating case...

His mind started at the beginning with the Eloise Smithers case. Had she been murdered? If so by whom? Then an idea suggested itself to Aaron. Maybe an unknown person had pushed Eloise to her death for an as yet unknown reason and Nathan had been enticed to keep quiet and take the rap. Aaron doubted whether Nathan would have refused money even if his beloved girlfriend had been murdered. His mum and himself were hardly well off. And as with most blackmail cases, as that's what it would have amounted to, the blackmailer comes to a sticky end just like Nathan. Of course there was one other distinct possibility.

Aaron himself had been convinced that Nathan had murdered his girlfriend, now he was irresolute as to

whether that was what had occurred. However he had not been the only people to assume that elucidation. The Smithers. Miserably he realised he would have to pay the peculiar family yet another dreaded visit.

Surely no one else could have a reason to murder Nathan Brooke. Or could they? That is something he would have to obtain from his mother. Another angle that Aaron would have to explore would be friends and enemies at Nathan's school, which Aaron presumed would be Wellston-on-Sea Comprehensive. Aaron thought that would undeniably be the nearest school to the Brooke's farm.

Aaron's mind drifted back to Eloise's diary. That would be something to enquire about at Wellston-on-Sea Comprehension. Where had the rumours originated? Were they true? Who was the affair meant to be with? Aaron considered whether Eloise had believed the rumours. Her diary was adamant that she didn't and as it was private and moderately well hidden, no one but herself was likely to read it. That would mean she would express her honest opinions within it.

Did Nathan keep a diary? On the same principle it would be an interesting read. Would its pages divulge a confession? Or would it name another person as Eloise's killer? After lunch he and Barnfield would have to have a furtive poke around Nathan's bedroom. Usually crucial bits of evidence would be discovered in the deceased's room.

The sandwiches passed into his mouth almost automatically, his mind focused on other, more vital matters than food. As his mind drifted through the possibilities of the crime he stared through the condensed, steamy car windows. He studied the demolition to the innocent bonfire. Then a haziness covered his eyes and they failed to discern any objects or people.

He blinked. The fluttering of his eyelids brought everything back into a discernable image. Standing in front of his car in the frosty yard, Eileen Brooke shivered and

sobbed. Aaron watched the haggard face streaming with black, coal like tears. Aaron's complete sympathy went out to Eileen Brooke; to lose a son was awful enough but to find one's son murdered was thoroughly inconceivable and horrid.

The tranquillity of the countryside was broken with a cry of elation from one of the searching officers, deriving from the rear of the farmhouse.

Chapter 15

Aaron bounded towards the source of the ejaculation. The air brushed against him as his feet glided across the treacherous ground. In his bones he could feel the investigation beginning, the adrenalin pumped through his veins bestowing upon him the required energy to travel faster and faster towards the scene of a presumably fundamental unearthing. For the first time in long while he felt glad that he was a detective. He impatiently wanted to turn the corner of the house and distinguish what exactly the discovery entailed. The rest of the world blurred as he neared the scene. Through the corner of his eye he glimpsed the curious glances of by-standing police officers, who kept their silence not wanting to be admonished by an inspector with a reputation for losing his temper and punching a fellow officer. But Aaron didn't care, this was the part of the investigation he used to love, a love that had cruelly been denied but was once again returning to him, the collecting of the clues and the difficulty in piecing them together, trying hopelessly to establish what they meant.

The officers had crowded round the find almost like school children who packed themselves tightly together in a jumbled circle, in order to get a better view of the fight that threatened. The evidence had been carefully slipped into two transparent plastic evidence bags.

Aaron shot round the corner, skidding on slippery surface. Immediately the eager anticipation drained from him and was replaced by an overwhelming foolishness. As his feet sank into the soft mud he wished that it would swallow the rest of him. The arrogant P.C. s had turned towards him and cast him a baffled, mocking momentary look. As they had done so, Aaron caught sight of the officer clasping the evidence bags and the received glance became self-explanatory.

All that had been found had been a broken milk bottle and a short flat piece of flimsy wood. It reminded Aaron of something, something too long ago pushed out of his memory... Aaron dared not break off his glance with the objects so as to avoid eye contact with the police constables. The chunky bottle had spilt into two cracked pieces, still glinting in the dim light. The normally smooth glass was littered with unattractive cracks, glinting an unnatural white. The wood lay at the bottom of the silky clean plastic bag, looking out of place with its jagged splintered appearance.

Aaron was tired of being made a fool of and impatient to get the investigation under way, knowing the importance of it to his beloved career. And ignoring all the sympathy he felt for the bereaved woman he knew in his heart it was time to speak to Eileen Brooke.

Chapter 16

Once more Aaron made his way down the dimly light corridors of Eastonshire police station this time purposefully and doggedly indomitable. Again he was in no mood to be reckoned with, although he was slightly unsettled as he realised that his promise to himself to co-operate with and endure Barnfield had softened his overwhelming determination. This time, also, he was not heading for the derelict and dingy cell of Interview Room

Number 5 but the more luxurious comfort of Interview Room 2.

As he moved he thought, this investigation so fundamentally significant to his failing career was certainly not going according to its simple plan. Aaron would have hoped to have had Nathan Brooke banged up in a cell somewhere in the large grounds of Eastonshire Prison surrounded by the deadly, razor-sharp metal spikes and the never ending barbed wire mesh. Instead someone had put a bullet in him and the investigation became far more complex. But wasn't that what he desired? Even so if Nathan's killing turned out not to be the work of the weird and peculiar Smithers then he quite probably had a double murderer on his hands. A murderer who might possibly kill again if they someone imposed on their security. A murderer who would be far more difficult to catch than if the Smithers were the culprits. How strange, Aaron cogitated, that he could not pin point a particular member of the family but just treated them as a whole. Anyway he felt that this killer would be a nightmare to catch and even if eventually apprehended Aaron was worried that it would not be sans another death. So his increasingly unstable job hung even more in the lopsided balance.

Suddenly he was his career and he was plummeting from the barren cliff path where Eloise Smithers had met her death. The air bristled against his body and the creature covered rock pools that swirled the green-blue water zoomed towards his mind's eye. With one last effort of movement he twisted round in the strong sea air, the scent becoming ever closer. And in his mind he saw the desperate, haggard face of Nathan Brooke.

With a swift blink the illusion was gone but the experience left Aaron shaken and felt an eerie chill develop in the corridor. Aaron was all too glad when the brass plate pronouncing "Interview Room Number 2" came into vision. As he gently opened the door he spotted the

inconsolable Eileen Smithers sobbing her heart out and being comforted still by the kind P.C. She had sunk into the woollen blue sofas, that although have a distinct comfort seemed more at home in a public place and for public use rather than in a home. The room was one of the most impressive in the scruffy building and it was no surprise that it was kept aside for victims of crime or bereaved relatives. The room was intended to provide a relaxing environment for deeply upset people. The square of frosted glass let in a calming amount of light, not too dim or too bright to create an unpleasant or artificial atmosphere. The room was sparingly furnished with the settee, a pine chair, with thin almost uncomfortable cushions embedded, opposite the settee, a windswept landscape mounted in a wooden frame painted a tranquil shade of willow green hung on the wall next to the dark coffee coloured M.D.F. door and an almost token filing cabinet just to add the authentic air of a police station just to guarantee that one didn't forget where one was situated. This was necessary as the only other reminder of a police station was a basic tape recorder, fixed into the plain but textured white wash wallpapered walls, was roughly obscured from view by the heavy metal filing cabinet. The thin but worn neutral carpet enhanced the soothing atmosphere of the room, although the budget was probably only double figures the room held a class that made it look almost elegant and expensive.

Eileen Brooke's previously warm blue eyes, which had been drained of their vitality and were now too black blobs surrounded by a smudgy blue, darted upwards as the door softly swung open and Aaron, like a mysterious figure, glided into the room. Aaron moved gracefully behind the filing cabinet and with one quick deceptive movement, almost reminiscent of an illusionist snapped pressed the button that started the recording of the interview.

Aaron demurred from the standard formalities of the interview, partly because he was unacquainted with the

name of the P.C. and that would have lead to certain embarrassments on his part but mainly because he judged it unfair for the grief-stricken Eileen Brooke to assume she was being interviewed in connection with her son's murder, when Aaron only really wanted a recording so as to have the information Mrs Brooke was bound to give, regarding when she left her son, when she discovered him and such like, on tape.

Aaron gingerly seated himself on the pine chair, so as not to appear too eager to get the unpleasant situation under way. The officer kept a consoling arm on Eileen's shoulder almost as if to steady her and to stop her from passing out and to show her that there was someone there to support her.

"Is there anyone you'd like us to contact at this most difficult hour?" Aaron enquired tenderly and benevolently extending her every politeness.

After a moment's consideration Eileen shook her head slowly. "No. I have a brother but..." the sentence drifted away and was lost with the constant buzz of activity deriving from noisy areas of the station.

Aaron thought it inconsiderate, impolite and irrelevant to inquire into the circumstances of her obvious distancing from her brother though he contemplated how it was strange that both members of the Brooke family had refused to have anyone sitting in on their separate interview. Nathan his mother and his mother her brother.

After this uneasy silence he asked the obligatory question "Is it okay if I ask you a few questions? I know how painful this must be for you."

Eileen displayed her silent consent with the again slow jerking of her head.

The questions commenced. "So Mrs Brooke what time did you leave your son?"

"Well I had arranged to have coffee with Vera Wilkinson at 10 o' clock so I must have left about five to ten. I left

him sitting on the settee, it was the last time I saw him alive...”

The tears once more streaked down the normally friendly and compassionate face. Aaron twigged that the efficient voice, so unlike what one would have preconceived for a widowed farmer’s wife, must have been masking the grief that was churning her insides. As her soiled, hard working hands covered her face he saw how violently they shook and it was some minutes before she regained her composure and the interview could continue.

Tears glistened even then as she relived the moment when she last set eyes on her beloved son. “He was sitting there, detached. But that had been normal of late. I didn’t think anything of it. He never quite got over Eloise dying. Poor mites the pair of them. I hadn’t realised they were so close.”

“Did you approve of the relationship?”

There was a pause as if an embarrassing question had been asked. “I’m afraid... I’m afraid I wasn’t aware of the relationship until Eloise died. I knew of Eloise Smithers but was unaware that she was dating my son. I didn’t poke my nose into my son’s love life. He could go out with whoever he wanted. He just let me know when he was going out and I never queried who with. Of course I was upset to learn he’d skipped school with her on several occasions but I know, Inspector, that my son did not murder Eloise Smithers.”

Aaron felt increasingly sorry for Mrs Brooke. Even after her son’s death she still clung to the hope that he was not a murderer. Aaron, however, had been convinced he was but now, after his death, he was not so sure.

Eileen’s face suddenly contorted in a sudden spasm of pain as she was hit by a thought, undesirable and disagreeable. “Inspector, he was all I had left. I’ve got no-one now.” The sobbing once again commenced and the violent shaking of grief and upset also began. Between the

tears she managed to piece together a sentence. “My... my husband John was killed... in the Gulf War... The First Gulf War. By... by... by some Iraqis. Oh I’ve got no-one at all now!” After several minutes the stem of tears were once again ebbed. “1991 my husband was killed. Nathan was just 3 at the time.”

“Was your husband not a farmer?”

“No, I’m the farmer. He was more of an army man. 25 years service he gave to the armed forces. He always did have a great pride in his country.” She said it almost regretfully as if she hadn’t supported his view. “I think he was proud to die for his country. But then he had been kept away from all the crime and corruption of the cities. He’d lived in Wellston-on-Sea all his life and you have to admit, Inspector, it is a picturesque and beautiful part of England to live in?”

Although irritated by her constant use of the word Inspector, he did agree that Wellston-on-Sea would have been a lovely place to have been brought up in. Realising that they had steered away from the matter in hand he tried to conduct the interview back to matters relevant to her son’s murder inquiry. Though it was only fair to let her talk, not only because of the grief she was feeling but because Aaron had learnt that witnesses sometimes gave away vital information as they apparently waffled and even if not they would eventually get back to the matter in hand more refreshed after discussing their own chosen topics.

“So what time did you return from Miss Wilkinson’s house?”

“Oh our coffee session was only an hour. I must have got back to the farm by at least ten past eleven. It’s only a short walk up the hill from Vera’s house. She’s number 5 on the High Street. I suppose you’ll want to confirm my story.”

“And what happened when you reached the farm?”

“Well I never went inside the farmhouse. I took the tractor out on some of the far fields. I hadn’t collected the

barrels of hay from them yet. I didn't go inside the house for a good half an hour. I didn't go back inside the house until a quarter to twelve. Then... then I found him lying there. Well you know..."

The tears welled up again as the image of her dead son lying helplessly dead on the rug obviously shot painfully into her mind. Aaron let her recuperate before continuing with his questioning.

"Mrs Brooke were you aware that your son had any enemies? At school perhaps?"

"Well someone must have hated him enough to kill him."

"There are other motives for murder apart from hate. Money for instance. Did anyone stand to financially gain from his death?"

A grim, sarcastic smile flashed between her lips.

Eileen answered dryly "I'm afraid we hardly have any money. Any we do have goes towards food and clothes. He didn't have a job so he only got his £3 pocket money each week. It wasn't much but it was all I could afford." Eileen sighed as she considered something before continuing, "I suppose all his possessions will come to me as obviously he hadn't even considered making a will. He was only sixteen!"

This tearful statement really disturbed Eileen as she realised what a waste of a life her son's had been.

"It's alright Mrs Brooke, no need to distress yourself. We can take a break if you wish."

"No Inspector, I'll be alright but I just keep getting little reminders... of what I've lost."

"So you weren't aware that your son had any enemies?"

Eileen's head slowly shook from side to side, her frizzy hair bobbing pathetically up and down.

"Okay then. Did your son have a close friend perhaps?"

Eileen's face contorted with the effort of memory. "I think there was one particular boy he hung around with a lot. Went to his school I believe."

"Which school is that incidentally?" Aaron interrupted throwing Eileen off her measured train of thought.

"Wellston-on-Sea Comprehensive?"

"Yes." A pause. "Charles... Charlton... Bare with me Inspector I'm just running through the possibilities. Christopher... Christian. Yes that was it. Christian!"

"Thanks that's very helpful. Best friends normally acquire an awful lot of useful information about the deceased."

"Of course, I'm sure Nathan would have confided in him secrets he hadn't mentioned to me. I'm afraid we weren't close like that but since his father died I've brought him up single handily and I've cared for him to the best of my ability."

"I'm sure you were a very good parent."

Dreamily she muttered, "I didn't stop it though did I?"

"There was nothing you could have done Mrs Brooke. We're dealing with a cold blooded killer."

"I should have been there. I should have been there..."

Aaron knew that Eileen was getting more and more agitated and as D.C.I. Barnfield was as yet unaware of the interview it was not a good idea to press her much more. He knew her sense of reality was beginning to slip.

Just a few more questions.

"Do you think it's possible that a member of the Smithers family might have murdered your son?"

"The Smithers? Why?"

"I think that... that they may hold your son responsible for the death of their daughter Eloise."

The words took a few seconds to penetrate into the ever more perplexed and grieving mind of Eileen Brooke.

"What? That's... that's... that's..." the desired word seemed to escape her, "...ridiculous. They think... they

think my Nathan killed their daughter... whatever her name was.”

“Yes.”

“He didn’t! He didn’t!”

“Oh I don’t suspect for one minute that he did Mrs Brooke,” Aaron lied. “There’s no need to distress yourself.”

“It wasn’t them. It was Ted Barrow. Farmer Ted Barrow.” Eileen seemed proud of her revelation but the warmth about her face had drained away and with it the cute pinkness from her cheeks. Her glasses twitched on her stubble nose and wrinkles creased the typically smooth forehead.

“Ted Barrow?” exclaimed Aaron as he pondered wonderingly whether she could mean timid Ted he had met only the day before.

“Yes. He threatened me yesterday. “You’ll regret it.” That’s what he said.”

Aaron was becoming lost in Eileen’s waffling. “Regret what?”

Eileen’s flow was halted by the obviously unexpected question. “I... I slapped him.”

“Slapped him?” exclaimed Aaron. “What on earth for?”

“Oh let me start from the beginning. Our farmhouse was built in 1760. Obviously it’s been done up slightly but it’s principally the same.” Aaron could see nothing obvious about the statement as the farmhouse was ramshackle enough to have been standing (or crumbling) for hundreds of years. Eileen continued unaware of Aaron’s cynical thoughts, “Well it was built next to the Barrow’s farmland which had already been there for ten years. I did a lot of research if you’re wondering how I know all this. Well John’s family were given 10 acres of land, land that went right up to the border with the Barrow’s. Well a number of years ago, not long after John’s death Ted and Lorna starting doing a bit of digging through the village Library

records. Apparently they turned up some records that proved that the field, 1 acre in area, bordering the two farmlands actually belongs to them. I never got to see the documents but they sent them to their solicitors who must have thought they gave the Barrows a sufficient claim on the land and passed them on to the local council. I got a letter from the council yesterday basically telling me to remove my belongings from that field as the Barrow's were reclaiming it. I marched straight round there with it and presented Ted with it. He was his usual bumbling, fumbling self and he was quite chuffed that 'justice' had prevailed. I was livid and I made some remark about Lorna and then I slapped him. Well as you can imagine he was pretty annoyed and he vowed revenge. I didn't take it seriously as it was only barmy Ted but now Nathan's been murdered I'm not so sure. I mean I'm sure Ted owns a gun. Most farmers do."

"Do you Mrs Brooke?"

"Yes I have one locked in the outside shed. It's a rifle."

"Is it still there?"

"I don't know you'll have to look. Why was... was Nathan murdered with a rifle?"

"We don't know yet." Aaron was about to ask further questions when Eileen unexpectedly mumbled:

"You must think I'm mad fighting with the Barrows over a bit of barren land?"

Aaron knew it had been phrased as a question but remained silent.

"Well with that 1 acre of land I've been able to do a lot of farming on it. But now Ted's taken it away from me... Anyway I'm not so sure now. Maybe it was just very silly and unimportant. Nathan certainly didn't deserve to die because of it."

"Maybe he didn't."

"You don't think it was Ted. Do you? You think it was me?"

“Mrs Brooke I can assure you the thought hadn’t even occurred to me.”

The kind female police officer whispered, “There, there,” consolingly in Eileen’s ear as if talking to a child.

Eileen shook her off, now suspicious of everyone. Her face suddenly grew red and sweaty as if feverish. Aaron knew the interview would have to be brought to a halt very shortly.

“Then why are you taking my farm apart?” Eileen asked accusingly.

“My officers are looking for the murder weapon that killed my son.”

“Why search my farm? Ted will have it on his.”

“Mrs Brooke I think you’re being slightly irrational.”

“You’ve wrecked my house, taken all the hay out my barn, emptied my tool shed; I’m surprised you haven’t come across my rifle yet. Well the door is locked but you’ve probably ripped it down by now. That bonfire, me and Nathan spent a lot of time putting it together. I just needed some matches. I got some from the corner shop on my way to Vera’s.” Eileen took the packet of unopened matches from her pocket and chucked them on the floor almost as evidence. “There. I was going to burn it this afternoon. But Nathan helped me do it. I couldn’t burn it now. But you’ve taken it apart. He’s gone. He’s gone. You’ve taken him away.”

Eileen started to shake convulsively once more, her screaming mixed in with delirious crying echoed spookily round the once comfy and innocent room. Aaron rose, clicked the tape recorder off and left the room, leaving the female officer to calm down the hysterical and grieving Mrs Brooke.

Chapter 17

Aaron sat in Vera Wilkinson's sitting room which held a panoramic view of Wellston-on-Sea's quaint, idyllic harbour with the different styles and sizes of boats dipping up and down amidst a maze of floating pink-red buoys which hovered on the film of the calm sea seemingly without purpose or ends. The flamboyant flowery curtains bordered this stunning postcard picture. The small, square lounge set in the small square house was ample for the undemanding needs of Miss Wilkinson. The cream textured wallpapered walls sympathised, strikingly with the strong raspberry red carpet still bouncy beneath one's feet even twenty five years after the purchase of the house. And that was indeed that amount of time that Vera had been cooped up in and beetled round the matchbox house. But unlike any plain matchbox the house oozed an old fashioned, traditional feel with its intricate and not in the least faded beauty. Two uncomfortable grubby and ragged armchairs sat opposite each other, for that was obviously all the company Vera ever kept, pushed back against the left and right walls but slightly angled so the occupant would have a breathtakingly astonishing view of the never changing harbour. The small 1970s style TV sat in its trolley to the left of the window presumably so if a programme ever got slightly tiresome Vera could turn her attention to the exciting activities of fishing vessels, luxury yachts or crowded tour boats. On the far wall as one entered the room was a small electric fire on which all the bars glowed their bright orange-red and the warmth radiated round the room giving a snug feel to the room. On the wall next to the narrow, bare arch leading into the rectangular cramped kitchen, hung a portrait of an elderly gentleman with thinning grey hair, combed over the increasing baldness of scalp. The features of his face seemed so intricate and Aaron found the picture remarkable in detail; the brown eyes set back into his head, the tiny spectacles that were perched on the bridge of his nose, the thin skin of the cheek

which clung obsessively to the jutting cheekbone, the long thin bony jaw and the stretched pale lips just revealing the yellowing teeth but no attempt at a smile had been made.

Vera bustled into the lounge carrying a weaved straw tray with a plastic bottom. On the tray was China teapot, two china cups to match, along with a matching jug full to the brim with milk that splashed onto the tray with little plopping sounds and a tin bowl of sugar. Aaron knew Vera's sort as he had met her on the course of unaccountable investigations; the ageing widowed but friendly busy body who knew all the gossip there was to know about their tiny village. Aaron was also aware that these elderly women could be so valuable to investigations with their meticulous observations of every day goings on. Primarily, however, he was in her house with the objective of establishing whether Eileen Brooke's alibi held water. It was just a standard precaution as Aaron was totally convinced that Eileen Brooke had not had a hand in her son's murder. Murder. The word came to him once again.

Vera was a stout lady with slightly hunched shoulders. She wore a long pink dress with a white frill around the neck and the arm length sleeves, which reminded Aaron of costumes from period dramas on the TV. The dress also looked marginally too tight for Vera's slightly podgy stomach. However Vera did look remarkably well for her age as Aaron would have put her closer to 50 than to the 63 she actually was. Her small, crumpled hands with their bulging streaks of veins poured out the tea. Vera's matted grey hair sat on top of her cheerful face resembling a wig in its apparently weak attachment to her head. The darting, pale, almost translucent, grey eyes constantly jumped about, always alert. Vera was determined never to miss a trick. The flabby, creased skin hung from her cheekbones like washing on a line, above the illuminating smile of crooked but surprisingly sparkling white teeth bordered by dry red lips.

As she poured Vera followed Aaron's stare and answered the unasked question. "That was my husband, Wilf. He's been dead for... let me see... 15 years. We'd been here 10 years when he passed away. Only 60 he was. There was quite a large age gap between us 'cause I'm only 63 now."

Aaron looked shyly away as he realised his estimate had been 13 years out. Vera seemed not to notice but Aaron felt that it would have been registered by her sharp, intelligent eyes.

Vera rambled on, "Our parents never approved. Thought he was too old for me. Only 24 I was when we married. Lovely wedding it was. The weather was beautiful. Glorious sunshine it was. There's the photo, on the mantelpiece."

Aaron turned his attention to the thin wooden mantel piece poorly constructed over the glowing fireplace. Resting on the wood, taking pride position between inexpensive but somewhat sophisticated ornaments, was the wedding photo of Vera Wilkinson and the man in the portrait, her "Wilf". The cheap frame did nothing to bring out the beauty of the two young adults happily smiling at the camera with confetti drifting over them and into the spotlight of the photo.

"How wrong could they be? 30 years we were married and not a nasty word passed between us. Happiest couple in the world we were. Anyway that portrait must have been drawn in about 1987, the year before he died. He didn't look very well did he? Lung cancer it was. He used to smoke before he met me. I got him to pack up straight away but the damage had already been done, hadn't it. He got an arty friend of his to draw that for me. So I'd have something to remember him by. Course I've got lots of photos but that portrait's pretty good. He couldn't 'alf draw. Now what was his name? Martin... Martin Calvin that was it! And there's a sentimental value attached to that

portrait, that none of the photos have got, 'cause Wilf got that drawn specially for me, when he knew the end was near. And it wasn't cheap either. This Martin was in demand. Anyway you haven't come here to talk about Wilf have you Inspector? Oh please, do sit down."

Aaron obliged. As Vera finished pouring out the coffee he leant forward to the light oak coffee table, with its large rectangle of oak fixed in the middle, on which the tray had been set down. He dipped a spoon into the sugar and plonked to spoonfuls into his coffee cup. He then lifted the cup, relaxed back in his uncomfortable seat and took a sip of the strong coffee, overloaded with caffeine. Vera did the same and any passer-by could have glanced through the window and believed the pair to have been having a pleasant session of early afternoon tea. But then Vera and Aaron set down their cups, after tasting the thick brown liquid within them, the questions commenced.

"Mrs Wilkinson..."

Vera interrupted abruptly but with enough friendliness to sound polite. "Oh Vera please."

"Vera," Aaron started once again, "what time did Mrs Brooke arrive at your house?"

"Eileen got here bang on ten for I remember glancing at my wristwatch." Vera held up her arm as if displaying evidence. Aaron saw the shabby brown leather wrist watch with the small clock face, which was usual on ladies watches, gripped tightly around Vera's frail wrist.

"And what time did she leave?" inquired Aaron.

"I think it was just after eleven. Our coffee mornings only normally last for an hour, just a chance to catch up on the gossip. Of course we spent this one talking about poor old Eloise Smithers and how badly Nathan had been affected. He was really smitten with her."

Aaron was suddenly struck by the fact that Vera seemed to have acquired prior knowledge of Nathan and Eloise's relationship. He tentatively posed a question. "Were you

aware of Nathan Brooke and Eloise's relationship before Eloise's death?"

Vera leant forward in a conspiratorial manner. "Most of the village was. Their parents were probably the only ones in the dark. I don't think Eileen much cared who Nathan went out with but there'd have been fireworks if her family had found out. Very upper class and old fashioned the lot of them. I've never been on a sociable level with them. I've nodded to Alistair and Petula when I've seen them in The Swan. It surprises me how they lower themselves by going in there. I mean it's a lovely pub and Cyril's a dear but I wouldn't have thought that it was their cup of tea. Though I think Alistair is fond of Cyril as well but saying that I don't think there's any folk in the village that don't like Cyril. He's so kind to everyone. He often slips me the odd sherry on the house. I hope I won't get him in any trouble with the police."

Aaron laughed reassuringly and remarked:

"Of course not. I'm just here to solve a murder." Aaron took a further sip of his coffee as if to pluck up the courage for the subsequent question. "Vera, you speak about knowing about Nathan and Eloise's relationship. You wouldn't happen to know if they were going through a rough patch would you?"

"Well I wouldn't want to appear nosy but one does occasionally pick up snippets of gossip if one associates with the right people. And us old folk did take a strong interest in our very own Romeo and Juliet. Oh! How terrible that must sound now that they're both dead. It was just that us old folk like a bit of romance and those two lovely young people were made for each other. Unfortunately a few of weeks ago things started to go wrong. Dear old Mrs Firkins, who lives up the road, has a granddaughter at Wellston Comprehensive. Now Jessica, that's her granddaughter- lovely girl, had heard that Nathan had been distancing himself from Eloise. We all thought

that was a shame but there's not a lot one can do about it. I just kept my ears peeled for more snippets. Well actually it was I who saw the next bit, or bits should I say, of activity. It became apparent that every night after school for almost a week Nathan was meeting up with this boy and catching the 68 bus into Eastonshire. My ears aren't too wonderful in my time of life but I'd swear his name was Christian." That name again. "Not that I was listening of course."

"Of course" Aaron retorted to placate Vera but he was unable to keep a mischievous smile from crossing his lips.

Vera flowed on. "Well when I mentioned that to the odd few people the rumours really started to flow I can tell you. Everyone thought that maybe Romeo had gone the other way. Anyway the rumours didn't last long 'cause on that Friday night Mrs Deckle, who runs a B&B along the High Street, was nipping to the corner shop late one night to buy some milk. Gwenda Baker who runs it is a real dear; she keeps it open well into the night. Heavens knows when she gets any sleep. It's open at the crack of dawn. Anyway as I say she was just about to go into the corner shop when Nathan and this Christian came out. And they were in the middle of a blazing row. This Christian was absolutely hollering at poor old Nathan. Now from what Mrs Deckle could distinguish from the stream of obscenities was that Christian suspected our innocent Romeo of having an affair with his Christian's girlfriend. Mrs Deckle thinks her name was Martine or Marianne or something like that. Anyway I'm sure there was no truth in it, Nathan was certainly denying it. Unfortunately Mrs Deckle mentioned it to the odd person or so, completely trust worthy I'm sure, and it got to Mrs Firkins and she passed it on to Jessica and the next thing you know it's round the school. Though I'm sure it didn't reach Eloise as I started seeing her and Nathan hanging around on the pier and going down the cliff path again. That was where she met her maker wasn't it?"

"I'm afraid it was yes" Aaron grimly replied.

“Yes I saw the police cordon blocking off the footpath. I don’t miss much. Anyway I can’t believe both of the poor mites are dead. So you say Nathan was murdered. What about her?”

“Investigations are still under way. I’m afraid at the moment I’m not able to comment.”

“Oh I quite understand Inspector. Though I wouldn’t be one to tittle tattle.”

“I’m sure you wouldn’t.” Aaron was unsure whether Vera had expected him to divulge top secret information for her to put round the village. He was far too professional to divulge in something so stupid. For the time being his mind ignored the famous punch.

Then he drank up his coffee and thanked Vera for her kindness before taking his leave, in order to avoid any more stories about her dear old Wilf and stepped out into the bitter cold air through which the rain spat.

Chapter 18

Harry Barnfield felt a distinct unease as he trundled unwilling up the creaky wooden staircase of the Brooke’s house. The bare landing floorboards, faded with time and tread, creaked their tune as if to announce that he had come to raid the private rooms hidden by the heavy, chipped, dark brown oak doors. One stood directly opposite the top of the stairs and there was one other on either side of the landing. The bare concrete walls were splattered with paint and concrete and the bare shabbiness made the dim room disgustingly ugly. A single lamp hung from the ceiling covered with a moth eaten shade and the deep yellow glow did nothing to eradicate the dim feeling of the bare and basic room. The filthy grime covered ceiling was interrupted by a rectangular wooden hatch implanted into the ceiling. A loft, with its hatch not completely pushed

back into its rightful position. A slit of blackness shone down onto the already light deprived landing. Someone had been in it recently deduced Harry smartly, but then stopped himself abruptly as he remembered that the farm was a crime scene and was being thoroughly searched by his competent officers. Well competent bar one.

He had never liked Aaron but he had also never been able to pin a reason to his dislike. There was something about him; the cocky swagger, the mad rush of determination flowing through his head, the assumption that he was always right, even the violence he had been known to display. At this point in the murder investigation he had vanished to follow up his own leads. Had he forgotten who the senior officer was? No, Harry would never let him forget that.

Having returned from his liquid lunch in the pleasant seaside stroke country pub 'The Swan', Harry had found that Aaron, along with his car, had disappeared from the scene and no message had been left as to his whereabouts. He'd be off wasting his time somewhere, conversing with a snout or such like, nothing for Harry to lose sleep over.

The door directly in front of him swung gently open to his touch to reveal a miniscule bathroom. The narrow rectangular room had a petite square of frosted glass on the far wall above the old style maroon toilet. Harry found the colour distinctly disgusting and as the washbasin and the bath were manufactured in the same dried blood colouring he felt oppressed in the dull 70s style room. One would have found it difficult not to feel oppressed even without the distasteful and repugnant shade. The tank bath, elevated slightly on untidy blocks of wood with its peeling slime ridden once silver taps was almost touching the toilet which was only a few inches from the dirt encrusted basin. A square of mirror glass hung above the basin with white screw caps in each corner to hide from view the

unattractive nails. Not, thought Harry, that it would have adversely affected the appearance of the slimy room.

Retreating from the dark room, with only strips of light sneaking through the frosted glass, back onto the dim landing Harry selected the door, of identical make to the others in the house, on the left of the landing and slid into the room. Immediately he was hit by light from a wide, uncurtained window and was completely blank except for two wooden frames splitting the window into four. A double bed stood in the middle of the room. Harry tried to recall to his memory whether Eileen Brooke was married as she was undoubtedly the occupant of the bedroom. Then the true explanation was pulled from the recesses of his mind as he turned his attention to the basic dressing table, with a few drawers, pushed against the far wall with a tiny mirror in a frame propped up on top of the dressing table. As next to the mirror, in its rather attractive- rather out of place flowery frame, was an enlarged photo in a basic chunky wooden frame. The photo was the face of a man. The man was presumably in his late thirties at the time the photo was taken. Even having only seen Nathan once, Harry could at once see a remarkable resemblance. The bright red lips, the thin brown eyes, and the handsome features of his jaw were instantaneously distinguishable as those of the 16 year old boy who lay dead on a furry white rug downstairs. However the man in the photo's cheek were unshaven and prickly stubs of hair grew through his cheeks and the style of his hair was also different as it had been combed to the left leaving his parting to one side, which had obviously been the fashion of the time (possibly the 80s) but Harry thought it looked decidedly silly in 2003. From the resemblance and its pride of place position Harry instinctively knew who it was; Eileen Brooke's deceased husband whose name he was unaware. Pushed up in front of the dressing table was a white enamel stool a cushioned rose pink seat fastened to the top. Next to the dressing table

was a solitary, bare and unpainted cupboard and that was all the furniture the room had. The walls were white wash and bare and so were the exposed floorboards.

Nathan's room was entirely different. The narrow single bed was pushed back against the left hand wall, and the mattress sat on rickety pine feet. Multi-coloured striped curtains were pulled across the window causing a dark brown glow to disperse around the room. Harry itched to draw them back but it was a crime scene. Nothing should be touched. A pine chest of drawers full to the brim with clothes, which were visible bursting out of the drawers, had been positioned at the foot of the bed. The top of the unit had been morphed into a writing desk. School books were piled in haphazard piles on either side of the desk, leaving a space in the middle for writing, where, at present, a cheap, light blue plastic fountain pen rolled aimlessly about. This was the room of interest to Harry and it was Sod's law that it was the last room he had looked into. He needed to build up a clear picture of the deceased before he could reveal the identity of his killer. From the impression of the room alone Harry summed up that Nathan seemed like a normal teenage boy. The walls were plastered with pictures of sexy, female Pop Stars that Harry, who listened to Mozart's symphonies on his way home from work, had never heard of. The room seemed classier than the other rooms in the house but not excessively so. The thin, frayed red Berber carpet and the ceiling length oak panel walls were indeed the most expensive investments in the house. Nathan's mother had obviously gone to great lengths to make his room a pleasant place to be. Not that Harry would care to sleep in it as he was an intolerable sufferer of sea sickness and the oak panels reminded him of a ship's cabin. The fact that the scenic Eastonshire country had been obscured from view one could imagine being on choppy waters. Reality slipping away, Harry's mind started rocking to and fro...

The door groaned noisily open but very little light was let in from the gloomy landing. Aaron stood in the shadows.

“Alright guv?”

“Where on earth have you been?” Harry growled, as reality flooded back in tidal waves.

Aaron took infinite pleasure in disclosing his whereabouts and as he spoke a sly smile grew on his face. “I’ve interviewed Mrs Brooke and taken the liberty to check out her alibi. It’s concrete.”

“You’re taken a liberty alright Holmes! When did I give you permission to interview Mrs Brooke without me?”

“I took the initiative, sir. Anyway it’s all on tape.”

“Well you won’t have asked all the necessary questions so we’ll have to disturb that poor woman again.”

“I was very thorough, sir. Have you found a diary yet guv?” The question was almost casually posed.

“A diary? Why, did Mrs Brooke say he kept one?”

“I didn’t ask but as Eloise had one I concluded that it was probable that Nathan kept one as well. The entry for last Friday would be an exceptionally interesting read.”

Harry was unsure how to respond but Aaron’s display of confidence somewhat disgruntled him, for he liked to be the one with the Aces.

The next 10 minutes were spent by the thorough searching of Nathan’s claustrophobic room. While Harry insisted on removing the mattress, peeking behind the frayed edges of the carpet and ferociously knocking the panelled walls in the vague hope of discovering a hollow compartment. Aaron, however, was more specific. He briefly flicked through the pile of Nathan’s school books but without much hope of discovering anything. Having completed his little habit of nosiness he set to work on the drawers, pulling each one out without mercy, tipping the clothes onto the floor, smacking his hand against the firm pine base before returning the drawer, along with its tangle

of clothes, back into the chest of drawers. Having carried this out on each on the six drawers Aaron headed for the landing leaving Harry with his hand inserted under the mattress.

“Where are you going?” Harry blurted out, as he realised his subordinate was abandoning him in the nauseating shipwreck.

“To see if they’ve finished downstairs” answered Aaron, briefly glancing up at the ajar attic hatch.

Removing his hand swiftly, Harry glided out onto the landing and creaked down the stairs after Aaron.

The scene of the crime was now heaving at the seems with white coated wasps. Every surface was dusted meticulously by fingerprint officials and forensics combed the whole room looking for valuable DNA evidence. As they entered Dr. Kensic swept up his black medical bag and head for the door.

“The body can be taken away now,” he informed the pair in his normal gruff voice.

“What have you found?” Aaron asked eagerly.

“Well I can’t be more specific about the time of death until I get him back to the lab but I’d say death was almost instantaneous. My guess as to the type of gun would be some sort of rifle. Probably an old make, judging by the markings on the bullet. Though there was something fairly strange.”

“Yes?” Aaron felt a surge of enthusiastic expectancy as he always did when an investigation started to reveal promising information.

“Well in my opinion, this will have to be checked of course, but I’d say that the bullet was fired from close range. Now the body shows no signs of being moved, the mat could have been slid across the floor of course but there were speckles of blood on the floor right next to the mat. Now if this was the case and he was standing on the mat when he was shot and the shot was fired from the other

side of the window then that hardly classes as close range. It certainly wouldn't explain the deep entrance wound caused by the bullet."

Kensic held up the evidence bag, previously concealed in his right hand. At the bottom of the bag was a tiny object, not unlike a nut, caked in a sticky maroon substance that made the bullet look like a kidney stone, just removed from a human body. Kensic mumbled on, "No this is merely a guess and the bullet will have to be tested, of course, but my professional opinion is that it didn't perforate the window."

Kensic seemed to wallow in the shocked and confused faces of Aaron and Harry as if someone were finally appreciating the genius of his work. "Interesting isn't it?"

Aaron was quick to leap on this new information. "Then what about the bullet hole in the window? There isn't another bullet anywhere, is there? In him, for instance?"

"No, I'm quite sure of that."

Aaron seemed to ponder this intriguing piece of information while Barnfield began his interrogation of Kensic. "Are you sure? It's ridiculous."

"I'm not sure the bullet didn't pass through the window, not yet anyway, but I'm quite sure that the bullet was fired from close range and for it to have come through the window then that would be a longer range than the wound implies. The wound does seem to have come from the window but I would be inclined to think that the shot was fired by someone standing on this side of the window rather than outside."

"Has any sign of a forced entry to the farmhouse been discovered?" Aaron asked of Kensic.

"No, sir."

"Isn't all this immaterial really?" barked Barnfield.

Aaron cut in before Kensic could open his mouth. "Of course it's not sir. It poses the question of where the other bullet went and why was it there."

Aaron strode over to the window and crouched to study the bullet hole with its ice like cracks streaming away from the jagged hole. From the position of the hole he allowed his eyes to follow the imaginary path of the bullet. He found them focusing on the landscape picture above the settee.

Barnfield stood, unimpressed with Aaron's show of thorough scrutiny that would have been more at home on a detective show just before the detective discovered the vital clue that wrapped up the whole case, with his arms folded in an impenetrable manner. Aaron, ignoring Barnfield's obvious show of mocking disapproval, paced over to the landscape and gently caressed the frame and its glass that covered the picture in the vague hope of finding a hole that could be attributed to a bullet. Unsurprisingly the frame had no such dents in the glass or in the frame. On closer inspection Aaron could see that the canvas on which the picture had been drawn was also imperforated. That was even less unsurprising as it incredibly strange if a bullet had damaged the painting without leaving a hole in the glass. But then again Nathan's murder posed some equally peculiar questions. Where had the bullet that had cracked the window gone? It couldn't have just vanished into thin air. Could it?

Aaron was then struck by another thought and on impulse he wrenched the painting away from a shiny nail that had held the picture in place. Luckily his hands were gloved so even if the forensics were yet to dust the frame it would not have been contaminated by Aaron. Behind it was nothing but a badly painted wall, although plastered with cracks and chips, especially around the nail, it was without holes that could be ascribed to a bullet. Slowly and deflated Aaron hooked the frame back onto its designated nail.

Turning round he saw the unimpressed faces of his colleagues Kensic and Barnfield. "Just a hunch" he shrugged in an explanatory manner. The sentence hid the

embarrassment under the surface. But at least he had been trying to solve the complex puzzle unlike his colleagues.

On muttering a goodbye to Kensic Aaron left the room and ventured outside into the now streaming rain and the frosty wind that made the leaves dance about his feet. Barnfield was a few steps behind him.

“Sir,” Aaron ventured meekly, “I think it might be time to pay Ted Barrow a visit.”

“Who’s he?”

“I’ll fill you in on the way down the road, guv.”

Aaron quickly strode towards the entrance not giving time for Barnfield to protest and Aaron was tugging the gate across the thick mud before Barnfield had time to open his mouth. As he tugged, Aaron looked back at the farm and in particular at a ramshackle shed in which a S.O.C.O. was emerging from. In his gloved hands he carried a rifle. This was obviously Mrs Brooke’s rifle and Aaron felt a nasty sensation in the pit of his stomach as he realised that the hysterical and grief stricken Mrs Brooke had been right in her accusation. The shed door lay smashed on the floor with the panels separated and splinters of wood visible around the edges.

The vicious wasps continued to buzz about the farm. For the first time in his career Aaron doubted whether he really wanted to remain at Eastonshire Police Station.

Chapter 19

The long walk down the steep winding road had not been a pleasant experience for Aaron. Not only had it brought back the painful experience of driving the deceased home with the fearful belief that he had murdered his girlfriend but now he was frightened of what his colleagues were capable of. It might just have been a rickety old door but to Aaron it signified so much more. Added to this the complicated case floated through his mind. While all this

was going on in his head he had to fill Barnfield in on the Ted Barrow situation.

As he enlightened Barnfield regarding the feud between the Barrows and the Brookes, the sarcastic comments that slipped freely from the mouth of Aaron's superior officer helped Aaron to realise that his proposed truce was just an unrealistic fantasy and one that would never be realised. He and Barnfield worked better against each other, if that was logically possible.

Regarding the behaviour of the S.O.C.O. s Aaron was still disturbed by it but regarding the murder investigation, the most pressing of all his thoughts, his mental assessment was taking shape. He was convinced that the two crimes were connected but using his skills as a profiler, drummed into him at police school, he could see vast differences in the two deaths. The pushing of Eloise Smithers to her death surely was not a pre-meditated crime. Aaron knew there were five different motives for murder. His mind desperately tried to see which ones fitted Eloise's death, if any. While doing this he decided that he would remove the complication of Nathan's silence and his subsequent murder for the present.

The first motive for murder was for financial gain. As far as he knew no-one stood to gain from Eloise's death. If anyone did then it would be her family and he was adamant that the Smithers were in good financial straits. Anyway Eloise had only been a 15 year old school girl and it was unlikely she would have a stash of money hidden away.

Next was the security motive. This would mean Eloise knew some sinister secret about some person and they about subsequently murdered her for their own peace of mind and security. The point to remember, Aaron knew, was that if Eloise's death had been murder, and he was now positively sure of this fact, it had not been a violent crime in the least. There had been no scratch or mark on Eloise's beautiful complexion about from the consequences of her

smashing into the rocks. This would therefore fit the motives of financial gain and security because the murderer would have wished no pain on the victim as they were just removing them for their own gain. However what possible secret could Eloise have obtained about her murderer. Though, Wellston-on-Sea was likely to be flooded with dark secrets, from the past.

Next was the love motive. Aaron was slightly biased towards this motive because it apparently fitted Eloise's death the most satisfactorily as Aaron's early conceptions suggested that the whole case did indeed revolve around this particular emotion. The motive would normally entail the victim having a partner that some other person had a maddening crush on and killed the victim to leave the gate open for themselves. Or of course, and this would suggest Nathan as the killer which Aaron now doubted, the victim's partner might have been indulging in relations with another person and had murdered the victim to leave the path open for the murderer and their new conquest. It was worth remembering that Nathan and Eloise's relationship had been nothing more than a teenage passion and would have petered out in time. Failing that Nathan could easily have dumped Eloise and murdering her would have been grossly unnecessary.

Next was the psychopathic motive. Aaron held great reservations about the idea of a psychopath walking through the sleepy village of Wellston-on-Sea and then along the cliff path just at the moment that the two truants were running along the cliff top. Aaron also felt it implausible that a raging psycho would be without a weapon and would have pushed Eloise without inflicting any pain and this also begged the question of why Nathan had not been killed then as well. Why would the mental case have picked on Eloise and let Aaron get away. He was more empathetic to the idea that one of the inhabitants might have mental problems but to murder Eloise they

would probably have been driven by another motive, apart from being a psychopathic.

The final motive for murder was revenge. This would entail that innocent Eloise Smithers had done some injustice towards some unknown person and had been murdered for the person's personal revenge. It begged the question what could she have possibly done to hurt anyone in her short 15 year long life. Also, from experience, Aaron knew that when extracting revenge killers liked to be face to face, which of course the murderer and Eloise would have been, but they also liked to extract pain to pay back the injustice done against them, pay shooting or stabbing and just to push her to her death as if removing her had been more important than hurting her.

Those were the 5 motives but there was something else that Aaron knew it was necessary to take into account. Anger. It was possible that Eloise had been locked in a fierce argument with her murderer and they had lost their cool and pushed her from the cliff path.

This methodical analysing of the motives proved to Aaron, that his subconscious had decided that Eloise's death was murder and not just an accident. He had never seriously considered suicide, although if she had just found out that Nathan had been cheating on her then it was a possibility, but otherwise, from what Aaron had learnt, she had seemed a perfectly ordinary 15 year old and was very happy with her boyfriend so murder was the only other way to explain how she had landed in a rock pool which was a good few metres away from the bottom of the cliff.

His mental process now moved onto Nathan's murder and at least in this instance this was certainly murder, although it was not without its complications. Firstly Aaron let his mind try to match the motive as if Nathan had been shot through the window and then he would move onto the possibility of his murderer being in the room with him.

If the shot had been fired through the window then the motives suggested were once again security and financial gain. Someone who wasn't fussed if they were face to face with Nathan at the time just fired one shot through the window, not multiple shots, just as if removing them was more important than standing watching them die in agony.

Aaron mentally accepted it was possible but enormously implausible, that if Eloise had been killed by a raging psycho and Nathan had got away then the killer could have gone to the farm to get even with him. Aaron knew there were so many holes in the fascinating idea that he didn't realistically consider it. Like, how would the killer have known where Nathan lived? Nathan did not go home after Eloise died until Aaron himself had taken him there. Or had he?

Revenge was far more likely than any of the other previously thought about motives and Aaron was well aware of this fact. Though it was only far more likely given the circumstances that the Smithers had held Nathan personally responsible for their daughter's death and not in terms of profiling. It was possible that the member of the Smithers family could have made eye contact with Nathan as he lounged on the settee, that Nathan could have jumped from the sofa in a petrified panic and then the trigger had calmly been pulled. But was that really revenge? Then again Aaron considered the possibility that the killer had been one of the young members of the Smithers family. Or maybe both of them? Surely they would just be concerned with making him pay for their sister's death by taking his life as well. Profiling might not apply for immature and undeveloped minds.

An image shot through his mind like a war plane screeching overhead. The charismatic figure of Sydney stood, rifle in hand, outside the lounge window of the Brooke farmhouse, with his clean leather shoes sinking into slimy sludge beneath and next to him his sister, Teresa,

egged him on with childlike encouragements and Aaron, the passer-by, saw madness and psychosis in the light blue eyes. The gun exploded into life with a crack that echoed forever across the barren countryside and out to the depths of deadly greyness.

The apparition was gone as rapidly as it had come and Barnfield was back at his shoulder. From Aaron's vantage point of the steep decline the gate to the Barrow's farm, the one Aaron had thought belonged to the Brooke's on that sinister night, was now visible. A chill tingled down Aaron's spine at the thought of that night.

As Barnfield dragged the creaky gate open, Aaron thought of love. Surely that motive would never fit into Nathan's murder. He had no girlfriend now, not after Eloise's death. Or had he? Mrs Wilkinson had mentioned that he was going out with his best friend's girlfriend. Aaron would have to go to Wellston-on-Sea school and see if he could locate the mysterious Christian as it was possible he had murdered Nathan for cheating on him behind his back. The type of crime though didn't fit, somehow. Christian would surely have confronted Nathan before shooting at him through the window. Though according to the Vera's friend there had already been a confrontation on Friday so why would he have waited until Sunday before killing him. And surely he would have wanted to be in the room with Nathan to wallow in his revenge and watch him die as he fired the gun several times. The strangest thing in this crime was it was sans violence or anger.

Obviously if the killer had been let into the house by the victim then what did that change. Well it almost completely eliminated the psychotic motive unless they were someone Nathan knew. But who?

Viewing the crime from this angle would possibly rule out financial gain and security as it would be unnecessary to be face to face with their victim when they could have

fired a shot through the window for example. Unless of course they had another reason for despising Nathan and had wanted to settle this debt by being in the room with him and letting him know his fate.

The killer being in the house did mean that the revenge and love motives held a certain truth to them as the killer could have obtained revenge by watching them die but it still didn't explain the solitary bullet.

The drizzle fell, plopping into the puddles. Barnfield and Aaron approached the rickety door of the Barrow farmhouse.

Apart from the obvious confusion of where the bullet had come from, which Dr Kensic would hopefully be able to settle when he got the bullet back into the laboratory, Aaron was puzzled by something else. Why was Nathan standing up? Obviously if the shot proved to have come through the window then Nathan could have seen the mystery figure, or figures, through the window and leaped from the sofa only to be shot with a solitary shot. But had Aaron not perceived content in the eyes of the dead. This would mean Aaron was familiar with his killer, had let them in, taken them to the lounge, sat himself back down on the settee and then in the moment of adrenalin had seen the rifle (maybe previously hidden under a coat) been produced and had sprung up desperately to try and dislodge the gun from his killer's grasp. And then the everlasting sound of the rifle which would ring on in Nathan's ears for ever. But surely this horror would have rid his face of the momentary emotion of content?

Aaron mind clicked off like a light switch and his thoughts seeped temporarily irretrievably away as Barnfield rapped on the door without any consideration for its delicacy. Aaron knew that the questioning of Ted Barrow was necessary but he didn't for a solitary moment believe that it would yield any remotely useful bits of information connected to the murder of Nathan Brooke.

The Yale lock clicked from within and the door was once again viciously thrown open. Ted Barrow stood in the doorway, attired in the same clothes as two days previously and a puzzled, almost anxious expression creased his face when his eyes met Aaron's. "Oh Inspector it's you." The words seemed to lack friendliness but they did appear to hold genuine bewilderment and be utterly oblivious as to why the Detective Inspector was once again standing on his doorstep.

The sound of the spitting rain seemed to increase in decibels and apparently for the first time drifted into the ears of Farmer Ted. "Oh do come in out of the rain." The frail yellowing smile and pleasant aura returned to the meek, wrinkled face.

Aaron's leather shoes twitched, ready to engage in the offer but Barnfield's harsh words interrupted his proposed movement. "That won't be necessary. We just need to know you whereabouts between 10 and 11 o'clock and would be grateful if we would be allowed to remove your rifle, providing of course you own one, for forensic examination.

A low, inaudible but exasperated sigh emitted itself from Aaron's lips. Barnfield was lacking in compassion and tact but maybe, Aaron unwillingly considered, he was being somewhat hypocritical as he never let anything stand in the way of proceeding with an investigation but he was adamant that he could have handled the delicate situation with more subtlety and without the obvious hint that Ted was a suspect in a criminal activity which Barnfield had declined to enlighten him upon.

Before Ted's wan lips could part a shrill voice of feminine authority rang through the farm like a telephone. "Ted who's at the door?" The voice sounded from the sitting room, in which Aaron had been seated in just two days ago.

"The police dear," was Ted's uncomfortable reply.

Ted flinched at the piercing exclamation of surprise. “The police! They’ve already been once.” The springs of the settee relaxed causing a creak, just audible from the hallway above the din of the spluttering rain, as Lorna rose, her undoubtedly slippers padded across the carpet and Aaron could just distinguish the spongy footfalls on the raspberry carpet of the lounge.

Lorna appeared in the doorway of the lounge. The cluster of crumbs that had plastered themselves to the corners of her lips informed Aaron that she was either in the middle of, or had just finished the eating the of her lunch. She wore baggy jeans with thick, fresh mud caked onto the knees and streaks of dried mud down the sides. The jeans had been pulled up to her waistline and were fastened with a ridiculous dark brown leather belt which, along with the excessive height of the trousers did nothing to emphasise her rather slender figure. The furry, woollen, maroon jumper also did nothing for her sexy figure and from a distance she could be identified as a stereotypical farmer’s wife; ageing and without beauty. Obviously it would be unpractical to dress up one’s self for the Oscar’s when in reality one was going to go about the unenviable task of mucking out the pig sty.

As her and Aaron’s eyes met, hers, previously alert with the anticipation of a visit from the Eastonshire Police Force softened almost instantaneously. Once more Aaron thought he detected the fluttering of the overly extended eyelashes and immediately he recalled the shiver he had felt down his spine of sexual repression as Lorna’s feet had, unknown to her husband Ted, rubbed encouragingly down his back.

Lorna was speaking to him, bringing him out of his trance. “Oh Mr Holmes, we didn’t expect you again. I don’t mean to be rude but we thought we’d helped you in the all the ways we could on your last visit.”

The reply was snatched from Aaron's mouth by Barnfield's quick, ungentle retort. "Nathan Brooke's been murdered."

The flirtatious face of Lorna froze, as her attractive features tensed and Ted's meek face turned a ghostly white and Aaron feared that Barnfield's blurted explanation could have been too much for the timid, hopeless figure of Farmer Ted. Ted's ears glistened with threatening tears that wrinkled, soiled hands wiped quickly away.

From the genuine reactions of disbelief and horror from the members of the Barrow farmhouse Aaron was sure, if he had ever doubted it, that neither party were responsible for the death of Nathan. Whatever Ted might have threatened in the heat of the moment he had not killed Nathan in an act of revenge.

"When?" The word just managed to pass through the Ted's quivering lips.

"Between 10 and 11 o'clock this morning." Barnfield's words were as sharp and callous as usual and he was apparently unimpressed by the upset reactions of the pair. Aaron wished he would be granted the chance to speak so they could hear a king gentle voice. "That's why I wish to know where you were."

"You... you... think... it..." The lips were uncontrollable vibrating from an unpleasant mixture of anger and shock that no words could pass the pale red barriers.

Lorna, who had composed herself after the initial shock, strode forward. "And who are you?" she posed to Barnfield.

Aaron delighted in seeing Barnfield squirm as Lorna asked the accusing question. "D.C.I. Barnfield" he replied in a slightly disgruntled manner, flipping out his warrant card as he did so.

"Well Mr Barnfield, how dare you throw these slanderous accusations at my poor husband? We knew poor

Nathan very intimately. His mother's a very good friend of ours."

Barnfield was quick to divulge in his speciality of arguing. "On the contrary Mrs Barrow we have information to suggest that Mrs Brooke came round here yesterday, had a fuming argument with your husband and in consequence slapped him. Your husband then promised revenge. Do you not think it a coincidence that her son was murdered the following day?"

Barnfield put a brutal emphasis on the word murdered to enforce the severity of the crime. Lorna had certainly receded from her argumentative approach to Barnfield. "Or had your husband not informed you of that?"

Regaining her composure she countered with "Mr Barnfield my husband and I tell each other everything, don't we Ted?"

Aaron couldn't help but notice Ted's nervous little flinch as he was suddenly reinstated into the conversation. "Yes, yes. Oh course we do," he blurted out hurriedly, his lips still trembling somewhat.

"Ted told me that Eileen had come round, I was in the lounge while the argument was taking place, shouting her mouth off. She wasn't like her usual self, apparently. Up until now she'd been perfectly reasonable about the land. She was obviously a little irked that she'd lost the land. It's not as if we stole it off her. We took proper action and the land was rightfully ours so we are perfectly in our right to reclaim it. And do you really think, Inspectors, that my husband would murder that poor boy simply because he had been assaulted by his mother."

Aaron had had to try hard to conceal the overwhelming urge to smile as Lorna had classed him and Barnfield as Inspectors and Barnfield's higher rank had ceased to be acknowledged.

Ted's shoulders dropped and he visibly seemed to relax a tad and found the strength to adamantly deny the

allegations. “It’s a wicked thing to say, absolutely wicked. I would never do anyone any harm.”

Taking over, Aaron soothingly posed the essential question:

“I’m afraid we really need to know where you were between 10 and 11 o’clock, simply so you can be eliminated from our inquiries.”

Ted’s still juddering lips parted but before words could leave the chapped lips Lorna’s voice pierced the transitory silence of the hallway and rang out into deserted farmyard. “My husband has been on the fields with me all morning. We were probably out on the fields at that time, collecting up the bails of hay. There’s still some left that need collecting from the most distant fields but we got most of them done.”

Barnfield considered it his turn to raise a question. “Mrs Barrow, did you leave your husband at any time during that hour?”

“Really Mr Barnfield I can’t remember exactly what stage of the process we were at but we’ve spent the whole morning loading the bails onto the back of the tractor, then I’ve driven back across the fields and finally we’ve piled them up in the barn.”

Barnfield was not deterred and persisted with his interrogation. “But surely the tractor is only designed for one driver. How could you have been with your husband all morning Mrs Barrow?”

“Don’t try to be smart Mr Barnfield. I drove and Ted perched on the back. I think I’d have known if he’d jumped off as he wouldn’t have been there when we stop, before you ask. Now if that’s all we’d prefer it if you’d go, wouldn’t we Ted? The receiving of this tragic news would have been upsetting enough but you’ve made matters ten times worse with the silly notion that me or Ted murdered Nathan Brooke.”

“One more thing,” Barnfield began, “does either of you keep a rifle?”

“I do,” Ted answered dryly.

“Well if it’s at all possible I’d like to see it before I go” Barnfield explained with a falsely polite approach.

There was a moment’s pause as if it took a few moments for Ted to digest the words and savour their meaning. Ted then strode towards the door and Barnfield followed like an obedient puppy whilst Ted explained that his rifle was kept in a shed outside. Aaron hesitated for a second, considering whether there was any point in following. By this point he itched to be getting on with tasks valuable to the investigation like interviewing the Smithers, which he mentally decided must be their immediate next port of call. They must not be allowed precious minutes in which to concoct believable alibis which would consequently rule them out of the murder. In his heart Aaron knew the Barrows were innocent and he felt that this line of enquiry had run into the proverbial brick wall and no more investigating time should be wasted upon it. At the same time Aaron was aware that it had been he and not Barnfield who had insisted on questioning the Barrows as a result of Eileen’s evidence and the overwhelming fervour she felt for her damning certainty that Ted had killed her son.

With an exasperated sigh he followed the Ted and Barnfield through the door frame, with its rickety old door, and out into the monotonously plopping precipitation. Water dripped into the vast expanses of mud-coloured puddle that had spread themselves across the gritty yard. Aaron briefly glimpsed the rear of the expensively tailored suit, attributed to Barnfield, on which muddy dirt was slopping, serenely up and onto the bottom of the well-tailored trousers and encrusting the extortionate leather shoes. His corduroy trousers and leather shoes were already splattered and Aaron was not excessively concerned. Most of his clothes that hung in his wardrobe were either torn,

shabby, soiled or stained. He was unarguably not a ponce and his clothes took the brunt of his dangerous lifestyle, as he had never been one to shy away from getting into the thick of the action or from proverbially getting his hands dirtied.

He turned the corner of the farmhouse and in front of him Barnfield and Ted were going over to ramshackle wooden shed standing in front of a seemingly ordered but extremely smelly row of pig sties with chubby pink creatures snorting about and poking their square noses into the mixture of pig feed and soggy mud under their inadequate little trotters. At the very rear of the yard stood a rather undersized barn made of sturdy wood, now a darker colour after being drenched with the drizzle, the left being packed entirely with bails of hay, the right was taken up with empty little pens constructed of iron bars with furry sheep with slighter dirty coats bustling about in them.

Ted clicked a latch and swung the wobbly door open with a purr almost like a cat's. To Barnfield's question of whether his rifle was enclosed within Ted replied in the affirmative.

Barnfield's rude and thunderous exclamation echoed around the yard and surrounding countryside. "You keep a rifle in an unlocked ramshackle little shed?!"

Ted's meek little response would have failed to arrive at Aaron's ears if he had not by this point caught up with his colleague and Farmer Ted. "Yes."

"Do you realise how dangerous that is?" Barnfield questioned accusingly. Aaron felt sorry that someone with a nervous disposition like Ted had to be the unfortunate recipient of one of Barnfield's noisy interrogations.

Ted's lips quivered as he breathed "No-one's going to steal it round here."

"Let's hope for you sake they haven't," Barnfield threatened, glancing down at the arms of his suit and as if for the first time seeing the dark, watery, blotches of rain

that were colouring his precious grey suit and hurriedly ordered, "Let's get inside then."

They passed into the shed.

For a few moments they might were in complete darkness and Aaron could only hear the distant rush and pull of the sea and smell a dampness in the air and the distinct scent of petrol. It took a couple of moments for Aaron's eyes to adjust to the gloom but then lots of lopsided shelves, precariously attached to each of the four walls and stacked with jams jars and junk seemed to materialise. For such a small shed it was crammed with tools, hose pipes, some old with holes taped up with pieces of tatty masking tape, reels of luminous orange wire on the floor and next to them was a can of petrol from which the distinct scent had been emitted and in a clearer light Aaron would have seen the dark black streaks down the side of the red metal can. On the opposite wall, attached by a small plastic clip was a rifle to which Ted pointed and told the inspectors it was his. The wooden part of the rifle was starched and the metal barrel was exceedingly rusty. An unstable shelf was directly above it and as well as being occupied by a load of junk like rolls of double sided tape and of masking tape, a corroded old hammer there was a grimy jam jar, with remainders of thick sticky red jam grimed on the side, that, if one let one's imagination roam free, could almost be blood. In the jar there were about twenty red cartridges for a rifle.

Even in the gloom Aaron was alert and suddenly became aware that's Ted's whole body had tensed, his wrinkled face had dropped to become haggard and stretched. His blank grey eyes were not perceivable to Aaron in the dim gloom but they had suddenly sprung into life and portrayed an apprehensive dread as they fixed on the far wall. On following his line of vision Aaron perceived that they were not fixed on his rifle but on the rifle next to it; propped up against the shed wall.

Pointing Ted quivered, “Oh good God! That’s... that’s not my rifle. It doesn’t belong here.”

Slowly Barnfield suspiciously turned to face him and patronisingly asked, “Are you sure?”

Presenting the same sort of anger he had done against Eileen, when he had made his futile threat that now landed him in the middle of a murder investigation, he viciously shouted as loud as the timid vocals would allow, “Oh course I’m sure. I’m not senile Inspector.”

Aaron was appalled at the glance Barnfield flashed in Ted’s direction that clearly read “If you say so” and desperately tried to placate the situation by asking Ted if he’d prefer to return, with him, to his wife in the farmhouse and leave D.C.I. Barnfield to take care of the situation. Ted replied in the affirmative and they slipped out of the darkness but not before Ted had cast a vengeful look in Barnfield’s direction.

The latch clicked shut and Barnfield rose two fingers at the door, obviously directed at the farmer who was walking away from it. He then flicked his mobile phone from out of his interior coat pocket and punched some numbers in. The illuminator on the screen now cast a little green glow around the murky, shadowy, claustrophobic hut that made Barnfield feel slightly queasy and with the only sounds audible to his ears being the soft purr of the sea and the ticking of the rainwater on the leaky roof, he once again imagined himself on a dreaded boat.

Unsurprisingly he was relieved when he could receive no signal as it gave him a believable excuse to pass out into the fresh afternoon air that he had earlier been keen to get out of. Still the rain drops splashed onto his face and his suit but now he didn’t care as they gave him a certain freshness and rejuvenated his spirits and ceased to be a nuisance. As he once more punched the numbers onto the keypad of his phone he was just glad to be out of the gloom that in his opinion wrapped up the case. There was no

doubt in his mind as to the guilt of Farmer Ted. Even with his twenty five years of experience it was a bizarre and unique motive and he couldn't understand why Ted had murdered Nathan instead of Eileen but he had never pretended to understand murderers and looked down on detectives who tried to profile crimes and who thought they could get into the head of murderers, which was debatably why he and Aaron had never hit it off.

As he smiled at the sardonic irony of this thought he heard a voice on the other end of the line. "It's Barnfield," he barked into the receiver. "Get forensics over to the farm down the road. I think we've found the murder weapon."

Chapter 20

It was 3.33pm when Aaron heard the deep rasping bell echo around the interior of the Smithers mansion.

He had left Barnfield with the Barrows, whilst their shed was dusted for DNA and fingerprints and the two rifles were bagged and taken to the lab for testing, as he clung to the hope that by staying with them they would crack under the pressure and he would be able to force a confession out of Ted or be able to make Lorna admit that Ted could or had slipped away from her during the morning.

The door was once again flung open by the thickset, elderly smartly dressed butler who did not require to see his credentials once more. Their feet clapped across the chess set before the butler tapped twice on the lounge door and was bid to enter. The butler then stood to one side and gave a courteous little bow as Aaron passed into the lounge.

This time the children were not present but the older Smithers were in exactly the same positions as when Aaron had visited the previous day although they were attired in different garments. Petula sat immobile on the sofa only slightly inclined her head as the Aaron stepped into the splendour of the room. On her head was a skilfully weaved

straw bonnet with a dazzling pink bow wrapped around it. The hat perfectly matched, as obviously intended, the pink velvet jacket and matching skirt that she wore which were both from a very pricey designer label store. Underneath the jacket was a plain white cotton blouse with glittering silver buttons that illuminated the price of the item. Aaron was unsure as to whether Petula's clothes were entirely appropriate for the following day after her daughter's death. Her legs were stockinged with dark brown silk tights of an exquisite quality. Her shoes were also different from the previous day, as they now match her pink outfit, as they are a light rose colour, fairly new, expensive looking with high pointed heels.

Alistair Smithers stood by the fireplace tapping the smouldering embers of nicotine stinking ash of a glowing cigar into a frosted glass ash tray layered with dark black grimy ash with small bent stubs of cigars on top with the poisonous dark powder oozing from it onto the sooty base of the tray. He wore a fawn cotton jacket of a designer label expense, with a thin white linen shirt, without tie, under it and fawn trousers of the same material and quality as the jacket. Like Petula's blouse the skirt was done up with gleaming silver metal buttons, that gave the fawn suit a sparkling exquisite quality although the absence of a tie made Alistair look incredibly casually dressed, principally because the top few silver buttons were unlatched revealing a fraction of his tanned chest with a cluster of bristly brown hairs creeping out.

As the butler slid noiselessly out of the room the door clicked shut and Alistair swung round, startled and surprised. "Inspector," he began, "what brings you here? We told you all we knew the other day. Or have you come to tell us that you're arrested Nathan Brooke for the murder of my daughter?" After a pause, he asked, seemingly as an after thought, "And how did you get in anyway?"

Aaron remained icy cool and calmly went through each of Alistair's questions but all the time being careful not to cease to remember the importance and power of the man to whom he spoke. "Your butler let me in and no Nathan Brooke has not being arrested seeing as he's dead; murdered in fact." Aaron but a severe and deadly emphasis of the word murdered. "The reason I'm here is to establish where you were when he was killed which was between 10 and 11 o'clock this morning."

Neither of them expressed any emotion, including shock, at the news of his death which was natural enough. Petula calmly asked with only a slight raising of her composed voice in a tone devoid of emotion; "He's dead?"

"Yes."

"And you think I killed him?" bellowed Alistair incredulously.

"Not you in particular just someone in this house."

"I think that's a tad impertinent Inspector." Petula shrill voice cut through the momentary silence.

"Mrs Smithers, when I was here yesterday do you remember what your son said?"

Her face tensed with remembrance and with the sudden realisation of the seriousness of those words. Her intelligent brown eyes that Aaron had been unable to view the other day now bore into him and clearly displayed the knowledge that she could remember her son's remark word for perfect word but chose not to. "I really cannot remember Mr Holmes. Is it at all relevant to your investigation?"

"Yes. He said that one way or another Nathan Brooke would pay for the death of his sister. Now what do you think he meant by that?"

A false and disturbing smile flashed upon the crooked yellowing teeth in an attempt to hide the malice and brutal anger in her still calm and calculating voice. "Not what you're implying Inspector."

“Possibly not but I’d still like to know where each of you were at the desired time.” Confidence started to surge through Aaron’s veins and the fear for his job started to ebb away. He was adamant the Smithers would have no grounds for a complaint as he was positive in his mind that one of them was the guilty party and enough if he was wrong as long as he refrained from being rude or slanderous he felt that the Smithers would not bother with the deliberate hassle attached to making a complaint against a police officer. Although he viewed how strange it was that he had felt it necessary to display compassion to Ted and Lorna Barrow, for no reason apart from his pity for them when he was now being extremely harsh to the Smithers, just because he felt a venomous dislike towards them, when they had suffered a terrible grievance.

“Well I really think it’s exceptionally heartless after the tragic death of our daughter,” Petula admonished, “but if it’s really necessary not that I’d like to be seen helping you with finding the killer of that low life scum. I was here at that time reading a book. I can go and provide it for you if you so wish; it’s a mystery book actually.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Aaron hastily interspersed although Petula had made no move to rise from the settee. “Could anyone back up your story?”

Petula snorted and replied, “Inspector, need I remind you we are upper class citizens and I despise of the fact that you are treating us like common criminals. If you must know there probably isn’t but Carl was around here but I have hardly seen him all morning and Teresa was accomplishing her homework upstairs. My husband has been out at a business meeting in Eastonshire all morning and only arrived back about a half an hour ago.”

Aaron turned on Alistair and asked if this was the case, who before speaking took a long puff of his cigar, almost as if to give him energy, scattering blue-grey fumes around the room, and then answered in an infuriated voice, “I don’t

know what business it is of yours but yes I have been out at a business meeting all morning.” Hastily he added, “Although I wouldn’t have arrived at the desired time.”

“You were still here?” Aaron posed the question brusquely.

“No... well I left here about 10 minutes after 10 o’clock and as my meeting wasn’t until 11.30 and as it would only take 15 minutes maximum to drive into the centre of Eastonshire... I stopped off at the White Swan. Cyril Lambeth will confirm this naturally as I was chatting to him most of the time.”

Amused and surprised were the two emotions that Aaron felt at this knowledge as a country pub, that from the little he had viewed of it looked very crummy, did not seem to be the sort of place that a respectable and upper class businessman like Alistair Smithers would chose to pop in for a swift half, or more, before a meeting, especially as drinking before meetings could have disastrous effects including to jeopardise the reputation of companies, something Alistair would be anxious to avoid.

Spookily to Aaron, as if Alistair had read his mind he continued as if feeling compelled to explain. “It’s a surprisingly pleasant country pub, no louts or anything like that and the landlord Cyril’s a jolly old fellow and I was conversing with him for much of my time there.”

“And how long were you there for?” Aaron pounced.

“Probably about an hour as I arrived there at about 10.15 and left a little before 11.15. Does this mean I’m in the clear for the murder?”

“Let’s see if Mr Lambeth confirms you’re story Mr Smithers first” patronised Aaron.

“He will Mr Holmes.”

“Good. Now I need to ascertain the whereabouts of Teresa and Sydney, if that’s at all possible.”

Breaking her silence Petula exclaimed, “Well really Inspector insulting my husband and I with the absurd

inclination that we might have murdered Nathan Brooke is one thing but accusing our teenage children is quite another. I'm sure we would be well within our rights to report you." Petula lowered her voice to a sombre monotone as she asked, "I hope you haven't forgotten about the tragic death of our daughter only two days ago. Why won't you just leave us be in our grief?" Aaron identified a coating of liquid appear on the clear, greasy whites of her eyes as she uttered her two questions.

"I don't wish to intrude on your grief," Aaron explicated, "but I have two murders to solve."

"I think Eloise's pretty much solves itself, don't you Inspector?" inquired Alistair in a denigrating voice making his status in the community apparent.

"Not necessarily but I'll wait until I have all the evidence before I make any definite conclusions like you just have. But you must understand that I don't wish to accuse your family only to eliminate you."

Petula dryly observed with a smarmy tint to her voice, "But surely the two things go hand in hand, Mr Holmes."

"Possibly but whatever Nathan was I still must establish who his murderer was. Two wrongs don't make a right just remember that."

"Don't you dare lecture my wife Detective Inspector Holmes," bellowed Alistair, dabs of wet saliva spurting from his mouth revealing his tobacco tainted teeth.

"I apologise that was not my intention. All I wish to do is to determine where Sydney and Teresa were at the time of the murder and I can leave you in peace."

"Inspector," Petula addressed Aaron, "Teresa is still studying upstairs and that is where she was at the time of the murder. Obviously no-one but herself can confirm this fact but I see no reason why her word is not good enough for you. Anyway, as I can tell you where she was there is no point in putting her through an unpleasant interrogation, most inappropriate for a girl of that age. There is no way

she could have slipped out of this house without someone noticing.”

“I’d prefer it if you’d send for...” Aaron began but as he uttered the first word and saw Petula’s lips part he knew it was in vain.

“As for Sydney,” Petula cut Aaron’s sentence short with no acknowledgment that he had even spoke, “he has not yet returned from his job at the Green Parrot cafe as his shift doesn’t finish until 5.00pm so he will not be back for a good while yet.”

“What time did he leave for work?”

“Approximately 10.15 as he walks down the road into the village. He poked his head through the door to let me know he was going and upon arriving at the Café the staff will be able to verify his whereabouts so there is very little time in that hour unaccounted for.”

“Surely it doesn’t take 15 minutes to walk into the village?”

“No quite but Sydney likes to get there early and help to set out the café before customers arrive.”

“Right thank you. Naturally that will need to be checked but you’ve been very helpful.” Aaron struggled to keep the hint of sarcasm from his voice and he was sure that it had been detected by the two members of the Smithers family.

Alistair muttered in his aristocratic voice that their butler would see him out and at the press of the buzzer over the fireplace the bald unimposing figure of the ageing Carl slid silently into the room. As he was led into the spacious foyer, Aaron couldn’t resist a glance up the stairs to where 14 year old Teresa was accomplishing her homework as she had been at the time of Nathan Brooke’s death. Or had she?

That question would haunt Aaron for the rest of that day and he scornfully rued the fact that he had been denied an opportunity to speak with her.

Chapter 21

Although the church clock had only just echoed the time as 4 o'clock across the village, Wellston-on-Sea already seemed asleep. A chill associated with late afternoon had been swept in from the North Sea and the village, now only lit by the ever paling white sheen of the sun from behind the purple rain clouds, was bitter and deserted and even the sea kept its distance revealing the bare expanse of single, strewn with brown masses of rough and slimy seaweed, in all its bareness.

Even the Green Parrot was practically empty bar an aging lady wrapped up warm in a thick purple anorak, the owner of the ginger cocker spaniel, tied to a chunky gravel bollard outside, which pattered across the pavement and rubbed its tiny wet nose on Aaron's cord trousers as he entered the café.

Modernistic was the word Aaron found himself immediately struck by on entering and he deliberated on how long had passed since its construction and what had stood in its place before. The soles of his shoes scraped across the spiky bristles more as a show of courtesy rather than to disperse any fragments of mud from the base of his shoe. On leaving the mat with the word 'Welcome' brazened across his feet clapped onto the smooth stylish floorboards cleverly locked together in the latest design. On them stood chrome tables and chairs. The centre of the tables were not chrome but a large segment of glass, freshly stained by thick clumps of tomato sauce or permanently stained with dried brown grease, on which stood, metal shakers of salt and pepper, plastic table numbers and a laminated menu which rested on a small vase of artificial flowers. Even the glass counter was framed by chrome through which a number of appetising delicatessens could

be viewed. Although Aaron assumed it would appeal to the younger generation and could imagine that it would be a popular haunt for school children looking for an after school snack and at dinner times when hundreds of pupils would be desperate to escape the well publicised grotesque school dinners served up by the warm hearted dinner ladies, which evoked memories of the steaming mashed potatoes with mushy peas that he had been forced to eat an awful long time ago, he, who represented the older generation of rural England who enjoyed the finer things in life, found the restaurant cold with a total lack of warmth and dimly lit, in fact its only light was two small bulbs embedded into the ceiling surrounded by a gleaming brass casement.

The ageing lady in the thick purple anorak looked up briefly and then continued sipping her coffee from a white cup with a blue line painted around the top presumably to imitate expensive china. Aaron cast a puzzled glance at the elderly lady wondering what her opinion of the modernised café was.

On casting this thought aside he strode over to the counter where a boy stood, of no more than 16, wearing jeans and a white long sleeved polo shirt underneath a green T-Shirt with the words ‘The Green Parrot’ emblazoned in the top right corner.

On showing his credentials to the youngster his whole manner changed and he suddenly became helpful and the gormlessness look that had been apparent as he stared up at the ceiling evaporated from his face. Aaron’s request to see the manager wasn’t too much trouble at all and he dashed through the swing door behind him into the steaming kitchen.

Only a few minutes passed before he re-appeared proudly introducing the manager with the glee of a magician who has just pulled a rabbit from a hat. The manager was slightly younger than Aaron although he had a bald patch in the centre of his scalp and only had tufts of

greying brown straw hair on either side. He seemed to be a kind, warm hearted and generous man not in the slightest discomposed by the arrival of a police officer in his café.

After the formality of shaking hands and the swapping of names had been got out of the way Aaron began his questions. The manager, whose name was Arnold Lattice, confirmed that Sydney Smithers did indeed work for him but did not question Aaron on the reason for his wishing to know. On questioned about Sydney's time of arrival Lattice began uneasy for a fraction of a second before replying:

“Err... Sydney. Of yes... well he's normally here well before his shift begins not like the rest of them mind but today he was slightly late. Supposed to be here at 10.30 he was but didn't arrive until about 10.45 today. He didn't offer an explanation but as he's normally punctual I didn't bother asking for one. And I had heard about his sister's tragic death so I thought it best to be lenient”

Aaron agreed that that was the best course of action and then asked if it would be possible for a quick chat with Sydney. Lattice said that would be fine as trade has just about dried up for the day and sent the boy behind the counter to go and fetch him.

A few minutes later, Sydney was proudly presented by the counter boy wearing the café's uniform and expensive grey trousers with a silk like texture. Sydney came forward slowly with a slight apprehension showing on his face but he tried to keep it from his voice as he brashly asked, “Have you arrested my sister's killer yet?” causing the purple coated lady to brusquely look up from her coffee at the events taking place at the other end of the café.

“Can we talk in private Mr Smithers?” Aaron asked in a softer voice trying to maintain some privacy.

“If you've haven't arrested him I'm not interested.” In a childish adolescent manner Sydney pushed his smooth baby like hand right up to Aaron's face, so close he smell the fresh taste of the delicatessens he had been handling all

day, before turning towards the kitchen in an exaggerated spoilt manner. Aaron was surprised at the impolite manner being shown by the respectable Alistair Smithers' son although he shouldn't have been that surprised considering Sydney's outburst when Aaron had called round at the Smithers house the day before and that was really the reason he was here now. He had realised then that the Smithers family were rather strange and that the children resented being brought up in an old English upper-class family style. Sydney obviously rebelled with these adolescent outbursts although they were extremely immature for someone of 17 like Sydney. Eloise had obviously rebelled by having a secret boyfriend and wallowing in the delight of pulling the wool over her parent's eyes. Aaron was unsure about Teresa, although he realised that living under the strict rule of her parents had made her very peculiar and although he felt rather stupid in admitting to himself that a 14 year old frightened him her silent menacing manner did.

Aaron might have made these harsh judgements of people he barely knew when he himself was anything but perfect. His main two problems were his fierce determination and precarious temper. Sydney's display caused him once again to lose this temper and he shouted at the back of the retreating, saliva once again flying out of his mouth and splattering on the usually hygienic floorboards, "He's dead. Now will you come outside?"

Aaron's eruption caught everyone by surprise and made the old lady gurgle on her tea with shock. The counter boy looked sheepishly away and started to rearrange the cakes on display underneath the glass counter. Sydney stopped in his tracks but as he had his back away from Aaron he was unable to see what his facial expression portrayed and with rue he accepted that it had been a mistake to tell him of Nathan's demise while not looking him in the face.

Sydney froze for a moment as if considering a course of action before spinning round and purposefully striding out of the café. Aaron muttered a few words of thanks to the dumbfounded manager before following Sydney out into the street.

Even before Aaron had had time to close the door behind him Sydney pounced with a question. “What’s his death got to do with me?”

“Yesterday you said he would pay one way or another for what you thought he did to your sister.”

“No, not what I think he did to my sister. What I know.” Sydney spat the words to make sure their impact hit home. “Anyway it was just a figure of speech it doesn’t mean I’m going to go round to his farm and kill him.”

Aaron had been a detective too long not to pick up on the accidental piece of information Sydney had just dropped into his words. “How do you know where he was killed?”

“I don’t.” The words flew out in a rush as if the denial had been prepared. “It was just a figure of speech.”

“You like figures of speech, don’t you?” Aaron had not been able to conceal the mockery in his voice and Sydney was incensed.

“Don’t you take the mickey mate. I lost my sister yesterday don’t forget. Now tell me what you want then clear off.”

“I want to know where you were between 10 and 11o’clock this morning.”

There was a pause were all the sounds of the sea and the squawking of the seagulls suddenly reached Aaron’s ears for the first time. A car whizzed past with the standard whine of the engine. The noise seemed to prompt Sydney into speaking as if he had considered a point and had decided what he would say. The consideration of his whereabouts just served to heightened suspicions that Aaron already held about his involvement. “I was at home

until about 10.30 and then I walked into the village to work and arrived here at about 10.45. I'm a slow walker."

At last! Aaron felt a surge of triumph surge through his body like water running through a pipe. He knew that the investigation was suddenly progressing as at last he had been fed a definite lie. He was hit by a bought of indecision of whether to expose Sydney as a liar now or to try to converse with him and lull him into a false sense of security before striking with his damning knowledge.

He chose the latter.

"Oh right thank you. That's all I need to know."

"How did you find me here, anyway?"

"I just been up to your house to check your parents whereabouts and your mother told me where to find you."

Aaron softened his voice and changed his tone to casual conversation as he commented, "I'm surprised you're at work today with Eloise's death only two days ago. Couldn't you have got compassionate leave?"

"Mother and father made me come in. They said it would take my mind off things being the stupid fools they are."

His last sentence highlighted the tension that Aaron had suspected existed between Sydney and his parents.

"How often do you work in the café?"

"From 10.30 until 5.00 at the weekends and 3.15 to 5.00 in the week. College finishes at 3pm so I can get back here by 3.15 taking the bus and I work up until 5.30. The café shuts at 5pm but I help with the tidying up."

"Do you enjoy working in the café? The manager said you always get there early, except today of course."

"No, I flaming don't enjoy it. Getting there early is Father's doing. He wants me to look *keen*." Sydney snorted to suggest how ridiculous the word was. "Actually the whole idea of working in the rotten place is his idea. He wants me to know that I have to pay my own way in the world and can't just expect to sponge off him because he's stinking rich. It's hard work fitting in the hours with all my

college work but he doesn't care. As long as I'm out earning. This morning was just a bit hectic that's why I was slightly late."

Aaron had considered it rather odd that someone from such a wealthy family would be working in a High Street café. At least Sydney had cleared that up for him even if he had dug himself a deeper, darker hole by trying to explain why he had arrived late at the café although Aaron might have believed it if Petula hadn't given him away by saying he left at 10.15am when he claimed not to have left until 10.30.

"Which college do you go to?"

"Eastonshire College."

"Do you enjoy it?"

During their conversation the handsome features of Sydney's face had softened slightly and the antagonistic had drifted away but now it returned and his features hardened with a look of anger at being messed about. He barked, "Where's this going. I haven't got time for all this twaddle. You don't really care if I enjoy college or not, you're just after information."

Their eyes met. Sydney's previously innocent blue eyes now appeared greyer and more intimidating and Aaron was slightly disturbed and knew he wouldn't be able to bare the penetrating glance for long. "Fine I'll cut to the chase if that's the way you want it," Aaron told him assuming the persona of a hard cop like one would see on the TV. "I know you've been lying about you're whereabouts between 10 and 11am this morning."

"What are you talking about?" Sydney asked with indignation although breaking away from Aaron's stare as if he was worried his eyes might portray his guilt.

"Your mother told me you left the house at 10.15 but Mr Lattice said you didn't arrive until 10.45. So where had you been for that half an hour and don't give me the rubbish

about being a slow walker? It's half a mile at the most from your house to the café."

Sydney stood stock still. His cocky attitude and self-confidence had drained from his body in that spilt second along with the colour from his previously rosy cheeks. His lips quivered as he managed to murmur, "I need... sit down."

Aaron gently took him by his bare arm, not covered by the short sleeves of the T-Shirt, on which prickly hairs were standing on end and almost seemed to be shaking along with the whole of his body. He led him across the deserted road, although the purr of a distant car could be heard coming down the road in which Sydney lived, and over to a rusty metal bench with its green paint peeling off in large sticky sections and covered in scratched on graffiti. The bench looked out over the gritty beach, littered with fishing vessels embedded into the sand, each with a long, interlocking, rusty chain with a overly large pink plastic buoy at the end, reminiscent of a volleyball, and at the retreating waters beyond. The swish of the sea was only just audible, being drowned out by the groan of the wind and the creaking of nearby trees in the invisible wind.

Sydney lowered himself onto the bench, apparently unconcerned by the rainwater that lay on the paintwork and immediately soaked into the base of his trousers. Aaron, who had not desired to sit and who viewed the droplets and the smudge of white-brown seagull deposit with a disgusted apprehension, remained standing. Aaron prided himself on not shying away from getting his hands dirty or the base of his trousers for that matter but he did desire to interrogate murder suspects in a relative comfort and he felt that the bulk of his concentration might not be on the job in hand if he parked himself on the bench.

On Sydney's face was plastered unmistakable look of guilt and nauseating horror at being discovered. He tilted his head forwards and rested it in the palms of his smooth

hands now pasted in a sticky sweat. In a low voice, partly blotted out by his hands, he murmured, "I've done something so stupid," in a tone sounding both childish and pathetic. To add to this hopelessness a few blobs of tears dripped on the already watery pavement, from behind the impassable shield of his hands; a shield which covered all emotions and gave a little private space in which he could gather his thoughts and decide which to express and which to conceal.

"He killed my sister, you must understand that." Aaron gave a slight inclination of his head, almost as the sign for Sydney to continue. "After my outburst yesterday, I realised that Nathan Brooke must not get away with Eloise's murder and that he would be made to pay for it. I decided to kill him. A life for a life." Aaron struggled, and failed, to keep the anticipatory exhilaration that was rushing through his body, from off his face. Was he speaking to the killer?

Sydney continued in his shaky voice, blissfully oblivious to Aaron's inner thoughts, "I rose early this morning, before my parents or Carl. I knew in my mind what I intended to do; I'd spent the night planning it. I wanted a painful death for him but I couldn't face being face to face with him. I'm not a cold blooded killer, I just wanted him dead. So I decided upon an explosion."

Past the hands Aaron could just detect the corners of a sadistic smile on Sydney's face as if suddenly he had become proud of his sinful actions. "I took the box of matches from the kitchen along with an ordinary milk bottle. Then I went along to the garage having located the key on top of a cupboard in the kitchen. From there I took a can of petrol and a spill. Luckily there was half a box of them, left over from last years firework display on our land."

A spill! Aaron mentally kicked himself as he realised why that wooden stick found behind the house had evoked

buried memories which now came flooding back in a ferocious wave of thought.

Holding the spill out in front of him, like a sacred candle in a church, he had crossed the science laboratory over to the heat emitting Bunsen, positioned at the front, with the humourless eyes of the teacher scrutinising ones every move. Dabbing the spill under the dancing glow of the flame, that dispersed the distinct aroma of gas around the crowded bustling wooden classroom, he precariously navigated his way back to his seat, avoiding the unpredictable movement of other pupils in their hideously baggy brown woollen overalls, to light the Bunsen located on his desk which now roared with expectant gas courteous of his overly impatient partner who varied from occasion to occasion but the experience never altered in the slightest.

The words continued to gush in an unstoppable stream from the lips of Sydney, who had rid of the immediate horror of discovery and now wallowed in relief at being able to open up to someone and ceased to have to bottle up his inner feelings and his actions, although not fully connecting with Aaron's ears as it began to dawn on him that although the smashed bottle and dropped spill would be cleared up he was not presently conversing with the elusive killer. "... and when it was time to set off for work I collected the sports bag from my room and dashed down the hill into work. It was such a feeling knowing that soon I could avenge my sister's death. I passed the café, being careful not to be spotted and hastily made the speed trek up hill to the Brooke's residence. Upon climbing the gate I approached the house. I could see there was nobody in the kitchen so I made my way round the left side of the house. As I ducked under the lounge window I could just catch a glimpse of Nathan in there so I nipped round the next corner where I wouldn't be seen by him. I'll be honest, I paid no thought for Eileen and whether she was in the house but in fairness I probably wasn't thinking at all."

The words passed over Aaron and his face portrayed a flippant dubiousness to convey to Sydney that he was not taken in by the obvious softening of the dramatic tale.

“Anyway I put the bottle down at the back of the farmhouse, having removed it from the sports bag strapped over my shoulder, right next to the far wall of the lounge in the hope that the explosion would rip through and... you know.” The two customary disclaimers replaced the words that he couldn’t bring himself to utter; his desire to blast Nathan Brooke into gory pieces. “Next I took the petrol can and spill from the bag, putting the spill down on the floor for when I needed it. My intention was to fill the bottle full of petrol, stick the spill into the liquid, light the spill with a match, and escape before the little flame wore its way down the spill into the petrol. But I didn’t even have time to get the lid of the can before a gun shot sounded from a disturbingly near vicinity.”

Aaron’s eyebrows twitched with curiosity as the story that had appeared to be fast losing its relevance provided a tantalising piece of information.

Sydney struggled to keep the enthusiasm as he reached the dramatic part of his recital, as if wanting to impress Aaron with the thrilling, heart pounding account, “So I chucked the can back into the bag and made a dash for it, unfortunately knocking the bottle over as I went. I should have picked it up along with the spill but panic and fear had regrettably replaced sensibility by this point. I ran the length of the back of the house and then vaulted the gate and dashed down the hill.”

“So you didn’t go back the way you came? You didn’t see if someone was standing at the lounge window with a rifle?” The questions flowed from Aaron’s mouth, with the desire to excavate them from his mind before he could forget them.

“No. I just wanted to get away and that was the quickest route.”

“When you arrived did you see anyone else loitering around the house?”

“No. Do you think I’d have tried to go ahead with it if I had?” Sydney indignantly asked with a trace of patronisation.

“What time did you hear the gunshot?”

“Probably just after half past ten. Anyway,” Sydney was eager to continue with his narrative, peeved at the seemingly pointless interruption, that he had started to enjoy and had removed his hands as all fear had completely receded and his brash, self-confidence had returned, “I darted down the hill back to the village chucking the sports bag into some shrubbery on the roadside with the intention of retrieving it after my shift. I hadn’t planned what I would do with the bag as I couldn’t very well walk into work with that even if everything had gone the way I planned as it would still had the petrol can and matches in it; I wasn’t leaving them behind or my parents would have noticed their disappearance. Will they have to find out?”

“What you’ve just told me is very serious not least because you were probably there when Nathan was killed. There can be no other explanation for the gunshot. I’ll need a statement from you. Also you’ve just admitting to trying to kill someone. Didn’t you think about the consequences if you’d succeeded?”

“I’ve said I wasn’t thinking. I wasn’t in my right mind.” He flung back his head and emitted a short laugh of disbelief. In response to Aaron’s puzzled expression Sydney expostulated, “It’s just dawned on me that it is was only this morning.”

Ignoring his dislike for Sydney Aaron opted for the gentle approach. “I’m not going to inform your parents or take this further as long as you make a statement. As Nathan is now dead he is unable to press charges for attempted murder. Think yourself very lucky.”

“Thank you.” The words held a touch of mock appreciation and it was this final antagonism that made Aaron continue with a warning.

“And if I find out that all this was just a fairy tale hoping that I’d cross you off the suspect list and that you were the one who pulled the trigger on the rifle then I’ll come down on you like a ton of bricks. Also it might be a good idea to inform your parents as you might have to give evidence at the trial of the murderer saying what time you heard the gunshot and you’ll need to explain why you were there.”

With a sigh Sydney agreed that he would enlighten them the moment he got home and then he rose and traipsed across the road towards the Green Parrot.

Chapter 22

The wooden door with a small pane of stained glass, with a bright red flower and gold background, creaked open and Aaron stepped into the smoky atmosphere of The Swan. Aaron’s leather shoes padded onto the matted raspberry carpet as he entered the tavern.

Behind the chipped, rotten bar stood a tough looking but ageing man in his middle 60s who Aaron correctly supposed to be Cyril Lambeth. The face, which gave Aaron the notion that he had somewhere seen it before, seemed pasty and weather beaten. The large brown eyes, situated behind the flexible black frames of his glasses with their two little squares of glass, seemed to possess the ability to bore right into the person upon which they were fixed, like lasers. Next to these masterful lasers the bony pointed nose and thin spongy strips of red beneath did indeed appear to recede into the square bony countenance. Upon his head was a clump of dark grey-black hair that, in certain misleading artificial light, had a tinge of inky blue about it and also resembled a wig. Although he appeared friendly as he flashed Aaron a tobacco stained smile and told him that

regrettably they were not yet open Aaron thought that his pleasant persona held a certain falseness to it and that Cyril had a darker more unpleasant streak hidden away under years of amicability. This impression was partially created by Cyril's thick set shoulders and the indistinguishable pattern of his green tattoo permanently engraved into his left arm, visible because the yellow sleeves of his grubby shirt, moth ridden shirt with sticky sweat patches soaked under the arms, were rolled up to his elbows revealing muscular arms with tufts of dark brown unruly hair growing down them leading right down to his wrinkly, chapped, tobacco stained hands where further tufts were engrained into his fingers and fastened to the creased skin on the rear of his hands. As well as the tattoo there was something else on his left arm; an expensive gold watch that glistened from the harsh overhead lighting behind the bar.

As Aaron monotonously retrieved his warrant card from his interior jacket pocket he glanced round at the pub. On the wall next to the bar was adhered an old darts board whose foam was caked in a layer of grubby black and cracked and pierced from the repetitive perforation of thousands of darts. Above the bar a wooden shelf was fastened in which all types of glasses; wine, beer, vodka etc... were stored. As Aaron had entered Cyril had been filling the shelf with dripping glasses that he first dried with a soiled, ripped tea towel. Similar timber shelves occupied the wall behind the bar with all kinds of upturned bottles attached with a clever mechanism that squirted the liquid it contained into a glass when pressure was applied to a little lever, reminding Aaron of water machines that are customary in hospitals. A low crooked door that led to Cyril's private quarters beyond was also situated in the wall. Opposite the bar sturdy wooden tables were scattered about with chairs of the same wood were positioned around with ripped, worn cushions embedded into the chair by

grimy and scratched brass studs. It was these tables with solitary ash trays in their centre that a young barmaid, possibly in her late teens, was pointing a spray of detergent at the table, almost like a gun, which at haphazard intervals it spat its fluid onto the table in little bursts. The barmaid then rubbed the liquid, which held the distinctive smell of cleanliness about it, half heartedly into the table. Aaron cast an appreciative glance at the tight, white top that clung to her perfectly rounded, slender figure and which her lengthy, shiny dark brown hair seemed to majestically dance across as she moved and the fragment of material, that insulted the title of skirt, attached around her waist that revealed the full length of her firm, slender and waxed legs. Aaron mused wryly to himself that it was not the sort of wear appropriate for a pub that would shortly be packed full of drunk, foul mouthed, leering men, though immediately admonished himself for his momentary display of incorruptibility. Cyril was firstly and lastly concerned with selling alcohol. Once the alcohol had been purchased the rowdy men could smoke, laugh, reminisce or leer at the barmaid if they so wished.

On the far wall were two over-large arcade machines, or in Aaron's day- One Armed Bandits, with their flashing lights and linkage to the evils of gambling like the noisy, overcrowded, corrupt arcades that had the feeling of a den of vice. In the right corner of the same wall, elevated so it almost touched the ceiling, was a top of the range Panasonic T.V. that gleamed with expense and newness. As Cyril had done two nights before, Aaron commented to himself how much the stylish T.V. ruined the traditional look of the quaint little pub with its low and almost hazardous black wooden beams that stretched themselves across the ceiling.

As Aaron introduced himself as a detective, a mixture of apprehension and trepidation became apparent in the pupils

of Cyril's wood brown eyes, made more observable by Cyril's falsely, pleasant greeting:

"Oh I'm sorry I didn't realise, Inspector. Can I help you at all?"

"Are you Mr Cyril Lambeth, owner of this tavern?"

"I am."

"Then you can. Was Mr. Alistair Smithers in here this morning?"

Cyril's face contorted in an effort of remembrance but Aaron thought, perhaps unfairly, that the expression was for his benefit alone and was confident that Cyril knew the answer to his question. After this brief pause Cyril looked directly into Aaron's eyes before replying confidently, although for Aaron too confident for it to be the truth; "Yes I believe he was."

"Do you happen to know what time that was?"

"I'm sorry I can't remember off hand," was the feeble and unconvincing disclaimer. "May I ask what this is about?"

"I'm afraid I can't comment at present but it is incredibly important that you remember the time."

"Well I don't open 'till 10am and he wasn't here straight away. Maybe about quarter past ten, say."

"And when did he leave?"

"Probably about an hour later."

Aaron knew that he could just leave now and dash back to the station to catch Eileen Brooke before her departure but something indefinable in Cyril's story failed to ring true, forcing him to persist. "Just one more thing, what did he do while he was here?"

"Err... sat at the table," he cast a vague hand towards the table that the barmaid was scrubbing with lacklustre, "and sipped a pint."

He needed time to mentally analyse the information that had been fed to him by Cyril and Alistair, but already Aaron could feel an inner glee as he realised, for the first

time, that as Barnfield had been trying to squeeze the Barrows for more information, which Aaron was convinced didn't exist to be told, he had been unravelling the case that grew in complexity by minute.

Thanking Cyril, whose broad shoulders had visibly relaxed as the ordeal was brought to an end, Aaron left, but not before casting a curious glance at the barmaid whose scrubbing hands had frozen as Aaron had introduced himself as a detective.

Stepping out into the late afternoon chill, his thoughts whirled uncontrollably around. Who killed Nathan Brooke? He was positive that Alistair's 'alibi' had been cooked up between him and Cyril but the crucial question was why? Surely not to benefit Cyril as he had appeared unsure of the facts of the alibi and if he was the killer he would have taken time to establish the facts of the alibi more carefully. No, the alibi must have been prepared to assist Alistair. Teresa and Petula Smithers had no-one to corroborate their story as he had asked Carl, on leaving the Smithers mansion, and he couldn't confidently swear that Teresa or Petula hadn't left the house. Though, if either of them were the killers then they would surely have taken the trouble to provide themselves with a plausibly credible alibi. Sydney had no alibi but Aaron was inclined to believe his story and with his unjustified prejudice against the Smithers that trust must count for a great deal. Also he was risking landing himself in proverbial deep waters if his story was a complete fabrication, although maybe he knew he could never be tried now Nathan was dead and he might be willing to admit to attempted murder to put him out of the frame for murder. But Aaron did not think he was that calculated and if he was the murderer then he could surely have found a more convincing alibi and one that failed to have the potential to slur his family's respected and esteemed name. Unlike Barnfield he was prepared to believe the alibi that the Barrows had provided for one

another, which subsequently placed them out of the frame. So far the only concrete alibi seemed to be Nathan's mother's which was not enormously helpful as she had never seriously been considered, as a suspect although there were a few more questions he would like to ask her. This was the reason that he drove his car back to Eastonshire Police Station.

Chapter 23

She had been just leaving. Eileen had phoned Vera on the public telephone and she had agreed that Eileen could come and stay with her while the Brooke farm was thoroughly searched for evidence. Secretly, but understandably, Eileen could not face the daunting prospect of returning to the farmhouse, that she had once, but would never again, call home, as the peaceful, cosiness had been tainted forever by the horridly gruesome discovery that she had made in her sitting room. She felt she would never be able to rid her mind of that chillingly vivid image of Nathan; dead on the rug.

As she headed for the swing doors of Eastonshire Police Station, struggling past the constant stream of officers entering and leaving like bumble bees, all she could think of was being free of the interrogation, the questions and the room; cold and intimidating in its attempts to be homely, relaxing and to put stress upon the point that its occupants were law abiding citizens and not common criminals. She saw Aaron mounting the 5 concrete steps leading up to the entrance she knew he had come for her but was gripped by the proximities of fear as she worried of what knew information he had acquired. An ominous grinding sounded within the pits of her stomach as she viewed the refreshed determination, plainly visible on his face.

"Mrs Brooke, I'm sorry to trouble you but could I just ask you a few more questions?"

She was led into a little room, its walls plastered in posters covering a range of serious topics, which Eileen guessed was used for witnesses to make their statements or where members of the public with complaints or concerns could speak to an officer in private. Neither of them sat and Aaron could promptly under way with his questions.

Luckily, for Eileen, they were relatively straightforward and Aaron knew very little more. On being asked who held a set of keys to the farmhouse, she replied that herself, Nathan and Vera were the only people with keys. She had hers on her, Nathan's was probably left in the farmhouse, to which Aaron confirmed a set had been found on the hall table and Vera's would have been on her keyboard at her house. Eileen explained that it was always handy for a neighbour, whom one could trust, to have a spare set in case, in an emergency, it should be necessary to gain access to the house and she indeed possessed a spare set of keys to Vera's house.

With this information it became clearly apparent to Aaron that the killer had not gained access to the Brooke farmhouse by unlocking the door so he moved onto the possibility of Nathan having admitting the killer himself. He could have gone away at that point, thanked Mrs Brooke, and pondered on who Nathan would have let into the house but Eileen had been unmovable in her conviction that Ted Barrow had in fact taken the life of her son, so he felt compelled to ask:

“Mrs Brooke, do you think that Nathan would have let Farmer Barrow into the house?”

The expressionless eyes darted about nervously at the direct, penetrating question but there was no hesitation in the sharp, efficient response; “No, certainly not.” The voice expressed no doubt but Aaron thought that underneath the pretence Eileen knew Ted was not a murderer.

Once more the simple words, “Thank you,” stuck in Aaron's throat for another possibility had arisen in his

cluttered mind. He knew he would regret not asking the question and felt he had no choice in the matter. He knew that it must have been the worst day of Eileen's life and could not even conjure up in his mind what it must feel like to lose your only child simply because he had never even considered having children but he desperately wanted to catch the double killer, as he was sure Eileen did too.

She was heading for the door but his question stopped her in his tracks. "Mrs Brooke, there was no sign of a forced entry to your farmhouse but contrary to first impressions it looks like your son's killer was inside the house when he murdered you son. Can you remember if the front door was ajar when you entered your house?"

Eileen became shakily unsure of herself, for a reason Aaron failed to fathom. To him the question had seemed a straightforward one. Eileen could feel the nape of her neck prickle with little hairs and her voice unwilling quavered as she blubbered; "I... I really can't remember. I wasn't paying attention to detail. It was only once I got inside that... I realised it was a crime scene and was careful... not to contaminate anything."

Finally Aaron thanked her and she hurried out of the room, her efficiency once more disgruntled by Aaron's questioning. To Aaron the question had born from a little idea he had had as to how the murderer had gained access to the farmhouse but he had expected it to come to a proverbial brick wall as he could see no contrivable reason for the door to be left unlocked instead of, as it had certainly done so, proving that Eileen was keeping something back. A possibility struck Aaron. Perhaps Mrs Brooke had accidentally left the front door unlocked and had felt a sickening guilt when Aaron had signified that the bullet had been fired from inside the house and not through the window as first believed. Her careless mistake might have cost her son's life.

Eileen burst through the swing doors and took in great gulps of the fresh air, uncontaminated by the stale smell of crime like the air inside the station, and wallowed in the comforting squawking of distant seabirds, that usually served to irritate her immensely. But she was enormously relieved to be free and wanted to get on with her now probably lonely life.

A life that was soon to be cut short.

Chapter 24

Barnfield relaxed back in the driving seat, his mind a whirl while Aaron also sat prone and introspective beside him. Barnfield had insisted on taking his car to Wellston-on-Sea Comprehensive.

It was early on Monday 8th September and the traffic out of the centre of Eastonshire was sluggishly slow as people crawled along in a desperate attempt to arrive at work punctually. But Barnfield's Mercedes crept along in no hurry, which had already infuriated a few drivers who had shouted obscenities through their open windows, much to Aaron's quiet amusement. Anyhow he was glad that Barnfield was taking things slowly as he relished the time to gather up his thoughts.

When Aaron had first arrived at the station, earlier in the morning, Barnfield had already been waiting for him with some interesting pieces of information from reports that had been left on his desk. Aaron had been slightly peeved that the forensic reports in question had been left on Barnfield's and not his desk but Barnfield was, regrettably, leading the investigation. The bullet that had been probed out of Aaron had no traces of having passed through a window, the gun found in Ted Barrow's shed was indeed the murder weapon and no footprints had been discovered in the mud outside the window. The first and last pieces of

information served to prove that the killer had been inside and not outside the farmhouse. How he had gained access was another question. If he had been outside the lounge window he could not have failed to leave footprints in the churned up slush from the recent unleashing of precipitation. Surely? There, to Aaron, seemed to be something increasingly spooky about the killer. But the planting of the gun on the Barrows did not fit in with this intrigue and complicity. Then again maybe Barnfield was right. Maybe Ted Barrow was a calculating killer and the depositing of the gun in his own shed was an ingenious double bluff. Aaron hoped and believed that this was not the case. Barnfield was not going to win and that undoubtedly would be a victory. He would love nothing more than to get even with Aaron after been made to look an imbecile over the Daniel Tyne affair. But Aaron would never let this be turned into a childish competition, with the silly striving to score points. Eileen Brooke had lost a son, Petula Smithers had lost a daughter (his prejudice was once more apparent as he did not contemplate that Alistair had also suffered the same dreadful fate) and this was the reason that they were, today, making the journey to the school. A journey that Aaron felt would reap rewards in the investigation. The pending interview with the mysterious Christian would be useful as, from Vera Wilkinson's evidence (which as with Cyril and Sydney's evidence of the previous day, Aaron had reluctantly filled Barnfield in on), he had a very definite motive for murder. It would also be enlightening to learn about Nathan from his once closest friend.

Neither of them spoke. Neither of them wanted the other to do so, so as to avoid unpleasantness.

Eventually the street in which the school was situated, which coincidentally ran parallel with Wellston-on-Sea's High Street, was reached. It was a pleasant street with deep brown brick modern houses, no more than 3 years old, all

of which had a small immaculately mown lawn bordered by clusters of flower beds crammed with the dowdy, dull flowers of the depressing season. Aaron viewed the houses as cabins of domesticity, for, during his long career, he had visited so many homes like the ones which Barnfield's Mercedes presently crept past. Wellston-on-Sea comprehensive, framed against the dazzling brightness of the pallid sky, a mixture of a hundred clouds all mingling together to form a gleaming blanket, held a spookiness which Aaron instinctively found disconcerting; partially due to the clouds, which hung like an ominous fog over the school. Further beyond the moon grabbed and dropped the sea with the monotonous swish.

The school was a number of years more mature than the houses surrounding it but Aaron gained the impression that the houses had been constructed before the school and it had been plonked carelessly between them, ruining their regularity. The heart of the school seemed to be a large red brick building, which spanned over a couple of acres, irregular in its height. Aaron would later learn that it contained most of the school's classrooms; all of which looked more contemporary than the school's exterior. The tables and chairs they contained had a feeling of freshness and sparkle as if just obtained from the factory and a fair quantity of classrooms were clustered with hi-tech equipment like headphones and computers etc. The classrooms in run down little huts, sloppily scattered around the school's site, were not in such prime condition. The limited furniture within was probably from the classrooms that had recently undergone refurbishment. The wobbly, scattered tables and chairs marked with irremovable graffiti would not have complimented the stylish feeling of the new classrooms. Both types of classrooms, however, held one thing in common; their walls were plastered with stupendously outstanding work,

in the teacher's eyes, of past and present pupils. In the case of the crumbling classrooms, it was mainly the former.

With all this recent designing Aaron was startled somewhat on discovering that when he and Barnfield wished to enter via the main entrance they had to pass round to the rear of the school. As they navigated themselves to the well hidden entrance they came across the rather diminutive playing fields, which were also found at the back of the Comprehensive. The reason for their inadequate size was that the knoll slipped majestically down the countryside towards the backyards of the establishments situated on the High Streets. A slight remuneration was that the edge of the playing fields offered a spectacular view of the sloping, unspoilt greenery tinged with flecks of autumn, the picturesque village, the charming little beach and the lapping waves. Aaron conjured up the image of budding artist from the school all sitting on the edge of the slope and lavishly sketching their interpretations of what was in front of them. Had Aaron or Barnfield (who, unlike Aaron, did not appreciate the finer things in life) gone over to the end of the playing fields, where a waist high wood panel fence stemmed the urge of pupils who otherwise would be inclined to skive down to the village, they would have looked down on the roof tops of the toy town village of Wellston-on-Sea and may even have seen the puffs of smoke emerging in delicate streams, from the brick chimney of Vera Wilkinson's terraced house.

The duty pupil, who before Aaron and Barnfield's entrance was gazing into space and tapping his pen repetitively against the desk, was intrigued and excited as they introduced themselves as police officers and Aaron noticed his pale grey eyes light up as if they had flicked a switch. As requested he took them to Nathan's form tutor, obviously instructed by a high ranking teacher to cooperate fully with the police.

Nathan's form tutor, Mr Briggs, was a squat man; petite but stocky, who, although capable of being terrifyingly strict to disobedient pupils, there was also an air of pathetic honesty and a comical inadequacy about him, heightened by his tangle of curly ginger hair and jet black, wide rimmed glasses. He delicately poised himself, in a lounging fashion, on the corner of his uncluttered desk in a manner clearly portraying to the two detectives that he would not be cease to be comfortable and feel unperturbed merely because of the arrival of two police officers. As he spoke his voice did not waver and no nervousness or any type of emotion was detectable.

Aaron had been a charming, reserved boy and had flustered many female hearts in the year, much to the other boys' jealousy. From staff room gossip with Nathan's English teacher, Mrs Pimble, it had been apparent that he had a natural talent for words and could string the most meaningful and complex sentences together quite simply. On asked whether Aaron had had a close friend of the name of Christian, Mr Briggs did not hesitate but a slight unease crept into his composed voice. Apparently a Christian Faye and Nathan had been the best of friends but a few weeks ago Mr Briggs had picked up a certain tension, not that he took any interest in his pupils' private lives, between the two of them. Previously that had been seated next to each other and had chatted away, even when asked not to do so, and their relationship had got stronger and stronger. "At one point I had thought that maybe they were..." Mr Briggs blushed a colour similar to his hair, his composure gradually seeping away. "You know."

Aaron realised that this was exactly the same conclusion that Vera Wilkinson and her busy bodies had leaped at, but Aaron viciously believed that those sorts of old ladies had no concern with the truth if it was not juicy enough to be spread rapidly around the village.

“Not that I’d pry into my pupils private lives,” lied Mr Briggs hastily, not wanting to appear speculative about his pupils. “What they do in their own time, within reason, is of no consequence to me or any other staff in this school.”

Aaron sensed, as did Barnfield who was paying strict attention although appearing not to do so, that Mr Briggs was to begin an insignificant lecture on the morals of the school and posed a question with haste. The answer, to whether he was aware what had triggered the argument, was in the negative. Mr Briggs answered a few more questions but there was nothing of a nature for Barnfield or Aaron to get overly eager about.

Having concluded the interview with Mr Briggs they were taken to an office to speak with Christian Faye. He was in his final year of the school and was 16, the same age as Nathan had been. Aaron had twigged that Wellston-on-Sea Comprehensive was not a school that bothered with the debatable subject of school uniform. When Eloise had been found she had been wearing ordinary clothes and so had Nathan when Aaron and Barnfield had questioned him on the only time they were ever to meet him. Presumably they had not had time to change before their rendezvous on the cliff path. Seeing Christian in baggy jeans worn too low down for Aaron’s preference, with a dangling elastic belt with a little strip of brass on the end, a plain white T-Shirt with a black sweatshirt underneath and his feet shod in stylish Adidas trainers confirmed this inkling. Like Nathan, Christian was rather dashing and had the look of a charmer but his slightly overlarge, flapping earlobes rather ruined this impression. Otherwise his smooth well cut features with his pale, innocent blue eyes and silky pale pink lips would have made him very handsome. His dark brown hair was set in a spiky fashion that was all the rage to the youth of today but Aaron found it rather untidy and repulsive.

His voice, when he spoke, had a slight Cockney ring to it and Aaron guessed, correctly, that he had not been brought

up in or around Eastonshire. “I’m willing to help you as much as I can with your inquiries as Nathan *was* a very close friend.” Aaron did not fail to pick up on the purposeful emphasis on the word, *was*. His overly suspicious mind considered whether this was to demonstrate acceptance of his death or to reveal that they had been friends at one point but had ceased to be before his death. Staring into his face there was no emotion or grief visible, no tears layering his cornea. “I was hit quite badly when our head teacher told us, this morning, in a special assembly dedicated to Nathan. “

Aaron’s mouth opened but Barnfield had already started to dryly inquire: “When was the last time you saw the deceased?”

There was no hesitation as if his response had been prepared in advance, knowing he would be asked the question. “On Friday morning. I haven’t seen him since he was taken off by you lot after Eloise died.”

“Did you know her well?” Aaron was amazed how Barnfield could pose questions sans emotion or softness without even trying.

“She was Nathan’s girlfriend. I saw quite a bit of her.”

“What was your relationship with the deceased?”

Barnfield had obviously been affected by Mr Briggs’s unfounded suspicions.

“How do you mean? We *were* the best of friends.”

Aaron could remain silent no longer. “Don’t mess us about Christian. This is a murder investigation. We know you had an argument with him over your girlfriend.”

Christian stared back with an incredulous look upon his face, but no guilt. “You do? I was worried about telling you about that. That’s all right then.”

“We need to know what happened. From the beginning, if you don’t mind.”

Christian swallowed as if to prepare himself for the recital. “I’d been going out with a girl in my class; Martine

Lucy. Well after a couple of months I began to suspect that she was cheating on me. She became very distant and thinking back she had begun to get very cosy with Nathan. Then about a month ago a friend of mine informed me that he'd seen Martine and Nathan having a snog on a bench of a lunch time. I confronted him about it the next day. We had a blazing row, he denied that he'd been cheating on me but he didn't deny the kiss. He said Martine came onto him. Not that I believed that of course. That was a couple of weeks ago and I haven't spoken to him since. Except when he shoved me up against a wall in the boys' toilets just over a week ago, after the news had got out that he'd nicked my bird."

"Did Eloise get to hear of this?" asked Aaron, unable to keep the interest from his voice.

"Probably. It was all round the school and the village. The old biddies saw to that. One of them heard us rowing when we came out the Corner Shop."

"But Eloise never spoke to you about the accusation?" persisted Aaron, almost chasing a lost ball.

"No, I had nothing to do with them after that. She kept going out with the double crossing swine, more fool her, so I didn't speak to her. I wanted nothing to do with him."

Barnfield blurted out in an accusing manner with his normal amount of tact: "So in truth you had a reason to murder him?"

"No. Do you really think I'd kill him over that? Martine wasn't worth it. I dumped after I heard about the kiss and that was that."

"Hardly, if you stopped speaking to your best friend."

Aaron could see the impact of Barnfield's statement smash into Christian like a vase flung in anger. Suddenly Christian lost control and screamed wildly: "Okay! So I hated him enough to kill him. I've known him for years and that was how he treated me. I told him everything and apparently the confidence wasn't returned. I don't know

how long he'd been..." the words, for a moment, were too bitter to say, "... seeing my girlfriend for. I could have killed him when I heard he'd snogged Martine but do I look like a killer? I'm too nice, that's why people walk all flipping over me."

The tears began to seep out the security of his eyes but he hastily swept them away, as if his masculinity would take a further dent if seen crying by fellow peers. Although this was unlikely as they were situated in a teacher's office.

Once he had calmed down Barnfield asked, a tad too harshly for an upset child; "Where were you between 10 and 11 yesterday?"

After replying that he had been at home with his mother, father and baby sister all day, except for attending church in the evening which he begged for them not to divulge to his mates, and as requested writing his address into Barnfield's neat and organised notebook, he left and Martine was summoned. She strutted in with a waddle which was immediately familiar to Aaron. Her lengthy brown hair blew behind her as she entered the office with an enormous energy. She wore an overdose of make-up, her eyes were surrounded by a deep, depressing lavender eye shadow, her lashes were glued together with black eyeliner and curved upwards in a suggestive manner and her cheeks were blushed with a peachy colour that added to her tarty appearance. Aaron felt that the make-up was just a façade to conceal her true feelings beneath. The only hint of this was in her swirling hazel-brown irises that seemed to show great trouble, depression and even the same psychosis that Aaron felt sure he had seen in Teresa Smither's swirling brown irises. She wore a blue short skirt that revealed her firm slender and waxed legs. Waxed legs. Why did the words echo in Aaron's mind? Why did her flowing hair and tight white blouse look so familiar? Memory struck his brain like a flash of lightning. She was the barmaid in *The Swan*. But she was still at school. She

couldn't be more than 16. Aaron was sure you had to be 18 or older to work in a public house. No matter, it had no consequence on Nathan or Eloise's murder.

She sat and the questions begun. "We've just had your ex-boyfriend, Christian Faye, in Martine," Barnfield told her. "He's been telling us about you and Nathan Brooke."

"There *never* was and now never will be a me and Nathan." The voice was as mature as her make-up made her look and Aaron realised she was a very capable, if not slightly fierce, girl.

"Did you want there to be?"

"No." There was no hesitation in the response. This rapidity added a slight falseness to her words.

Aaron spoke in his gentle voice. "Tell me about the kiss."

"There was no kiss. Some idiot made it up to spite us." The recessive, guilty eyes seemed to contradict the words.

"Did you blame Nathan for your spilt with Christian?" was Aaron's well thought out question.

"Don't be silly. I blamed the moron who dobbed us to Christian. I didn't kill Nathan if that's what you're getting at. I..." Aaron wondered what she had been about to say but she didn't enlighten him and Barnfield appeared not to notice but one never knew what was going on past his cunning brown eyes. "We were good friends and that was all. I knew he was Eloise's and I'd have never have dreamt of stealing him from her."

"Did you get on well with Eloise?"

"She could be alright yes. I didn't like the way she got a bit obsessive about Nathan towards the end."

"Obsessive?" queried Aaron.

"Oh it was just a little impression I formed." Aaron found this remarkably fascinating as this threw suspicion, for Eloise's death, back onto Aaron. Eloise had got stiflingly obsessive and his hormonal patience, Aaron never

forgot he had only been 16, had snapped and he'd impulsively pushed her to her death.

Before Martine's departure Barnfield asked where she had been between the hours of 10am and 11am on the preceding day. She told them she had been at home with her mother all day, who would naturally confirm this, then she wrote her address into Barnfield's notebook and duly left them to ponder upon the information they had received from their visit to Wellston-on-Sea Comprehensive.

Chapter 25

The tractor skidded and bounced across the wet terrain, with its light mist hanging above like an ominous premonition. Mud spewed up against the body work of both the tractor and the trailer that it dragged in its wake. The trailer, five metres by two, was crammed full of bails of hay and it was these that Ted rested on as the tractor, with Lorna at the wheel, unhurriedly jerked its way back to the farmhouse. His nostrils were filled with the burning of petrol as the tall, slender chimney stuck to the front of the tractor emitted its gaseous fumes into the sweet smelling air of the countryside.

The transporting of the bails was an everyday occurrence in the autumn and should have filled Ted with a warm sense of familiarity but his mind whirred with the horrors of two deaths in the quiet village in which he had been brought up. What was worse was the discovery of the rifle in his unlocked shed and the mystery of how it had ended up there. Its finding had hit Lorna quite badly and if Ted knew one thing in this terrible business then it was to protect Lorna. She was his whole life and he loved her more than she was capable of loving anyone. But that had never bothered him.

One thing that did bother him was the unspoken fear of Lorna's that it was he who had put the gun in the shed. Ted knew the thought must have at least crossed her mind. But whatever daft things Lorna did or thought he would carry on protecting her and that was why he had lied.

Chapter 26

The playground bustled as pupils at Wellston-on-Sea Comprehensive munched on their various snacks, chatted to friends and younger ones dashed about in a game of 'tig', all adorned in different garments so the pack of seagulls that soared overhead would have seen a vast sea of colour. Martine pushed through the madness seemingly ignorant to the hustle and bustle around her; her mind was set on finding one particular person and when she did there was hell to pay.

She saw him about ten metres in front of her, standing with a group of his noisy friends. She was glad of this; he'd need all the help he could get if she got her hands upon him. Fury had replaced commonsense.

Before reaching him she shouted fiercely, her mouth wet with saliva. "Why did you tell the police? There never was a me and Nathan!"

"Oh come off. Everyone knows you loved him," Christian spat back.

She wondered if he, or anyone else noticed how quickly the subject was changed, "You killed him, didn't you?" accused Martine.

"Think what you like. We all know you killed Eloise."

Her pupils enlarged in madness, her hands clenched and she flung herself forward, almost in a trance, and beat her fists against his flailing, defensive arms. And as she did she screamed like a lunatic.

The playground was stilled. Everyone looked round. Teachers dashed over, dropping their mugs of tea. His friends tried to peel her off but to no avail.

It was only several minutes that some burly teachers managed to drag her away; kicking and screaming like a small child who could not bear to go to school.

Soon the chaos was resolved, the pupils returned to their forgotten activities and normality reined.

Chapter 27

As the Mercedes drove back to the station they decided, or more accurately Barnfield ordered, that Aaron would check up Martine Lucy's alibi and he Christian Faye's. Aaron would be dropped back at the station so as to pick up his Astra and then, without delay, must make the journey to Martine's address which was written on the page of Barnfield's notebook that had been duly and efficiently ripped out.

Upon arriving back, the Mercedes having sped away, Aaron headed for the minute car park, located at the left of crumbling, old fashioned building which was Eastonshire police station, and almost collided with a breathless Alistair Smithers who was pacing decisively towards the station.

"Ah Inspector, I was just on my way to see you" he exclaimed, slightly taken aback at bumping into the very man he was hurrying to see.

A few minutes later they were seated either side of a wood-worm ridden, old table whose four legs were not of equal length, in the "statement room", as Aaron had secretly nicknamed it, where he and Eileen Brooke had stood and had a brief but revealing conversation only the day before. The unpadded chairs were not of the same standard in which Alistair was familiar but his mind appeared too pre-occupied to really take in his primitive

surroundings. Alistair being adorned in a silky grey business suit, complemented by an expensive white shirt complete with a non-descript tie made Aaron wonder why the business man was not steering his empire, presently.

The man's creepiness was heightened as he appeared to read Aaron's thoughts; "I'm on my way to a meeting but I thought I stop off on my way and see if I could see you. It's vitally important, to me anyway."

"You like stopping off on your way to meetings, don't you Mr Smithers?" was Aaron's smarmy dig.

"Don't you forget who I am and that I'm here of my own free will and not obliged to be. I just wanted to help."

"Well?"

"As you sensibly instructed, sensibility being something my Sydney's being lacking in of late, Sydney told Petula and I of his shenanigans regarding the petrol and Nathan Brooke" Alistair informed him, appearing not to want to degrade his respectability by uttering the fateful words; attempted murder. "You must understand that he's being under enormous pressure what with the death of his sister. We all have."

Aaron intervened. "If you've come to defend Sydney then save your breath. We both know what he's capable of but I've decided not to take the matter any further." He made it sound like a generous favour but with Nathan dead it would never have reached court.

"That's not why I came. When he told us I realised the guts it must have taken for him to tell you the truth and that I should follow suit. If my son can tell you about something as serious as that," he still refused to say the words, "then I should be honest with you about my whereabouts between 10 and 11 o'clock yesterday."

"Well?" Aaron asked with a touch of impatience.

"This will be in confidence won't it?"

"That depends if what you tell me is relevant to the death of Nathan Brooke."

“I can assure you it isn’t. You see when I said I was at The Swan between 10.15 and 11.15, I lied. My wife must not find out about this but I was actually with a lady on the outskirts of Eastonshire. A Miss Nancy Parker. We enjoy each other’s company,” was the meek disclaimer added on the end but Aaron knew what they really enjoyed.

“I’ll need her address.”

“Naturally.” Alistair dug his hand into his inner jacket pocket and produced, as if he had been prepared for this eventuality, a gold fountain pen and a scrap of paper and duly scribbled down some details.

As he did so Aaron posed a question that baffled him duly. “How come Cyril lied for you?”

“I had a feeling you might ask that. Well my whereabouts weren’t the only thing I lied about. Cyril is the most unpleasant of people. Fair enough the pub is quaint enough and I do take Petula there occasionally but not for his company. He doesn’t just sell pints you know. He sells alibis. Not alibis for the police, nothing like that, I bet he was rather flustered when you turned up asking for my whereabouts he wouldn’t want to get on the wrong side of the law again. No he just provides alibis for the philanders amongst us, not that I’d degrade myself to one of those, but people just slip him £10 for every hour they want covered and if their husband or wife should pop in later in the day then Cyril will confirm that they were in the pub for the agreed hours.”

£10 an hour! Aaron was stunned at the scale of Cyril’s fraudulent activities. He was unaware of how to proceed and was glad when Alistair spoke.

“I only meant to deceive Petula, not you Inspector. My morals always have been to co-operate fully with the police.”

Aaron dryly snorted to himself. “I’m sure that’s true,” lied Aaron, displaying his most innocent smile. “But I suggest that you find someone else to provide your alibis;

preferably someone not running making money from it.” He paused slightly before displaying his annoyance. “You know this is really the last thing I need the middle of a double murder investigation. Not only have I got the victim’s father lying to me but now I’ve got to completely diverse from the murder to go and chastise Cyril for his illegal alibi trading.”

“Please don’t raise your voice at me, Inspector,” Alistair calmly, if not sarcastically, requested.

Aaron, not realising he had done so, lost all the patience he had grudgingly mustered and bellowed at Alistair. “Get off your high horse! You can have all the business connections and famous acquaintances and power you want but to me, who you incidentally regard as dirt, you’re just another liar that I have to face every day. So don’t you dare ask me to try to keep your little secret. If I have to reveal it I’ll have no qualms in doing so; I’ll enjoy it even. If I were you I’d run home right now and tell Petula exactly where you’ve been when she thinks you’re supping a quiet pint with the “amicable” Cyril.” Seeing Alistair’s flabbergasted expression that he, Alistair Smithers, had been lectured by a lowly D.I. Aaron added bravely, for a blissful moment ignoring the possible repercussions and forgetting how important impressing Alistair had been at the start of the case; “Go and report me to one of your chums at the top if you like. You’re within your rights. See if I care.”

With that Aaron flung open the door and ushered a flabbergasted Alistair into the foyer.

As Aaron made his way towards C.A.D., not before pausing for a few minutes in the “statement room” to reflect on what had just passed, he knew there would be no complaint. Alistair would not wish to discuss his philandering with a senior officer, like Winchester, who presently held him in high esteem. Squeezing his way through the bustling, dimly lit corridors, he felt adrenalin surging through his vein in ferocious spurts. Maybe that

summed up his life...? He was pleased that he had allowed Alistair to know how he felt towards him and the speech had been a welcome opportunity to let out his pent up frustrations with the Smithers, with Barnfield and maybe even with the job? But this was soon dismissed; he felt as keen and determined as ever, maybe more so. This case was one of the most complex and intriguing he had ever worked upon and he would never, could never, rest until he, not Barnfield or anyone else, had unwound the ever winding mystery. He was heading to C.A.D. to search their limited database for Cyril Lambeth, something he had intended to do the moment he had laid eyes upon him. Maybe it was the tattoo, maybe it was his broad, stocky façade or maybe it was just his criminal aura that had presented Aaron with the immovable impression he had been inside; maybe more than once.

And sure enough he had; although it took Aaron a while to find out. To Aaron all computers were, like all modern technology, slow and unreliable. The machine whirred into its solitary existence, with lights flashing that meant nothing to Aaron or seemingly to anyone. Eventually the database loaded up onto the screen and Cyril Lambeth's name was typed in. As Aaron's fingers monotonously clicked the keys his mind whirred like the computer that had began to emit a stuffy heat that merged with the heat of the other computers to create a stifling oppressiveness that could not be obliterated by the churning fan that seemed to add to and not remove the warmth. He considered Christian Faye and Martine Lucy as suspects.

Christian appeared unlikely as his quarrel with Nathan seemed to be a typically childish love affair and not serious enough for him to murder his one time best friend. Aaron believed that if Nathan had lived then Christian and he would have patched up their difference. In Aaron's experience boys were not ones to hold grudges. When

Christian came to realise this his well suppressed grief would be made a whole lot worse.

Martine though had definitely been concealing something; Aaron's instinct told him that it was about her relationship with Nathan. In his mind there definitely had been something going on and that Christian had been correct in his suspicions. This was obviously the rumour that Eloise had referred to in her diary. But Aaron did not feel that the complicated love affairs present in the playground of Wellston-on-Sea Comprehensive had any bearing on either death. Dumping and dating happened all the time when children got to that difficult age and never in Aaron's experience had they led to murder. The love struck teenagers in the relationships may have, at the time, thought they were madly in love and that they had found their future partner but given time the infatuation would have died and only the ashes of the burning fire of passion would remain.

With an alerting beep the information flashed onto the screen; complete with a photo of a younger Cyril Lambeth looking directly into the camera with a gaze of sadistic detachment. In the past 30 years there was nothing but before that Cyril's record was crammed with offences. He had been convicted on a number of charges of fraud and assault. Over the years his time inside had accumulated to nearly 10 years. Aaron was annoyed that he had not checked up on Cyril as a matter of routine, as he should have done so with all the suspects he had accumulated.

Consequently, each suspect was methodically checked via the slow search system. Only one of the other suspects had a conviction; Christian Faye had been cautioned over a theft in a newsagent's just over two years ago. Aaron could see no reason why this was anything but inconsequential and that Barnfield would soon return having found Christian's alibi to hold the proverbial water.

Oh no! His random thought reminded him that he had been sent to confirm Martine Lucy's alibi but had been completely diverged. As he rose from the seat he happened to glance at his digital wristwatch and was slightly startled to learn it was half past twelve. Independently, he decided that he would grab a quick lunch in the canteen before going to see Nancy Parker, although he was in doubt that she would verify Alistair's alibi; whether it was the truth or otherwise. He was no fool and he would not have come to Aaron unless he knew that Nancy would corroborate his story. He would leave Martine's parents until later; for two reasons. One, because they might both be at work and secondly, because he wished to ask Martine a few more question. The sentence; "I blamed the moron who dobbed us to Christian," floated into his mind. Was he being overly suspicious or had it meant there was something to "dob" to Christian?

He was washing down two white, egg mayonnaise sandwiches from a crunchy, triangular container with a bottle of Buxton when Barnfield marched into the claustrophobic, noisy and dim canteen, with only one window covered by blinds through which slits of light illuminated thin strips of the canteen. As he sat down next to Aaron, Aaron's previously relaxed air tensed. Barnfield gruffly explained how his morning had been spent.

Firstly he had checked upon Christian Faye's alibi which seemed almost unbreakable. Then he had been summoned to elaborate on the progress on the case. Aaron felt tempted to utter; "That wouldn't have taken long," but wisely declined to do so.

In turn Aaron filled Barnfield in on his morning; the visit of Alistair Smithers and the painstaking search of information of criminal records on the suspects. He enlightened Barnfield on the rather meagre findings, who seemed to have no interest in Cyril Lambeth.

“Faye’s parents never mentioned that when I spoke to them this morning.”

“Well they’d hardly be likely to,” was Aaron’s dry comment.

“Oh, I almost forgot. Sydney Smithers apparently came in and made the statement you requested.”

Aaron muttered a few gleeful words, screwed the bottle top back on and left with a muffled “Goodbye.”

The traffic was bad and the blue Vauxhall Astra made several wrong turnings as the driver was somewhat unfamiliar with the area of Eastonshire in which Nancy Parker resided. Eventually her house was located, after careful scrutiny of Aaron’s rather tatty map. Luckily she was in, due to her profession of lap dancing. Aaron was rather astounded to learn of this and began to see a whole different side to Alistair Smithers. Once one saw through the upper crust exterior he was as derogatory towards woman as most men. Leering at half naked women had never been something Aaron could emphasize with, although a few investigations of his had taken him to those sorts of clubs. He had always considered that men who attended such places must be starved of sexual excitement in their domestic lives and he found the whole ludicrous concept repulsive and abhorrent.

Nancy Parker certainly had lean, luscious figure required and Aaron could see Alistair’s attraction. In her account of Sunday 7th September there was no deviation to Alistair’s. He had been with her between 10.15 and 11.15 before he had gone on to his meeting. Aaron found it strange that there had been a meeting on a Sunday but maybe he just didn’t believe the old saying “Business never sleeps” and anyway it made no difference to the investigation where Alistair had gone after his encounter with Miss Parker; that was assuming she was single! Though he knew what it was like to work for dreadfully exhausting long hours in a profession that could be mentally and physically

challenging. Taking one last look at Nancy, who Aaron judged to be no older than thirty, a good deal younger than Alistair, he saw that Alistair had obviously found a way to relieve the stresses of his business and to psyche himself up for a meeting. Aaron had not believed that Alistair would consume alcohol before a business meeting and that was one of the first things that had alerted suspicions in his mind. Obviously though, before meetings, Alistair Smithers did require a stimulant but of a very different nature!

As he clambered back into his trusty Astra, Aaron happened to glance at his wristwatch. He was staggered to learn that it was after 3 o'clock. As time was flying so quickly Aaron hoped that it would not be one of those days that so much was planned for but there was too little time.

He looked again at his watch. Exactly, the time was 3.11pm; time to pay a visit to Martine and her family.

Chapter 28

At the same time, Vera and Eileen sat facing each other with an eerie, alienating silence. Vera for once had nothing to say. She knew that words of sorrow, regret or comfort even would not help to soften the tremendous grief that Eileen was feeling. Vera had been able to sympathise with Eileen when she had lost John, as Vera was regrettably familiar with that particular kind of grief for she had lost her Wilf. But they had never had children. She was unfamiliar to the maternal instinct of a mother.

Wrapped in her own world, Eileen stared absent-mindedly towards Vera wondering what thoughts were flowing through her mind. Did she know? No, but Eileen wanted to tell her. They had been companions for longer than Eileen was able to remember in her present state of mind so there was no better person for her to fulfil her urge of talking about the events of yesterday morning. But not

here. Vera's matchbox lounge was driving her insane. One seized to concentrate when one felt oppressed but she needed to concentrate to try and make sense of all the thoughts, drifting through her fatigued mind.

She rose. "I want to go out," was her almost child-like demand, "for a coffee."

Glad to speak Vera reacted with: "I can make you a coffee dear."

"No I must get out. I've been cooped up all day and I can't stand it for a moment longer."

Eileen marched into the hall, decisively, grabbed her comfy anorak and ventured into the misty damp, late afternoon.

Chapter 29

Chrome chairs squealed on the wooden floorboards and once more Vera and Eileen sat facing each other as they waited for their coffee to be served. Eileen's face was contorted as she lulled it over and over in her mind. She couldn't back out now. Could she?

As she heard herself speaking she knew what her mind had decided to do. "Vera?"

"Yes, what is it dear?" was the gentle response of the old lady. Should she really lumber someone so tender and kind with this sort of secret? Despite her kindness might she not be tempted to pass it around the village? No, she knew Vera wouldn't do that.

"I've got to tell you something. I'm going mad with it rattling round and round in my head. I have to tell someone and as you've been so good as to let me stay in your house I just don't feel that I can keep this from you any longer. But you must promise not to tell anyone."

Vera promised and coffee was served.

Chapter 30

The high pitched screech echoed around the house. Aaron released his finger from the buzzer.

The Lucy family lived in one of the brown brick houses on the road of Eastonshire Comprehensive. The sturdy oak door had two panes of arched frosted glass. After a minute or two Aaron could depict a blur of movement through the glass. As the person, who appeared quite short in size, approached the door Aaron heard a squeak of oil deprived wheels. Then the security chain slid back and, with a sigh of huge effort the door was swung inwards.

A lady, who Aaron took to be Martine's mother sat slumped in her wheelchair. The faded grey tyres showed it to be well used and in need of replacing. The lady who adorned its flimsy seat looked much older than her 45 years, not least due to her light grey hair, tied up in a bun. Her whole body had a look of frailty about it. Her thin bony, crinkled hands draped over the wheels of the chair. Despite her obvious fragility Aaron at once felt the friendly air of kindness about this poor disabled lady. She wore an old fashioned dress, decorated with patterns of colourful flowers; to Aaron the pinks and yellows looked rather hideous. The dress did not cover most of her thin, wrinkled, lifeless legs, which drooped over the edge of the seat and had dark purple varicose veins protruding from under the pale skin. The same skin hung from the meek, docile face with tow beady eyes and pale lips that from a distance would have blended in with her pasty complexion. The face would have held a certain cuteness to it had it not been for a large brown mole, with a rough, coarse complexion that appeared to have been crudely glued to her face.

As Aaron opened his mouth to speak the gentle but firm voice cut in: "You must be a detective. Martine told me to expect you. Oh do come in out the cold. I'm Suzie Lucy."

“Lovely to meet you. I’m D.I. Aaron Holmes.” Aaron stepped in, closing the door behind him.

Suzie made several seemingly difficult manoeuvres on wheelchair before she faced the opposite direction. Aaron would have offered to help but did not want to offend her obvious capability. The wheels grinded through the neutral cream carpet, that was in almost immaculate condition despite obviously being fairly old. He followed her through a door on the left which led into what was plainly the lounge.

Earlier that day, when he and Barnfield had driven down the road to the school, he had thought of the houses as “cabins of domesticity” and once inside his impression did not change. The lounge was uncluttered and tidy. There was the very minimum of furniture; just the one white leather two seater sofa without the standard crease marks indicating it had ceased to be sat upon for some time and only a few items of furniture on the sill of the plain double glazed window and on the brown wooden fireplace, with a small iron grate in the middle with imitative pieces of coal sitting in it. When turned on, an electric glow would burn underneath the coals.

Suzie propelled herself into the middle of the light room; due to the wide bow window that looked onto the street and the rectangular pine framed mirror above the fireplace. The lightness of the room had hit and taken Aaron aback as soon as he had entered the room as the day was misty and damp and the room was little more than 5 metres square. When bode to do so he took a seat on the rather stiff settee.

“This is about that boy Nathan, isn’t it?” the soft voice held definite intelligence. Her legs refusing to function did not affect the rest of her body.

“Yes. I need to no if Martine was here, yesterday between 10am and 11am?”

There was a moment’s pause for Suzie to contemplate the question and then she replied, her voice steady; “Of

course. I'm afraid she doesn't get out much, poor dear. Except when she goes to work at the chip shop in the evening." Aaron realised that this was the yarn Martine must have spun her mother. "Apart from that, she's always at home looking after her frail old mother. And a grand job she does too. She keeps the house spotless and is always there to give me a helping hand when I need it. It's not really fair on her but when her father died almost 5 years ago she couldn't bear to see me go into a home and said she'd look after me herself. Only I at the time poor dear. Yes well getting back to poor Nathan, Martine was not having an affair with him like that jealous Christian's being telling you. That was completely untrue."

"Oh I never doubted that for a moment. Is Martine in there were a few more questions I'd like to ask her?"

"This is about that incident at school, isn't it?" From his expression Suzie could tell the words were a mistake the moment they left her mouth. Her whole body froze. "Oh, you didn't know."

Aaron gently enticed her to talk. "I think you'd better tell me."

With a regretful sigh she told him. "Oh it was nothing. Martine was just a bit angry when she heard what Christian had told you and when she saw you at break she flipped. There was a little fight and she's been suspended for two weeks."

The words brought back painful memories for Aaron of his recent two week suspension; memories he wanted to forget.

He felt that there was no comment that he could make on the incident, due to its apparent irrelevance, and asked: "Is it okay if I speak to her?"

Suzie murmured her consent and told him: "She's upstairs in her room. It's first on the right. You'll have to see yourself up." She tapped her chair as if feeling it necessary to explain why.

Aaron gave her a 'thank you' smile and padded up the stairs to Martine's room. The first door on the right was pushed to. He padded over the bouncy, cream carpet and gently rapped on the door. "It's D.I. Holmes," he called.

Nothing. The silence washed a fear of apprehension over Aaron's body. Suddenly he had a vivid image of Martine lying dead in her room. The suspension might have been the final straw. Aaron's death, the subsequent interview, looking after her mother, even her father's death might have been far too much for a 15 year old girl. Over the years, a high percentage of Aaron's instincts had paid off. With this in mind he turned the handle and plunged into the room.

In complete contrast to the light and airy feel to the room he had only just left, Martine's bedroom was dark and stuffy. The one small window on the far wall was covered by a shut blind and the light that hung from the ceiling with a lampshade in a grotesque shade of purple. The walls were bare, except for a notice board opposite the bed, and painted the same dull shade of purple. The dark jade green carpet contrasted nauseatingly with the walls and unlike the rooms downstairs, or at least the ones Aaron had seen, it was untidy with clothes strewn randomly over the floor. In the centre of the room, pushed up against the right hand wall, was a pine bed with small wooden knobs on each of the bottom corners and an arch shaped head board touching the wall. On the purple mattress, lay Martine; face down and completely prone.

She did not turn as he entered but she was not dead. Aaron could hear the soft rasp of her breathing and could indeed see her body tenderly moving up and down on the bed. Aaron felt embarrassedly stupid for hastily barging into a 15 year old girl's bedroom just because she had declined to answer. Indeed, she could have been lying naked on her bed and he would have been in far more trouble than he had ever experienced before. But she did

not seem to care. She did not even acknowledge his presence. Her eyes were fixed on the notice board.

Aaron came further into the room. "Martine?" Her head turned to face him, but she appeared not to see him- as if in a daze. But Aaron saw her: saw her very clearly. Her face was streaked with tears and the whites of her eyes smudged with thousands of blood vessels. Slowly, still in her trance, she swivelled round on the bed until she was sitting on the edge. As she stared straight into his eyes, Aaron defined again that look of psychosis and delusion. She appeared detached from the reality in which she was sitting.

Touched by her frantic, pathetic look, Aaron slowly moved over to the bed and lowered himself next to her onto the uncomfortable mattress, which creaked as he sat upon it. Comfortingly he placed his arm around her shoulders, unhurriedly so as not to alarm her, and she began to sob with a soothing rhythmic splutter.

Then Aaron turned his eyes to the notice board.

It was reminiscent of a shrine. Pinned to the wood, with brass drawing pins, was a collage of photos. The whole board completely covered with them. And as Aaron's eyes accustomed themselves to the murkiness of the dim room the blur of vibrant colours focussed and the images became decipherable.

In some of them Nathan's cheerful, face with its sharp features was smiling or laughing at the camera. In some he was with friends, Eloise, Christian, others; all of them looking impassively at the camera with the edginess one felt before the flash of the camera clicked and the photo pasted itself onto the flimsy brown-orange plastic which was the film. In some, though, he was obviously oblivious to the presence of the camera. Branches and leaves that jutted into the shot made it evident that the photographer was obliterated from Nathan's view. He was unaware of the photos and equally unaware of the stalker.

And suddenly as if with the illuminating flash of a camera everything became clear to Aaron. Martine; mad, deranged Martine had had an unhealthy obsession on the deceased. She had followed him, photographed him, kissed him. But had she rid him of his girlfriend, who Martine had sardonically claimed had become obsessed with Nathan? Or was that the truth? Aaron knew not what to believe no more.

After a deep, intake of breath Martine spluttered through eye-fuls of tears: "I can't... can't believe he's dead."

"You cared for him a great deal, didn't you?" The question was sensitively posed.

"I loved him," was the stark reply.

"Were you and he an item?"

The response held a definite note of bitterness. "No. He didn't want to betray his darling Eloise. Damn her, damn her!"

"And you wouldn't have minded betraying Christian."

"Shove Christian!" Her eyes raged with lunacy. "I didn't give a damn about him. He was potty about me but I only dated him to get close to Nathan. I knew they were good friends."

A thought struck Aaron but he knew that the question had to be devoid of accusation and full of sympathy.

"Eloise; did you kill her?"

"No. But I wanted her dead. Does that make me a killer? I... I don't know what's what anymore." Martine spoke to Aaron but her eyes roamed randomly around the room, searching for solace in the walls.

"No. That doesn't make you a killer?"

"But maybe she fell... because I had the desire that she should die."

"No." The response was firm and reassuring, to a girl losing her mind and reality.

"I shouldn't have hit him."

"Who? Nathan?"

“No. No, I’d have never of hurt him. He was my whole life. No, I hit Christian at school. Today. I’ve been suspended.”

“Your mother said.”

“Oh she’s glad really. I’ll be at home all day to run around for her.”

“You do a very commendable job, caring for your mother.”

“I don’t have a flipping choice do I?” Her voice rose to bawl the rhetorical question. In doing so she seemed to let out all her pent up frustrations, bitterness against the world. Aaron could sympathise as he knew that feeling all too well. He had done a similar thing only that morning. “When Dad died I couldn’t let her go into a home, could I?”

“What happened to your Dad?” As soon as the words left his mouth Aaron knew the question had been a mistake. The snubbed silence reinforced this and the subject was deliriously changed.

“I couldn’t bare you lot thinking I’d murdered Nathan. I longer to tell you the truth but I couldn’t bring myself to do so. Christian had no right telling you about the kiss. I was so angry and when I saw him I flipped and let out all that fury and resentment I’d felt for Eloise on him. It wasn’t really fair. I regret it now.”

“Did you and Nathan really kiss? Or was that just a rumour?”

With a sigh she exclaimed: “He didn’t kiss me. We were sitting on the bench, it felt right, I just took a lunge for him and there was a moment,” she smiled and stared aimlessly at the ceiling as if to relish the memory, “that our lips touched. That must have been what someone saw. I was pleased to split up with Christian. I was pleased that it put Nathan’s and Eloise’s solid little relationship on the rocks but... but the cost was he said he didn’t feel the same way about me. He had Eloise and they were happy.” In

annoyance she slammed her hand down onto the mattress and Aaron felt the shimmers of rejection pass under him.

With that feeling tingling through his veins he rose in an attempt to free himself from the depression that hung around Martine's shoulders. He moved over to the notice board, paused as if to contemplate his actions and then began to unpin the photos.

"What are you doing?" Coming out of her reverie Martine sprung off the mattress, which gave a little sigh of relief, and grabbed Aaron's arm to apprehend his actions.

He calmly explained. "You have to sort yourself out. Your mother needs you. You'll never get over Nathan with these reminders in front of you every night."

After a moment's consideration she released his arm from her iron grip and went and returned to her place on her bed. Once the photos were removed and had been placed into the security of Aaron's inside jacket pocket, he took one last look at Martine, who lying on her bed, gaped at the ceiling as if searching for what the future had in store. Convinced her life was back on track Aaron left the room with a feeling of immense satisfaction, proving to himself that the job wasn't just about catching criminals.

Chapter 31

He found Cyril drying some glasses. The look on Aaron's face told him immediately that the game was over. The pub was not yet open to the public and the silence echoed eerily around the pub.

"Mr Lambeth. I know you lied about Alistair Smithers. I know about your alibi scam. You're up to your neck in it Cyril."

After the momentary shock of Aaron's words his face regained its tough impassiveness and he growled: "Prove it."

“I spoke to Martine Lucy just now. I don’t think she’ll be coming in today. She’s a bit upset about Nathan. Oh, I also spoke to her earlier; at school.”

Cyril was no fool; he knew the point that Aaron was trying to convey. “I need some air,” he told Aaron briskly and with that he put the glasses down and barged past Aaron onto the High Street.

As Aaron alighted from the pub, Cyril was waiting for him by the door. “Let’s have a walk,” Cyril suggested and they strolled leisurely across the road, like good companions.

Aaron decided to trigger the conversation. “Was the pub doing badly? Is that why you did it?”

“No. The pub’s being doing relatively well as it happens. It was just as a bit of aside. Just for a bit of cash in the pocket, you understand.”

Aaron had thought that the flash new TV and gold watch had been slightly extravagant for a humble landlord of a quaint little village. “This isn’t the first time you’ve been involved in fraud? Is it?”

“I’ve put those days behind me.”

“Evidently not.”

Their feet took them in the direction of the pier; unnaturally light in the late afternoon with its row of elevated bright white bulbs.

“Have I actually done anything illegal?”

“Well I could do you on the spot for attempting to pervert the course of justice. If Alistair’s conscience hadn’t got the better of him I’d have never known. And I doubt you pay tax on your little community service.”

Cyril’s uncomfortable silence answered the question as well words could ever have done.

They unhurriedly paced over to the tarnished green railings and rested upon them, looking out across the harbour. The fishing vessels rocked to and fro on the glistening, impenetrable surface like abandoned rocking

chairs. The scent of the sea drifted gratefully up Aaron's nostrils, filling him with the feeling of being on one's holidays; relaxed, free, tranquil and unperturbed. Seagulls gracefully glided through the air, allowing themselves to drift on the wind. The peace of Wellston-on-Sea seemed to have returned after the double disturbance of murder.

"It doesn't have anything to do with Nathan Brooke's murder, does it?" pleaded Cyril desperately.

"Maybe it does. It stops whatever. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly Inspector."

The seagulls shrilled their high pitched squawk high above the pair and Cyril took the silence to indicate that the conversation was concluded. But Aaron was not yet finished.

"Now about Martine..." Aaron began.

"What about her?"

"I take it you are aware of her true age. She's only fifteen."

Cyril was sheepish and he gazed down at the lapping tide, that swished against the pier.

"Do you not think it's decent for her to be working in a smoky tavern, with rowdy louts, at her age?"

"I didn't put a gun to her back Inspector. Far from it. She persuaded me to take her on. She was mature enough to pass for 18." Aaron was fully aware of that. There was no doubting that Martine was more mature for her age in many ways. "She said she needed the money to look after her mother and all the jobs open to girls of her age didn't pay high enough. I couldn't refuse her. She said she'd turn to prostitution if I did." Aaron could believe that Martine would have used that line of persuasion, and might even have stuck to it, but Cyril did not seem the compassionate sort and certainly not the type to be walked over by teenage girls.

“You fancy her don’t you? That’s why you took her on?” The informed guess froze Cyril but his eyes did not falter from their gazing at the swirling current.

“What sort of person do you think I am?” Cyril meekly asked.

“I know what sort of person you are Cyril,” was the sharp retort. “You’re a devious ex-convict who’ll never change and never learn.”

“I’ve had enough of this slander.” He stood upright, letting go of the railings as if they had abruptly become infected.

Aaron swivelled swiftly round and fiercely grabbed his arm. “You’re not going anywhere.”

“What ya going to do? Arrest me?”

“If you fail to co-operate, yes. Look just admit that you’re fond of her.”

“It doesn’t help you with your flaming inquires does it?” Cyril spat, his temper fraying.

“No but I’m interested in Martine’s welfare.”

“So am I.” Aaron released his arm. “But not in the way you alleged. I worry about her. She seems a very strange girl. I mean when news of Eloise’s death came on the news, poor soul, I couldn’t help noticing an evil little grin on Martine’s face. I’m insinuating nothing but it’s just an example of her strange behaviour. And one day I wore her coat by mistake and in the pocket I... I found a picture of Nathan Brooke.”

Both the incidents made sense to Aaron. He did not feel that the evil grin meant anything but Martine’s hatred for Eloise. Aaron realised that she had a perfect motive for her murder but he had believed her denial. Also if Nathan had not been interested in Martine then there would have been no reason for him to protect her for his girlfriend’s murder. As for Nathan’s murder he was quite positive that she was innocent. He knew that hero worship, which was undeniably what had occurred, could be dangerous and the

stalker could become so crazed with their obsession that when they were spurned they killed them. But where would Martine have found a rifle? And surely if a demented Martine had rung the bell holding a rifle then Nathan would never have let her enter. However that obstacle applied to everyone and the forensic evidence suggested that the shot had not been fired through the window. Nothing made any sense.

“Right.” Aaron’s voice startled Cyril, as the silence had been so profound. “I’d ask you to terminate Martine’s employment but I don’t think that would be fair on her or her mother. Let’s just keep the fact that you’re employing an underage girl our secret. But if the alibi scam doesn’t stop, which fair enough I probably couldn’t prosecute you for, I’ll have to take action about the other matter. And that wouldn’t be beneficial for anyone. You’ll lose your licence, Martine will lose her job and will even have to turn to a more derogatory option or will have to put her mother into a home. It’s your choice.”

Cyril stared blankly into Aaron’s eyes; an action which disgruntled Aaron’s mastering composure. “It will stop, today. I’ll go straight, Inspector.”

Aaron didn’t believe that for a moment. Rehabilitation was not, by any stretch of the imagination, instantaneous. But he was quite sure that Cyril cared enough for Martine for the whole con to stop. Although Aaron knew this meant he had a result, in this matter anyhow, he was not blissful to use a dirty old convict’s affection, maybe even lustful desire, for a teenage girl to gain it.

As Cyril turned away down the pier back to ‘The Swan’ Aaron thought he perceived, or maybe he just imagined it, (his mind was ageing and stretched to its full potential in this complex affair) the words “Thank you,” mouthed on Cyril pallid lips.

Chapter 32

As Eileen lumbered down Vera's staircase, wearing one of Vera's fluffy pink dressing gowns over her grubby white nightdress with a frayed hole under the left armpit, at 9.15am on Tuesday 9th September, just as with her son's murder she felt no premonition of what lay ahead.

Vera bumped into the matchbox hall, dressed for the day ahead and wide awake. Taking her coat off the peg she asked Eileen tenderly and lovingly: "Sleep well, dear?"

"Not really," was the sleepy reply.

"I'm just nipping down to the corner shop to get some milk so we can have a nice cup of tea. You'll be alright on your own won't you?"

Eileen agreed that she would, secretly wishing Vera would stop fussing, and the door opened bringing in gusts of sea air and the rustling of the sea and the silence of the countryside. "About what I told you yesterday...?"

"Eileen, you know me. Your secret's safe with me." She gave her a loving, reassuring smile and bumped out into the street, closing the door behind her and glancing across the road, she obviously saw Eileen's killer leaning on the railings opposite.

Chapter 33

Christian doubted the Science teacher would even know they were missing. As he took the fleshy, squeezable hand of Katie's in his smooth, firm grip he didn't give Martine a second thought. Her performance the previous day had served to prove, what he had suspected since their premature break up, that she had never had any interest in him. She had only interested in Nathan. Oh how much he despised that name. They had been so close, they had cared a great deal for each other, they had told each other everything, they had risen above the rumours that they were

in love. And for what? Nathan, his supposed best friend, had stabbed him in the back like Julius Caesar's friends whose name he had learnt in a long forgotten History lesson could not be recalled.

Though all that bitterness was long forgotten as he led Katie down the concrete, grimy, cobweb strewn steps into the abnormal stickiness of the boiler room. Here they were alone and no-one's prying eyes, no memories of Nathan or Martine could interfere with them. Her delicate face leaned forward and kissed his. He had waited for the moment for days. So far their relationship had been restricted to a quick peck on the cheek, the odd phone call and texting their undying love for each other.

And as his lusting hand groped for her blouse buttons he had no fear that their relationship would last and paid no thought to unpleasant cloud of murder that hung over the formerly peaceful village. He thought only of Katie and of the happiness that they would have together.

Chapter 34

Eileen could not be bothered to dress. She was comfortable and held no intention of venturing outside the safety of Vera's house. Yesterday had been a mistake. Telling Vera in a public place were anyone could have overheard. Telling Vera at all had probably been the biggest mistake but she did, however, feel a lot better for doing so. The burden had been lifted from her shoulders and now only the emptiness it left and the sick feeling of grief, churning in the pit of her stomach remained.

The doorbell pierced her thoughts and understandably with the trauma of the last few days her body shuddered with the shock of the unanticipated alien sound. Her first instinct was to ignore it but after a moment's pause its shrill echoed through the house once more.

She was only in her dressing gown but she knew she must answer it. She was temporarily staying in Vera's house and it would be unfair to ignore a caller who might be important to Vera. Grudgingly she rose and went into the hall. The door clicked open to her touch.

The moment she saw the familiar figure standing on the doorstep her heart began to pound with dread and trepidation. The hood pulled up onto their head gave them a spooky, unnatural look of insanity, reinforced by the evil, disturbed glimmer in their eyes.

And then in an instance the sun's rays, boring through the light mist of the early autumn morning- predicting a more pleasant day than they had experienced since summer had died, glinted and glimmered like shimmering lights on a disco ball on the shiny metal that was a crowbar.

A crowbar- held in a threatening manner by gloved hands. Realising the danger, she grasped the door and shoved it forward with all the might she could muster. Her killer was too quick. They barged their shoulder against the door with such force that it flung Eileen backwards onto the carpet. For a fraction of a second she lay there. Defenceless. The killer swiftly, and with a remarkable efficiency, moved into the room and promptly shut the door behind them.

That cramped square room, that had been sufficient to Vera for years, was no place to escape a killer. Eileen scrambled across the carpet, which turned blood red before her blurred eyes. Her nails digging viciously into the carpet she crawled to the lounge door in a mad panic.

The door was less than a foot away when the blow struck. And another. And another.

Chapter 35

9.43am; Vera's house was alive with people. One minute later Aaron's Astra pulled up on the pavement. He noted with disgust that Barnfield's Mercedes was already stationed outside. He clambered out and ducked under the police tape that gently swayed in the sea breeze. The centre of the activities lay in the hall.

She was sprawled out on the raspberry carpet, which was in parts blood red, by the door which connected the hall and the lounge. The familiar red, sticky, congealed substance was matted on the caved-in skull. The bouncy hair, which still jiggled in the breeze from the open door, was dyed with solidified blood. Her neck and fluffy pink dressing gown were also caked in it and the room smelt of death.

Barnfield hovered uselessly by the body and was glad when Aaron appeared. "What happened?" asked Aaron eagerly but with enough solemnity to avoid being vulgar.

Barnfield quickly filled him in, glad to appear useful once more. Vera Wilkinson had found the body at 9.27am and remaining reasonably calm had instantly called the police. Presently she was sipping cocoa with Cyril Lambeth, who upon hearing of the murder immediately offered to take Vera to sanctuary at The Swan. At the moment that was all the information they had managed to extract from her. Aaron wondered whether that was due to Barnfield's normally well concealed compassion for Vera or Cyril's insistency that she went immediately to the pub. He plumped for the latter.

"She should have recovered by now. We need to go and see her." Aaron wondered how Barnfield was capable of being so shallow. Vera had just found a friend, that she had known for years, brutally murdered and Barnfield thought all she needed for recovery was a cup of cocoa and a sympathetic ear; if that's what Cyril had indeed been offering.

However as they moved for the front door, through the masses of people, Dr Kensic, who had been kneeling by the

body and carrying out his customary meticulous search, rose and called them back. She had apparently been killed by multiple blows to the head, inflicted by a piece of metal about 2 or 3 inches wide with a pointed end. Kensic guessed, although he was keen to stress that that was all it was, that the weapon had been some sort of crowbar. Time of death was around about 20-25 minutes ago but he couldn't be more precise at present. His professional opinion that a woman, in a fit of rage or frenzy could have committed the crime but a man seemed that more probable option.

On their way out Barnfield asked an officer for an update on the search of the house and its vicinity but nothing of notable interest had been uncovered. The officer also commented that no signs of a forced entry had been discovered. This suggested, along with the open front door, that Eileen had opened the door to her killer. As they strolled the short distance to the pub, Aaron updated Barnfield on his progress with Nathan Brooke's killing. Barnfield, however, seemed more interested in soaking up panoramic view of the harbour but, unfortunately, Aaron had been acquainted with Harry long enough to know that it was penetrating his brain.

Unexpectedly he asked of Aaron: "Do you think we're looking at a triple murderer here?" Never before had he been interested in Aaron's opinion. Like Aaron he had obviously accepted that this was no simple case.

"I'm not sure. I'd assumed that Eloise and Nathan were killed by the same person as there was a link but with Eileen's murder it becomes more and more complicated. I haven't yet come across one person who wanted all three of them dead. Obviously we have to consider that the first death may not have been murder."

"Obviously," Barnfield mockingly murmured.

They entered The Swan. Cyril and Vera sat at one of the tables by the window and they both aimlessly gazed out

over the harbour. Aaron pointlessly speculated whether Cyril and Vera had overheard his and Barnfield's conversation as they had passed the flimsy, greasy window. Vera sipped a thick brown substance from a mug and Cyril tapped ash from the cigarette, gripped expertly between his fingers, onto an ash tray, spotlessly clean obviously due to Martine's hard labour, that lay in the centre of the table. Vera cringed awkwardly and shrunk distastefully away, remembering what cigarettes had done to her Wilf. Her face had been drained of colour and her bubbly, inquisitive nature seemed to have been zapped away. Now she rested on her chair, calm, peaceful and introspective, and paid no attention to the goings on around her.

Only Cyril turned to look at the two detectives. He wasted no time on formalities. "She's had a terrible shock. Do you really need to speak to her now?"

"Yes," growled Barnfield, "we have little hope of progressing with our investigations until we've spoken to Miss Wilkinson."

"Oh course they must Cyril," piped Vera irritably. "And don't talk about me as if I'm not here."

"Sorry," was muttered and Vera began her account. Aaron believed that the enjoyment she had previously felt at supplying him with information had gone now murder was personally connected with herself. Vera had learnt the hard way that murder was only exciting if it did not personally affect you; as with most things.

"I left the house just after a quarter past nine to buy some milk from the corner shop. There was quite a cue and I was in there some 10 minutes. Gwenda Baker, the proprietor, will confirm this of course. When I arrived back the door was open. I sensed something was wrong. It's strange how one gets these curious inklings. Then I went in and that's when... that's I when I saw her lying there. I knew not to touch the body but I did have to step over her to reach the telephone in the kitchen. That felt rather undignified but

then I suppose death is. I dialled 999 and I suspect you know the rest.”

And then came Barnfield’s insensitive question. “And you’re sure that she was alive when you left?”

Vera’s sharp eyes turned cold, the last shreds of amicability and co-operation vanished. “What are you insinuating Detective Chief Inspector? You think I would have walked past her bloodied corpse on my way out. Or do you think I killed her?”

“No,” Barnfield sheepishly answered, realising the question to be a mistake, “that’s not what I meant.”

“Good. I’m an ageing lady who was very fond of Eileen. Fond enough to let her reside in my house while you lot turned over her house. I’d have resented the accusation. If you must know as I left she was coming down the stairs. She’d just awoken. I told her where I was going and left...”

“And that was all you said?”

“Yes.”

“And you knew of no-one who would wish her dead?”

“No.”

The two monosyllable answers to Barnfield’s questions had been pronounced so viciously and so quickly that Aaron formed the conviction that the formerly talkative Vera was concealing something. He knew that in her present state of will and grit it would be pointless to try to extract the details from her. When she had had time to recover from initial shock maybe she would decide to divulge her knowledge. Hopefully anyway...

“Not even Ted Barrow?”

“Mr Barnfield that’s preposterous. She mentioned their little grievances but he is such a kind hearted and loving man...” The sentence was left unfinished as if they should know he was incapable of murder that she did not need to reinforce it.

“When you left the house did you see anyone waiting outside?”

“I... I don't know I wasn't really looking.”

“Come on Vera.” Aaron, as if persuading a child to admit to a mischievous deed, coaxed her into talking.

“Oh there might have been someone standing opposite the house. I don't know.”

“Wearing what?”

“Oh a black anorak I think.”

“Did you know them?”

“I couldn't see their face. They had their hood up. Oh I remember now. They were carrying a sports bag. I assumed they were waiting to catch a bus. You know; going to the gym? A new complex has just opened in Eastonshire.”

Barnfield was still suspicious of Vera. He wondered why she had originally denied seeing anyone. Aaron, on the other hand, thought he knew. Her friend had been murdered and she, normally so inquisitive and with a deadly eye for detail, had seen the killer- maybe even smiled “Good Morning,” had failed to realise their intent and more importantly had failed to crane her neck in an attempt to see their face. Aaron knew it to be irrational but in her present state of disbelief it was expected. But the mention of the sports bag had sounded alarm bells in his head. It was a sports bag that Sydney Smithers had used to transport his destructive equipment up to the Brooke farm on the day of Nathan's murder.

On impulse he enquired: “Would you recognise the sports bag if you saw it again?”

“I'm afraid not. I only glanced at the man.”

“So it was a man?” Barnfield pounced with a question, as if a suspect had just made a fatal error. But Aaron did not see the meek old lady as a suspect. Maybe he was just taken in by her charm...

“No, I couldn't be sure of that. It was just a term of phrase.”

Aaron persisted, almost as if Barnfield had failed to speak. “Would you recognise the coat if you saw it again?”

“Probably not. Coats are all the same to me.”

Back on the street, they continued with their amicable discussion of the case. “I think we’ve got a good idea how the murder was committed,” began Barnfield. “Killer packs a crowbar in a sports bag, then goes to wait outside Vera’s house. Eventually she comes out and they seize their chance. They ring the bell, Eileen answers, sees the crowbar, flees into the house, trips up and the killer pounces. Then replaces the crowbar and leaves, leaving the door open.”

“There’re a few points that don’t make sense. They could have been waiting for ages outside the house. How did they know Vera was about to leave? How did they know Eileen was staying with Vera? And why leave the door open?” Barnfield’s features tensed with irritation as holes were poked in his story.

“Well what do you think then?”

“Pretty much what you just said but I was just making a few observations.” There was an awkward silence which Aaron swiftly broke. “Where to now, anyway?”

“Ted Barrow. He’s the only one with a grudge against her, as far as we know.” It annoyed Aaron, why Barnfield seemed to have a grudge against the innocent old man. Fair enough, it probably was necessary to speak to him but Barnfield’s behaviour could easily class as harassment.

“Oh by the way,” Aaron exclaimed in an accidentally sardonic tone, “in her interview with me Eileen mentioned a brother. He’ll need to be informed.”

“Name?” grunted Barnfield disdainfully.

“She didn’t say. We need to send an officer to the farm, go through her address book. Find him out.”

“I’ll give the orders thank Inspector.” After the recent amicability of Barnfield, this disparaging and bluntly sarcastic put down was quite unanticipated for Aaron who took it in silence.

This silence remained for the steep trek up to the Barrow's farmhouse. As they passed Vera's cottage Barnfield barked an order at some unsuspecting P.C. to go and search Eileen's house for an address book. Aaron's temper was frayed. It had been his idea and Barnfield had taken the credit by delivering the order. It was petty but small things like that niggled Aaron. He may have been demoted but even Detective Inspectors had a say in matters. And this had originally been his case but Barnfield, who had originally just been drafted in to start the investigation while Aaron was busy, had progressively taken over as the case had increased in magnitude and the eventual rewards a whole lot sweeter. But his determined nature never faltered; the rewards would be his. He took some comfort in the fact that although intelligent, Barnfield was too lazy to see a case, which had the ever increasing potential to be elongated, through to the end.

The wind gusted against their faces, sweeping leaves and debris further down the road. Aaron drifted into his own train of thought and became distanced from the body that climbed the winding road. Who had killed Eileen Brooke and why? Why was the important question and Aaron had his self-acclaimed method, of analysing the five different motives for murder, that had served him for many years. The violence of the crime had immediately struck Aaron and it didn't fit with the other two crimes. That immediately suggested that she had been savagely murdered for a different motive.

The first motive of financial gain didn't fit with the violence crime. Aaron guessed that the brother with whom she had not conversed with for many would inherit the little she had had, as he would be her next of kin and Aaron doubted whether she would have made a will. But if Nathan had still been alive...? But surely the brother wouldn't murder two of his blood relatives just to inherit a tatty farm and the small sum of money she had. Anyhow he

would be interested to speak with the brother; to find out why he had fallen out with his sister.

Secondly the idea that Eileen had obtained some knowledge dangerous to the killer. This was feasible; maybe she knew more about her son's murder than she had let on. Aaron had suspected as much when he had asked her a few questions on that second occasion. But the repeated blows to her skull discouraged this theory. The killer needed to remove her but surely there was no call for that outburst of violence. She would unarguably have been dead after the first blow. The others just indicated hatred and bitterness.

The third motive was of psychosis. He felt that he could all but discount this. The murder had been fairly well planned. Someone had packed a crowbar into a sports bag with the direct intention of murdering Eileen Brooke. As Aaron had pointed out to Barnfield there were a few points that didn't quite make sense but what was indubitable was the fact that someone had gone round to Vera's house to kill Eileen. How they knew she was there and how they knew Vera was out was debatable. Psychotics would more than likely have picked up a crowbar, hid in a thicket and jumped on the next person to come past. He doubted that they would have pacifically rung someone's door. Unless they had another motive for killing Eileen... That was the problem with psychosis; it wasn't really a motive on its own.

The fourth was revenge. This was more promising. The repeated blows would suggest someone had held a grudge. Someone had wanted Eileen to suffer in her death. Someone had let out all their pent up anger in that mad frenzied attack. However who would want revenge on Eileen? Surely Ted Barrow wouldn't go to these lengths just because she'd slapped him in the face. No, Aaron was sure he hadn't. What about the Smithers? Although being prime suspects for her son's death why would they kill

Eileen? It was inconceivable that they blamed her for her son's actions. He worried whether he would be able to question their whereabouts for this death without landing himself into conflict with Superintendent Winchester.

Finally there was the love motive. He was reasonably confident that Eileen had not been romantically entwined with any one and a vicious assault with a crowbar was not normally the nature of passionate crimes.

With Eloise's death he had considered the idea she had been killed in the heat of a blazing row but with this crime that suggestion was quite ridiculous. If someone had wanted to speak to Eileen they wouldn't have taken a crowbar unless they carried malicious intent.

Suddenly a bizarre idea waded into the depths of Aaron's mind. Just for a moment he supposed that Eileen hadn't been the intended target. Supposing the killer had gone round to Vera's house to kill Vera and was oblivious to Eileen's residence. But Vera had seen the killer on her way to the shop. Surely that had been reciprocated? But what if it hadn't? The killer rang the bell expecting Vera and when Eileen answered, seeing the crowbar, she had to be silenced. Improbable but possible. But to get at the truth Aaron knew he must consider various possibilities.

They had reached the farm. They passed through the gate and Barnfield, who had been lagging behind Aaron on the brisk stroll up the country lane, swung it to behind them. As they approached thuds and quiet chatter emanating from the rear of the farmhouse suggested that they would not find Ted and Lorna within. Aaron paced round the side of the farm, steaming ahead of Barnfield, past the tumbledown hut that had contained a deadly secret towards the barn crammed with bails of hay. In front of the barn was the mud splattered tractor, equipped with trailer. It was from this that Ted and Lorna lugged the hay, perspiration dripping from their faces and already soaking into their clothes so early in the morning, over to the barn and with a

final mighty effort threw their bail onto the ever increasing stack.

Ted saw them first. He muttered to Lorna and they came over; Ted nervously, Lorna with confidence and a slight irritation at being disturbed once more. She waited for no explanation and as soon as they were within earshot she shouted steadily and serenely but without amiability: "We told we all you knew. What is it now?"

Aaron did not wish to screech the news of Eileen's death at them and so waited until they had come right over to himself and Barnfield. "I'm afraid there's been another murder."

"Well why come to us?" Lorna barked indignantly.

"The victim was Eileen Brooke."

Aaron could almost perceive the words visibly slamming into Ted as he drained pale and went a nauseous colour. He clasped his mouth as if about to vomit. The stubby fingers clasped the lips tightly together as if to force the vomit back into the mouth.

"You've upset my husband. How dare you?" expostulated Lorna.

"I can speak... for myself," Ted spluttered through his hand, which he quickly removed so as to remove his cap to dap his already sweating face. For the first time a tension in the ostensibly blissful matrimony was apparent.

Aaron's calming platitude was necessary. "It's alright Ted. No-one thinks you killed her," he fibbed. "We just need to know where you were between 9.15 and 9.30 this morning."

Ted let out a quivering sigh and told him. "We've both been working on the farm all morning."

"I can vouch for that. Now would you please go," Lorna demanded of them. They obeyed but just before he and Barnfield vanished around the corner of the house, Aaron couldn't resist the temptation to glance back at Ted and Lorna. A muted argument was breaking out between the

pair. When Aaron had first descended on their farmhouse they were a delightfully happy couple- still strongly in love after years of marriage. Or so it had appeared... And now they stood accusingly pointing at each other in the yard. Aaron felt illogical guilt at having brought this strain upon their marriage. Deep down he knew the blame should not be attributed to him but upon the killer. Or killers.

Although still personally assured of Ted's innocent he felt a few niggles of worry about the brief conversation that had just passed. "We've both been working on the farm all morning." Why had Ted stressed that they'd both been working on the farm? "I've been working on the farm all morning," would have sufficed. It was he and Lorna who was under suspicion. And why had neither of them asked how Eileen had been killed? Did they already know?

Chapter 36

Later that day, alone in his office, Aaron had time to reflect on the progression of the case; if progression it was. Very little had been learnt. The main suspect, Ted Barrow, had an alibi. Much to Ted and Lorna's disgust and displeasure Barnfield had obtained a search warrant from Winchester to search the Barrow's farm. Neither the crowbar, the anorak nor the sports bag were found. No-one had seen the murder committed- rather strange, Aaron thought, considering it was in broad daylight. The meticulous door to door carried through by competent constables had yielded almost nothing. Only one person, apart from Vera, had seen the killer- if that's who the mysterious person in the black anorak with the sports bag was- and they had noticed even less than Vera. They had not noticed the sports bag and were not even sure of the colour of the coat. Like Vera, they had no clue to the sex of the mysterious person.

Without a significant breakthrough Aaron found it difficult to see how they would ever bring anyone to justice for the three deaths. No fingerprints or DNA had been found at any of the scene of crimes. The thorough search of Vera's house had been completed just an hour before. Barnfield was still searching Eileen's farmhouse and rifling through her papers in the hope of uncovering a lead. It was uncharacteristic of Aaron not to take part in this- maybe he was suffering from that inescapable condition of old age. The excuse he had provided his brain with was his belief that nothing of any importance would be discovered. Also he liked sitting in his office- reflecting. The familiar four walls provided the ideal backdrop in which to focus his mind on perplexing cases. He found himself more at home than in the semi-detached house he owned mainly due to the little time he spent in it and that although, apart from his presence, both were empty it was only in his house that the loneliness of being single set in. Indeed many cases had been unravelled whilst he had sat in his office.

There was a meek, frightened tap on his door and Aaron called the customary words of "Come in." A uniformed officer ushered in a tall, dark man whom he introduced as Marcus Brooke; Eileen's brother.

As he came into the room and sat on the chair opposite Aaron, as beckoned to do so by the latter, he found himself being observed by the Detective Inspector. He was a large, burly man in his late fifties, early sixties, with an air of brusque brutality. His face was chubby and his ageing features sagging. His leathery skin was unshaven and a bristly moustache grew above the pale, thin lips. The dark, beady brown eyes gave him a mysterious feel, emphasised by his long, camel overcoat. Brown hair, flecked with tufts of grey, was gelled back exposing a creasing and protruding forehead.

His voice was gravelly but revealed that he had clearly been brought up in Eastonshire. “Are you the investigating officer?”

“One of them.” Marcus, unaware of Barnfield, did not understand the bitter tone to Aaron’s voice.

“An officer contacted me this morning with the terrible news. Poor Eileen. Never harmed a fly poor dear. Kind and gentle she was. They mentioned Nathan as well. I bet that really shook Eileen up. Tragic. What’s happened to the village?”

The question was clearly a rhetorical one so Aaron posed one of his own. “Why did you and your sister fall out?”

“That was 10 years go. That can’t have any relevance on her death.”

“It was murder and everything is relevant.”

His face turned sour and his lips curled in a sinister manner; a habit of his. “You think I killed her? If you give me the time of her death I’m sure I can provide an alibi.”

“I don’t consider you a suspect. I know your address is 40 miles outside of Eastonshire. I just would like to know the upset between you and your sister that caused such a rift that you appear unperturbed by her gruesome death.”

“I can assure you that I’m anything but unperturbed. I’ve expressed my regret. What more do you want?” The words were cold and callous.

“It’s not a case of what I want. I just thought you may have been upset by Eileen’s death.”

“I am. People deal with grief in different ways. Just because I’m not blubbering like some hysterical child doesn’t mean I’m untouched. It’s worsened for me by the fact we haven’t spoken in 10 years.”

Having taken an immediate dislike to Marcus Aaron acknowledged that the conversation was going to be difficult going. All Aaron wanted to know was the cause of the disagreement and Marcus seemed to be skirting the question.

“And the reason for that is?”

He let out a deep sigh and rubbed his hand across his brow as if to remove imaginary perspiration. “We had a little disagreement about some money. When our mother died Eileen accused me of trying to diddle her of some money. I mean I wasn’t interested in the money and I didn’t take kindly to being called a money grabbing so and so. We told each other a few home truths and that was that. I thought she was being tremendously hypocritical. She was obviously far more interested in the money than I was to be causing such a fuss over it. Once the money was paid into my bank account I withdrew it and posted the lot through her letterbox. We never spoke again.”

“How much money was involved?”

“Our parents left us £20,000 each. They weren’t that well off. Eileen ended up with £40,000”

Aaron emitted a low whistle. “Judging by the state of her farmhouse she didn’t have a lot of money.”

“I’m afraid you’re wrong Inspector. You see when your lot phoned me and told me about Eileen and Nathan I realised I was her next of kin. I immediately phoned the solicitors I knew she was under at the time of our dispute. Luckily she was still with them. Apparently she hadn’t left a will. I inherit the lot. Her farm and her money which according to the solicitor was in the region of £42000. Reflecting on my sister’s philosophy I believe that she was too stubborn to spend a penny of that money and she’s kept it for all these years. And from what you said about the state of her farmhouse, even when she’s been struggling to make a living out of her beloved farming. Anyway I’ll see it for myself when I go there. I’m going to temporarily move in. I’ve brought some things down with me. Tidy the place up a bit. Sort her stuff out. Chuck out what I don’t want. Should have it on the market by the start of next week.”

Aaron was amazed at what had just passed. He couldn't believe how brutally cold-hearted Marcus could be. Eileen hadn't been dead for 24 hours and he was already planning to sell her farmhouse and clear out her belongings. He could see why Eileen and he might have had a disagreement over money. What was also surprising was that Eileen had had £40,000 in her bank and had chosen not to use it. He thought that she would have cared for Nathan's welfare enough to use the 'dirty' money. The feud with Ted Barrow had been insincere as Eileen had claimed to have needed that land because of the money it provided her when really she was not as badly off, financially, as she had claimed. Though Aaron could place himself in her farmer's boots. Would he take money from that devious, underhand, insensitive man sitting opposite him? And on her death, in years to come, she would have almost certainly given the money to Nathan through her will so he could live a comfortable life. How would she feel that the money was indeed going back to Marcus?

“Will that be all?”

Aaron nodded; keen to rid his office of Marcus Brooke. He didn't rise to shake his hand and Marcus disappeared out of the door with the same mysteriousness with which he had come.

The click of the closing door triggered Aaron's mind into action. Did the man who had just departed his office care enough about money to kill Nathan and Eileen; his own flesh and blood- his only flesh and blood? Probably but as much as he wished to believe that he had, he didn't. If he had then the viciousness in Eileen's murder would be explained by her brother's hatred for her. Hatred that wouldn't normally be present in a financial crime. But Aaron was sure, regrettably, of his innocence. If he had then why would he come the police station? The officer who phoned him would not have requested him to make the 40 mile journey. So why come? He knew he would be

asked questions of why he and his sister had ceased to speak. Awkward questions that would throw blame firmly upon him. But Aaron guessed this was the reason he had been graced with Marcus's presence. He knew he would need to come to Eastonshire to spruce up Eileen's farmhouse in order to prepare it for sale. Why not call in at the local police station, in order to clear his name? He had probably assumed the police to be aware of him and his sister's feud which would provide him with a motive for murder. This would be heightened by his blatant desire for money by selling her farm so briskly. It had not failed Aaron's attention how willing Marcus had been to provide an alibi. That was what he had come to do. He wanted to be wiped as a suspect. His certainty that he would have an alibi even though he should have been unaware of the time that his sister met her death was slightly suspicious to Aaron's alert mind but regardless of that, he wiped Marcus Brooke from the list of suspects. In his mind, at least.

Chapter 37

He relaxed back in the chair. Another of his ideas popped into his cluttered mind. If Eloise's death was suicide or an accident was it not possible that someone could hold a grudge against the Barrow family. Maybe it was something to do with Eileen's late husband John. Could he have been involved in some scandal? That would need to be searched on the dreaded computer. Could Marcus's life be in danger? As far as Aaron knew he was the only living Barrow. If someone wanted to wipe them all out for some unknown reason would they stop at Eileen and Nathan? Should police protection be organised for him? The hassle would probably be a waste of time. There were no grounds for this rash action and Marcus would almost certainly refute the idea. All this was just speculation. He knew that some research needed to be done into the

Brooke's background but he couldn't find the energy to prise himself from his chair. Though would this really lead to the breakthrough that he so frantically craved? Could anything be done to speed up this up or cause it to happen at all? Would they just have to wait? But Aaron was impatient. He couldn't just wait.

His energy levels were rejuvenated by the thought of an everlasting wait and the possibility of one of his most puzzling cases to date going unsolved and he leaped up and bounded for the door.

The phone on his desk rang. He returned to his desk and snapped up the receiver, his impatience ripe.

Vera Winchester was in reception. Had she decided to tell what Aaron was sure she had concealed?

He sprinted down the stairs to meet her, shoving his way past annoyed officers, and the research never got done. Luckily it was unimportant and would have yielded nothing of which Aaron was not already aware.

Vera sat upright on one of the upholstered red leather chairs in the waiting area of the reception. As he entered from the main bulk of the building she rose mechanically. Her normally immaculate hair, kept in place by a bun, was tousled and strands had leaped out of place in an untidy fashion. Aaron gained the impression that she had dashed to the station. Either that or there was a very strong gale blowing outside.

Motioning her into the "statement room" she humbly followed, apprehension of what was to come noticeably visible on her face, and moments later they sat facing each other across the table. Then the silence followed. Intangibly pleasant but silent just the same. The passing of time allowed Vera to gather her thoughts so they wouldn't just rush out in a gabble of imperceptible words. And Aaron did not begrudge her the time; indeed he needed time to regain his breath after his sprint down the stairs- he wasn't as young as he used to be. His chest still shuddered with the

pulsating of his heart as blood flowed almost perceptibly around his body.

She spoke. Words seemed alien in the deadly quiet room that had eaten the sounds from the rest of the station. “This is very difficult for me Inspector. What I’m contemplating elaborating you with was told to me in the strictest confidence.”

“I appreciate that but with murder confidences must unavoidably be broken.”

“I know. The only reason I’m going to let you into the secret is because I’ve convinced myself, over the past few hours, that this information may have been the reason for Eileen’s demise.”

Pricking up his ears, Aaron leant forward as if Vera was about to whisper in his ear for fear of the secret being overheard.

“I’d ask you to keep the information to yourself but knowing the importance of it I realise that’s impractical.”

Aaron was secretly impressed by Vera’s efficiency and intelligent. Since their conversation earlier she must have been assessing the situation in her mind.

“May I ask who gave you the information?”

A brief contemplating pause, then the solitary word. “Eileen.”

She clasped her hands together in a religious stance, tilted her head backwards and stared at the ceiling while muttering a little prayer. “Please forgive me Eileen. I hope I’m doing the right thing.”

More insensitive coppers like Barnfield would have passed a sardonic snigger at Vera’s actions but Aaron respected her beliefs and appreciated the seriousness of her information if she had to pray to her deceased friend before divulging it.

Then she dropped her eyes and stared purposefully into his. She took a deep intake of clammy claustrophobic air

and breathed: “You see Inspector, Nathan Brooke wasn’t murdered. It was suicide.”

Chapter 38

Vera paused; either for dramatic effect or to provide time for the words to penetrate Aaron’s mind and their shocking implications to be fathomed.

“When Eileen returned home from our coffee morning she didn’t, as she claimed, work on the farm. She went straight into the house and consequently found his body; in the same position as when you were called but in different circumstances. The rifle was still in his hand. According to Eileen he must have found the key, which was in a cupboard in the kitchen, to the shed where the rifles were kept. Your men will not doubt have found only one rifle in the shed, from which the shot was not fired, and presumed none to be missing. But of course Eileen would never have parted with her dear John’s rifle; when he did help out on the farm, being in the army, that was his favourite part, the shooting. What she also found next to the body was a

suicide note from Nathan proclaiming that he could no longer live with the guilt of pushing Eloise to her death. Apparently she had formed an obsession with him and as she had stood on that cliff edge he had seen a way out.”

“Now you must understand, Inspector, that I am not condoning Nathan’s actions. To think a boy of 16 would murder his girlfriends just because he couldn’t face finishing the relationship is truly despicable and repulsive and is a reflection on the twisted, blood thirsty nature of the youth of today. However I do sympathise with what Eileen did. Whatever her son was, she felt that as his mother it was her duty to preserve his name- even in death. Her main driving force was her late husband John. She described to me in beautiful, loving detail the summer’s evening that her husband had left for the Gulf War in 1991 and the promise she had made to him...”

Chapter 39

The glowing amber sun was dropping behind the distant horizon, upon which the sea, tinged orange by the sun’s last rays, lapped against. An isolated yacht seemed to be drifting in the yawning, lustrous arch of sunlight. In this dimming light the three sombre figures- two with tragic looks worn on their faces, one with happy ignorance- emerged from the farm onto yard.

Eileen gazed loving into her husband’s eyes; eyes he had passed onto their bonny, cheerful son who would one day grow into a replica of his father. The basic foundations to his face were already visibly present. John stood there returning her loving stare and his boyish, gleeful smile- almost like the sort that frequently appeared on Nathan’s face- brought a sad tear to her eye. Everything had the perfect quality of a movie scene. Nothing could ruin how

tragically happy she felt as she bid him farewell in the postcard worthy sunset.

“Look after Nathan. Make sure no harm comes to him.”

“You’ll be back to look after him yourself, silly,” but the moment she spoke the words her carefully suppressed tears flowed freely down her cheeks. With his soft, gentle hands John wiped away the tears.

“Don’t cry Eileen. I’ll always be with you both. Somewhere. Do you promise to protect him forever, Eileen?”

“I promise. I’ll comfort him through whatever life throws. I’ll always be there for him. But you’ll be back yourself soon. This war shouldn’t last long.”

John’s silence said it all. They probably never would see him again. He crouched down to Nathan, who was oblivious to the goings on around him, mudding the knees of the army uniform which he was smartly festooned in.

“Daddy’s got to go away for a little while. Will you be good for Mummy?”

The little boy, the personification of innocence, ferociously nodded his head up and down in an obvious notion of consent. John affectionately kissed his son on the forehead and whispered the words “I love you” and then stood upright to face Eileen once more.

He pecked her on the cheek- a more passionate kiss would have tempted her with what she would have to cope without for some months; maybe forever- and whispered the same words in her ear as he had to his son.

Through the silence of late evening the waiting taxi on the lane impatiently hooted its horn, ruining the tranquillity of the scene.

In the most cheerful voice he could muster John exclaimed: “Well this is it folks,” smiled and then turned away down the muddy drive. As he unlatched the gate he turned back to his family and wife and son spasmodically raised a hand in farewell. Pity raced through John’s

stomach as he watch the two pathetic creatures waving him away but he felt an overwhelming pride for his country and knew he must find the strength to pass through the farm gate to the battlegrounds of the Far East. He returned the farewell gesture and with that he was gone for ever.

Eileen placed her arm round Nathan's neck, shivered and then they returned to the safety farmhouse.

And the sun went down.

Chapter 40

“So after reading the letter she realised that to fulfil her husband's promise she must protect Nathan's name. She wanted to destroy the letter but she knew that by placing it in the waste paper basket it was likely to be discovered in the search that would ultimately be conducted by the police. However on her way back from my house she had purchased a box of matches from the corner shop in order to set alight her bonfire. Using one of the matches she burnt the letter. Now you must understand that the shock of finding one's child dead is incomprehensible and so she wouldn't have been thinking straight. A bizarre idea had formed in her mind. She would stop the world from learning that Nathan had murdered Eloise by making his guilt fuelled suicide appear to be murder.

So she went to the rifle shed, finding that Nathan had failed to lock it, and removed a cartridge from a jar on a shelf, being careful to lock the padlock behind her. You see for someone consumed with guilt her mind had been fairly alert. She considered who might have had a motive for murdering Nathan. Ted Barrow unfortunately presented himself. I do not condone the actions I am about to recite to you as I don't think setting up an innocent man was necessary in preserving the name of Nathan. In addition I don't believe that she chose Ted because he had a plausible

motive for killing Nathan but because she wanted to extract a form of revenge upon him for taking that piece of land away from her. But she realised there was a hole in that particular theory. With her recent strained relationship with Ted it was unlikely that Nathan would have admitted him into the house and with no forced entry it appeared that Nathan had admitted his murderer. Now a far simpler option would have been to fake an entry creating the impression that that was how the murderer had entered. But she wasn't thinking straight as I say. Nathan had been facing the window when he had done it so she gained the idea of making it look as if the shot that had killed Nathan had come through the window. That was why she took a cartridge from the shed. She loaded the rifle Nathan had used, went outside and fired a shot through the window. It cracked into the wall behind the settee. Luckily Eileen had already considered this eventuality. She dug the bullet from the wall so the police would assume the bullet in Nathan was the one that had penetrated the window, then knocked a nail in its place with a hammer she had found in her husband's tool shed, along with the nail. She then took a painting of Wellston-on-Sea that had hung in her bedroom- being careful to discard the nail it had previously hung upon in case the police should search her room and become suspicious of the solitary nail speared into the wall- and hung it on the nail to cover the cracks that the bullet had created in the crumbling wall. Finally she drove her tractor across the fields to the Barrows farm and planted the rifle in the shed that housed his gun and cartridges, which Eileen knew was always open. On returning home she dialled 999. By this time the adrenalin had worn off and grief had set in. I think she had been concentrating so hard on getting the details exactly right on framing Farmer Ted and turning her son's suicide into a convincing murder the horror of what had occurred had been stemmed. But as the adrenalin stopped flowing and she sat alone in the kitchen she was

overtaken by a crushing grief and sobbed until no more tears would flow. When the plods arrived she was naturally grief-stricken and distraught.”

Silence ensued. The story that Vera had just told, although incredibly fanciful, fitted with facts and so remained plausible. Indeed there were no doubts in Aaron’s mind that the story had been authentic. Vera would wish no lies to be spread about her friend and it was certainly not the sort of thing Eileen would have invented. No, the story was true.

Solely out of interest Aaron inquired: “When did she tell you this?”

“Yesterday afternoon, when she took me for coffee at The Green Parrot.”

Chapter 41

The butler’s face contorted with inquisition and curiousness as the battered old Astra swung to a halt on the gravel drive, spraying the immaculately mown lawns with the white stones so they settled on the ground, reminiscent of snow. Through the window he strained his eyes in the early evening gloom to see the detective who had recently been a frequent visitor to the house alight from the car and practically sprint to the steps. Sensing the urgency, Carl left the window and his common room and stealthily crossed the blue and white tiles and the enormous entrance hall that never failed to strike him with its magnificence.

The bell was pressed and held for some seconds where the deep rasping noise echoed menacingly, with an apparition of evil, around the mansion. Drawing back the bolt he threw open the door. Before he could open his mouth in his slow manner the detective in his somewhat scruffy leather jacket, which clashed with the posh intricacy of the house, marched into the house. Carl failed

to emit exclamations of protest as there was apparently little point. He felt they would have been ignored by the determined Mr Holmes. Besides it wasn't as if the family could come to any harm; he was a policeman.

Throwing the door open he stormed into the lounge. The unexpected opening of the door made the four occupants of the room cast a startled look at him. Petula was on the settee with her children either side of her. Alistair lounged in the armchair opposite the door. Both children slouched devotedly against their mother's shoulders.

Alistair, who had been puffing a cigar, jumped up fuming. The children, Sydney and Teresa, had been reading highly intellectually classics whilst Petula had been busily knitting some as yet unidentifiable item of clothing. This must be how a reporter feels, thought Aaron, when they pry into a celebrity's private life. That was the distinct impression he had been conveyed. This was the Smither's behind closed doors. If the butler had been given the opportunity to announce his arrival he was positive that the knitting needles and material would have been hastily shoved under the settee along with the reading material.

"How dare you barge into our house uninvited?" Alistair protested, his face bulging with fury. "Are we not entitled to privacy?"

"That depends on whether one of you is a killer or not?"

Petula rose like a Jack-in-the-box and demanded: "Leave this house now!"

"What are you so afraid of them?" he challenged her cheekily, unafraid of the repercussions of berating an important member of the community.

Alistair headed for the door. "I'm phoning Superintendent Winchester. We've had enough of this downright insolence."

"Go ahead," he ephemerally called, "I'm not here to speak with Sydney not you."

Alistair stopped in his tracks as Sydney sprung up, flinging the book upon the carpet. "I've done nothing. I've done nothing," he blabbered.

"Be quiet," ordered his mother, spitting venom.

"What haven't you done Sydney?"

"I didn't kill Nathan."

"Oh course he didn't," interposed his mother.

"But Eileen Brooke is dead." The words stilled the babble of voices. "Now Sydney, I think that whilst working at The Green Parrot yesterday you overheard an interesting conversation between Eileen Brooke and Vera Wilkinson. Tell me what happened next..."

And Sydney told him, much to his parent's dismay.

Chapter 42

They had been careless.

Serving them their coffee he couldn't help but overhear their revealing conversation. The moment Nathan had been mentioned his ears had pricked and he had stood behind the counter and strained to hear what they were saying. Luckily there had been very few people in the café so there was little to be done and few voices to interfere with Eileen's conversation with Mrs Wilkinson.

As he sprinted down the drive up to his family home, brimming with information, he failed to comprehend how Eileen could have had such disregard for Eloise. But mother and father won't, he thought, when I tell them. They'll be interested in getting justice for Eloise.

He let himself into the house and went straight for the lounge, believing that was where he would find his mother. As he entered he saw that his father had returned from work and was sitting on the settee with his pompous arm around his mother. The T.V. was on but sound was almost muted and his parents were conversing.

"Mother. Father. I need to speak with you."

His father snatched up the remote control and flicked the T.V. off.

The sombre note to his voice had attracted his mother's attention.

"You haven't done something stupid again have you?"

"Not me. I've just overheard something of vital importance to Eloise's death in the Green Parrot."

He relayed the conversation.

His father's immediate reaction was of disbelief but his mother sat upright; quietly reflecting. "Don't be a fool. We're all upset at Eloise's death but making up these ridiculous stories isn't going to help anyone. Trying to kill Nathan was daft enough. Do you realise the trouble you could have got yourself into?"

"Yes but I didn't see anyone. Did I? Because there was nobody. He did it himself. That's why I saw no-one running off."

"But you said you couldn't see if there was anyone outside the lounge window?" his father challenged.

"Yes but I'd only gone past it seconds before. I'd have heard someone come and thinking about it I think the shot did sound as if it came from inside the house."

"Then maybe the killer was in the house."

"Oh Alistair!" his wife exclaimed with a hint of exasperation. "Do you really think that Sydney would fabricate this story? It makes sense doesn't it? The only people with reason to kill him were this family and it wasn't any of us. Was it?"

The question went unanswered.

Petula persisted, unperturbed: "So it must have been suicide. He couldn't live with killing our daughter. That evil woman thought she'd protect her murdering scumbag of a son and raise the two fingers to Eloise."

"She's going to pay for this," spat Sydney under his breath.

“Oh stop being so melodramatic, the pair of you,” bawled Alistair, slightly disturbed by his wife and son’s venomous talk.

“Your father’s right.” Petula spoke down to Sydney in a suddenly patronising tone. “You do nothing about this. We’ll discuss what action should be taken.”

“There’s nothing we can do, dear. Even if it’s true she’ll never admit it. This would never reach court. It’s our word against hers. That Vera woman will say nothing I shouldn’t wonder.”

Petula muttered almost inaudibly: “Maybe I didn’t mean legal action,” and then in her ordinary composed voice: “Sydney go to your room. Your father and I have things to discuss. You did the right thing in coming to us.”

“I’m not going anywhere. She was my sister. I will get justice for her.”

“You’ll do nothing,” enforced his mother sharply.

“No-one will do anything,” Alistair masterfully preached.

Petula, ignoring the fact that Sydney had failed to leave the room, screeched at her husband, her last drip of composure, uprightness and demureness ebbing away. “How can you betray Eloise like this? Your own daughter? Do you not care what that woman has done? Do you not care that Nathan will be seen as an innocent and tragic figure forevermore? Not for the murderer he really was?”

Waving his hands Alistair bellowed a retort and Sydney also joined in the row, vigorously expressing that Eileen should pay.

But even in the mayhem Sydney didn’t fail to hear the creaking of the hall door. Someone had been listening to their conversation- just as he had listened to Eileen’s.

Chapter 43

“And you’re sure about the creaking door?”

The reply was in the affirmative so Aaron asked: “So you think someone was listening to your conversation?”

His parent’s stares bore into him as he hesitantly answered in a shaky voice, the simple monosyllable: “Yes.”

“Who? Carl?”

“No not Carl. He’s too professional and devoted to indulge in that underhand activity. I...”

“What?”

“I thought it may have been my sister.”

There was a sort of united gasp from the rest of the family.

“You mean Eloise?” his father asked sceptically.

“No, of course not Father. I’m not talking ghosts here. I meant Teresa.” He jabbed an accusing finger towards his sister. The gesture triggered outbursts of defensive objections from his parents.

“Teresa would never listen in to private conversations,” her father objected fiercely.

“Apologise to you sister at once,” Petula demanded of Sydney.

“Mr Holmes,” began Alistair in a voice full of stern irritation, “what is the meaning of all this?”

Temporarily Aaron ignored him. His eyes were fixed upon the calm, unruffled figure of Teresa Smithers. No words of protest to her brother’s accusations had been uttered from her lips.

“I would have thought that was blatantly obvious. Teresa overheard your conversation. A conversation in which she learnt of Eileen’s activities. Activities which had preserved Nathan Brooke’s name and stopped the village from learning of his murderous deeds. So this morning she delays going to school, takes a crowbar she finds in the garage, puts it in a sports bag like Sydney did a few days ago, puts on a black anorak, goes to the village, rings Eileen’s bell and...”

“No!” The exclamation came, not from Teresa but from Petula. “She didn’t kill Eileen. It was me.”

Everyone looked dumfounded at Petula. She dropped back onto the chair as if the intervention had drained her of her energy.

“I’m a police officer, Mrs Smithers. I know you’re trying to protect your daughter. But there’s nothing you can do for her now.”

The words visibly stung Teresa and she sprung from her chair, her eyes flaring. “I’m innocent. We’re all innocent,” she declared her voice echoing around the whole house.

“Sit down,” barked her mother.

“Petula what are you doing?” Alistair asked of his wife, a glazed, puzzled look of disbelief visible in his eyes.

“Stop!” Aaron’s stern voice stemmed the babble of voices. “You’re meant to be respectable people. You’re behaving like spoilt children. Now everybody sit down.”

The obeyed but Alistair was clearly irate at being spoken to like a mischievous child. As he moved from the door to his seat he cast a grieved look at Aaron and told him: “There are no killers in this room.”

“We’ll see,” was the sly response as if he held some previously unknown knowledge. The truth of the matter was he knew nothing and his visit to the house had been based on intelligent guesses. Guesses which soon looked to reap rewards.

“Now,” he started with the tone of a teacher who has just regained control of a troublesome class by an angry outburst. “Teresa, did you kill Mrs Brooke?”

“No.”

“Can anyone vouch that you were at school from 9.15 until 9.30 this morning?”

“Err... err... I was there.”

“Can anyone...?” his repetition was interrupted by a sharp word from Teresa.

“No.” Her parent’s cast her an incredulous glance of morbid horror.

“Teresa!” exclaimed her mother. “You haven’t been truanting school, have you? You saw where that led Eloise.”

“I haven’t. No-one can vouch for me because I was in the M.I. room. I felt a little queasy.”

“Oh, I remember your saying now,” sighed her mother in relief.

“Right. Do you own a black anorak?”

Aaron’s question was interrupted by Petula; fed up of her daughter taking the rap. “She doesn’t but I do. You’re wasting your time interrogating my daughter Inspector. I’m the killer.”

“How can you be so collected about this Petula? This is life imprisonment. Think of my reputation.”

“Oh go to hell Alistair! Someone had to do something.”

For the first time he queried his unmoved conviction that Teresa had bludgeoned Eileen to death. Seeds of doubt had been sown. If Petula was protecting Teresa she held remarkable acting skills; something, rightly or wrongly, he didn’t attribute her with.

Petula turned her attention back to Aaron. “The anorak is in the closet in the hall. If you want I can send for Carl and he’ll show you. If you require more proof I can give you details of the scene of crime. Eileen was wearing a fluffy pink dressing gown and was found facing the floor in the hall, next to the door facing the lounge.”

Alistair’s voice was quiet and his voice held a note of incredulous disbelief. “You killed her Petula?” Like Aaron, he had now realised that she was in fact telling the truth and not just confessing to shield Teresa.

“Yes.” The voice was of one who was not proud of one’s actions but not regretful either.

“Tell me what happened.” He was talking with the killer, the details proved that beyond doubt, but he was surprised

that he felt no elation just relief that the truth was out. Still, however, there was a niggling feeling in his brain telling him that not everything was what it would seem.

She obliged. "After the conversation that Sydney has just relayed to you I was worried that he may do something regrettable. He had already considered killing Nathan. Now I know my son. He's not a killer. His sister's death shook him badly. I daresay it shook Teresa as well but she conceals her emotions much more than poor Sydney." Aaron found it slightly disconcerting that she spoke of her children as if they were not present but she continued. "I knew it to be my parental responsibility to stop him from committing murder. However I also acknowledged that Eileen should be made to pay. The easiest solution was to kill Eileen myself. Sydney would then have not committed murder but Eileen would still have been delivered her comeuppance. I made sure he didn't leave the house last night and then having seen him and Teresa off to school I find a crowbar from the garage and packed it into a sports bag. I must admit that I did use that idea from Sydney's antics the other day. Though it seemed sensible. Someone carrying a sports bag would create little suspicion. Especially as I positioned myself in the spot where people wait for the bus. Luckily that provided me with a good vantage point of Vera's house, as well."

Interrupting her recital Aaron asked: "How did you know Eileen was staying with Vera?"

"Ah I have Sydney to thank for that as well. He recited Eileen's chat with Vera in great detail and luckily where Eileen was residing was mentioned."

"Carry on," encouraged Aaron.

"Right. I was careful to keep my hood up at all times to avoid recognition. I knew that was the risk of committing the crime in broad daylight. But I had no choice. I had to do it before Sydney could. I know letting him go to school was

a risk as he could have bunked off and done the deed before I arrived there. Luckily that had not occurred.”

“Now as you might have guessed there was no way of me knowing that Vera had been about to leave the house. I knew that but I just wanted to be there. If I was there I could make sure Sydney wasn’t too. As I stood there I considered how I could commit the crime. I could see Vera stumbling about in the lounge but there was no sign of Eileen. And then Vera left the house and strolled casually down the street to the corner shop. I realised I’d been lucky. From then on it was plain sailing.”

“I crossed the road and took the crowbar out of the sports bag, being careful to check that no-one was watching. Then I rang the bell and she answered. On seeing the crowbar she tried to slam the door in the face but I pushed my way in, knocking her over in the process. Once she was on the floor, killing her was easy. As I was checking she was dead I thought I heard someone coming down the street so I quickly stuffed the bloodied crowbar back in the bag and hurried out of the house, accidentally leaving the door open. Then I crossed the road and chucked the sports bag in the sea before returning home.”

For a few moments Aaron was, like the rest of the Smithers, dumbfounded. He couldn’t quite believe that an investigation he had thought would last for days, if it was ever solved, was abruptly over, just like that. He knew he should be pleased that he had unravelled the case without Barnfield’s hindering assistance.

Before making the arrest there was something that he felt it was his duty to say. “So, Mrs Smithers why did you kill her?”

“I told you. To protect my son.”

“But don’t you see, that’s why Eileen did what she did? To protect Nathan. And you killed her for it. I can understand your anger against Nathan. He took away Eloise. But I would have thought you could have

sympathised with Eileen. She meant no harm to you. We all want to protect our children and I know that and I've never had any."

Petula considered his wise words pensively and for the first time her face was tinged with regret as she realised the horror and unfairness of what she had done.

Alistair placed his head in his hands, to reflect, whilst the children wiped emerging tears from where they balanced on their eyelids.

"Petula Smithers, I'm arresting you on suspicion of murder." Aaron realised the ridiculousness of this customary line as now, there was no suspicion left. "You do not have to say anything but it may harm your defence if you do not mention now something you may later rely on in court. Anything you do say may be given in evidence."

She rose, kissed her emotional children goodbye and Aaron firmly gripped her arm and led her towards the door. There was no need for handcuffs. Mrs Smithers was not likely to attempt to escape.

The children looked after her; distraught and with pathetic tears dripping onto the carpet. The last few days had unarguably been the worst of their life and it would be some time, if ever, before they could recover. Two members of their family had been taken away from them for ever.

Alistair had risen and followed them to the door. At the door Petula turned and commanded Alistair to "Look after them," her voice free of love or affection for her husband. Something had changed in the last 10 minutes. Both had realised how well they didn't know each other.

She mouthed "Goodbye" to her children and with that Aaron led her away to her life of imprisonment.

Chapter 44

The case was complete.

It was the next day. He had been summoned to Winchester's office as soon as he had arrived to be congratulated on the unravelling of the case and had been granted the day off. Before he had left he had made a point of seeing Barnfield who had, begrudgingly, congratulated him also.

Now his car whizzed down country lanes, through a maze of dowdy coloured fields, some with tractors trundling across them. For the first time since Eloise had plummeted to her death he could relax. But, unlike his Superintendent, he was not satisfied. He didn't quite know why. Was it because the word murder had kept striking him before Nathan's suicide? Had that been a misjudgement? He consoled himself in thinking that it had been a reaction to Eloise's murder and not to the preceding death. Or was it because Aaron had been convinced that Nathan was innocent of his girlfriend's death? But could he have been innocent? Could he have been protecting someone? They would never know now...

And what about the diary? Aaron was positive that Nathan had kept one. His girlfriend had and he had been exceptionally good with words according to his teacher. Both points came together to suggest he had had one. But there had been no trace of it. Why? There would have been no reason to destroy before killing himself. In it would have been a passage about Eloise's death. A passage he would have written truthfully. Did that suggest that the account he written in the suicide note had been untrue?

And suddenly something came back to Aaron. Something that had registered in his subconscious as odd. Something he had seen at the scene of Nathan's murder. But what was it?

The tyres glided over the slippery tarmac. Aaron glanced out of the window, deep in thought. The sea twinkled under the weak sunlight. The fields rolled away into the distance.

And resting on top of them were bails of hay. Simple dead grass. But in Aaron's mind everything became clear. The mystery of the diary was explained but a few chance sentences echoed menacingly in his mind.

"I've brought some things down with me. Tidy the place up a bit. Sort her stuff out. Chuck out what I don't want."

Chapter 45

Marcus Brooke took one last puff on the burning stub of his cigarette, from which specs of ash danced on the air, before stamping it into the soft, damp earth.

In front of him was the bonfire. He had added some items to it. Some things he had no interest in and wouldn't be able to sell on. Old chairs, ripped books and lots of other items of junk he had found in various sheds.

The sun was starting to emerge from behind the clouds, the wind had ceased to sweep across the fields. Eileen's hose-pipe, with several gashes where water spurted into the turf or the air, lay on the ground, slithering like a snake under the pressure of water. Water trickled from the nozzle ready to extinguish the flames.

It was time to begin. He retrieved the cigarette lighter from his coat pocket. With a click the orange flame jetted from the contraption in its dangerous fashion. He had found a relatively long and sturdy stick on one of the field, where it had been wrenched from a tree by the wind. Holding it at arms length he moving the burning flame to one end of the branch and let it take hold.

The branch fizzed as the flame climbed across it, ash dripping onto the ground. He moved rapidly over to the stack of junk and inserted the branch into the pile. He stood back as the bonfire began to crackle, with its steady stream of smoke wavering on its journey to the sky.

Chapter 46

Sparks flew. Tyres screeched. The car sped along the country lane on which the Brooke's farm was situated.

Behind the hedgerow Aaron thought he glimpsed a thicket of smoke but couldn't be sure due to the blanket of cloud in which it blended with. It was what he had feared. Marcus had lit the bonfire.

Would he get there before the bail of hay was consumed by smoke?

What Aaron perceived to have happened was on Sunday 7th September, before committing suicide, Nathan had destroyed the only piece of evidence that revealed the true murderer of Eloise Smithers. His diary. Well not exactly destroyed, placed in a position where it would soon be destroyed. Eileen had mentioned how neither her, Nathan nor her late husband had smoked so there wouldn't have been a cigarette lighter in the house. Indeed there can't have been because in order to set the bonfire alight Eileen had purchased a packet of matches because they were out. She didn't arrive home with the matches until after Nathan was dead so he wouldn't have been able to use those. He wouldn't have wanted to put it in a rubbish bin because he would probably have known that the bins would have been thoroughly searched by police. In truth that probably wouldn't have happened if Nathan's death hadn't looked like murder. So where would he have put it? Why not in a place where he could be safe in the knowledge that it would be burnt very soon? The bonfire.

Obviously though he wouldn't want to just shove it into the bonfire which might have been dissected by the police and consequently discovered. So why not put it inside something that officer would be unlikely to look inside. A bail of hay.

Aaron remembered how strange he had considered it to be. Why would anyone want to burn dead grass that could be fed to the livestock?

He had reached the gate of the Brooke farm and the billows of smoke had intensified. He alighted hastily from the car which he had sharply pulled up on a grass verge. He lent over and unlocked the gate before shoving it open. The gate was on a slight slope and jammed in the sticky mud puddles which were elevated higher than the gate, due to the lie of the land.

Aaron took one step back and charged at the gate, leaping over it like a steeple chase runner. And like them being careful not to land in an enormous puddle on the other side.

Now he could see Marcus. He could see the bonfire, with its raging smoke and spitting ash.

He shouted across to the Marcus but his voice was swallowed up by the atmosphere. His feet pounded on the ground, mud squirting up at grubby trousers as he headed for the field with the burning junk, emitting the familiar scent of fire and smoke. He dashed through the open gate onto the field and once within 15 metres of Marcus shouted:

“Put it out. There’s evidence in there.”

Marcus spun round, startled at hearing a human voice of the hissing of the bonfire.

“What the hell’s happening?”

“Put that fire out now!” ordered Aaron masterfully.

Marcus bent and grabbed the hose from the ground, twiddled the nozzle to full power and then blasted the flames with water. Aaron refused to wait for the flames to be quelled. He clambered heroically onto the burning wood, gingerly ferreting through scorching twigs for the elusive bail of hay. Smoke sizzled in his face and through his leather shoes. He dared not breathe in fear of smoke

inhalation. The water gushed onto the leaping flames as the fire hopelessly lost the battle to the fierce bursts of water.

One minute later, not before his hands were blistered red raw, Aaron uncovered the bail and leapt from the stack with the smouldering bundle in his grasp.

“Aim it at this. Now!”

Marcus turned, as instructed, and directed the stream at the fizzing, steaming straw. The moment the hay was completely saturated, Marcus was ordered to continue putting out the blaze. There was no point letting the partially soaked bonfire continue to stew.

Aaron dug his hand into the coarse, bristly straw ignoring the ache as bristles of straw pricked and stabbed his scalded hands. After what seemed like minutes of rummaging Aaron felt something cool and firm to his numb touch.

The diary slid out of the straw with little complication.

Chapter 47

Ted Barrow busied himself with the everyday chores normally seen to by Lorna. But she was exhausted after the arduous work of the last 4 hours so he had agreed to make the beds, wash the dishes and complete any other tasks of domesticity which required attention, whilst she rested on the settee downstairs.

Firstly he had washed the dishes and stacked them away in the places in the cramped cupboards. Secondly he had done a little dusting. Something which Lorna had evidently neglected to undertake for quite some time.

His third task was to make his and Lorna's beds. For some years now they had slept in separate beds. This arrangement was quite amicable to Ted and he had never had any problem with it. When you had been married as long as he and Lorna had there was nothing wrong with

desiring one's privacy. He had haphazardly made his bed with a fairly scruffy outcome. Lorna always made the bed much tidier and more welcoming to sleep in on one's lonesome but it would have to do. He didn't matter. Only Lorna.

He vowed to make her bed much better and with the same cosy air with which she made his. Being in her room seemed like a novelty and he felt distinctly ill at ease as if in some alien place. A place with which he was unfamiliar. This caused a slight tingling down his spine, almost of portentous premonition.

Standing back he was quite pleased with the result, having slightly dashed the making of the bed. The sheets were smooth, he had taken some trouble to smooth them out, and folded back neatly with the creaseless duvet placed on top.

On impulse he decided to fluff her pillows to add an extra comfort to her bed. He took up the top pillow with the intention of fluffing it but stopped himself when he saw a photo flutter out from under it. Dropping the pillow he looked down at the photo.

And Nathan Brooke smiled up at him.

Chapter 48

'Extract from Nathan Brooke's diary- Friday 5th September 2003'

...Lorna glided gracefully over the crisp gravel. Her beauty melted the threatened, bulging clouds upon which she was framed against. Her flowing auburn hair flew behind her in the swooning breeze giving her angelic qualities. And she is my angel. And I am hers. I am her diversion from tediously dependable old Ted. That time when our lips joined in a passionate clasp I could feel my youth revitalising her overworked body. Farmer's wives

shouldn't be made to undertake laborious and gruelling labour. Then again that was not always the case. My own mother has always played a pivotal role in the running of our farm. I help on the farm as my late father did but neither of us felt a devotion such as my mother's.

As she came closer I could sense her vibrant attraction. Unlike Ted I appreciate her beauty. Beauty for him that is clouded by her grubby farming exterior. Our wide age difference counts for nothing. An age gap is a difference in years; not in personality, tastes, passions.

Her lips opened and closed and gracious words slipped imperially out. "Nathan, darling I saw you and your tart from the farmhouse. I felt I must drop by. Put her out of her misery."

Numbness gripped my body. Ever since embarking on this passionate, daring affair I had known that this dreaded moment would arise sooner or later- the latter being preferable. But I felt nothing, no remorse, no relief even. Nothing except an exhausting numbness. I was incapable of feeling anything until I learnt of Eloise's reaction.

Her reaction, when it came, was hauntingly chilling. She threw back her head and emitted a laugh that echoed out to sea and across the fields, alerting every living thing of her insanity. "So this is you woman Nathan. I doubted it was Martine. You wouldn't want her when you'd got me. Though saying that..." She cast a disparaging sneer at my Lorna, indicating that she was miles more desirable. How much more inaccurate could she be? But with that sneer she signed her death warrant.

The preceding events are blurred and disjointed. I hope that I will not write an inaccuracy in this book of truth. Lorna made a wild lunge as if previously coiled. Impetuously I raised a discouraging arm to prevent Lorna from a reckless attack. The last thing I required was Eloise's family to learn of how she sustained her injuries. Ted would learn of his wife's adultery very soon. The

Smithers would see it as their moral right as up-standing citizens, I'm sure. Though from some causal remarks of Eloise over the period of their relationship her father may be indulging in an extra-marital affair of which Eloise would be seriously reprimanded for even nonchalantly implying. This aside Lorna obviously had ceased to care of this eventuality by introducing herself to Eloise as my other woman.

Lorna brushed my arm aside and within seconds they were tussling on the precarious cliff edge. Eloise's fingernails pierced jealously into Lorna's cheek flesh. I intervened and wrenched Eloise away. I realise now how reckless the move to have been. Eloise had lost control. Her eyes swirled in a mad rage of jealous hatred for me and my lover. Her delicately silky hands beat against my sturdy but undeveloped rib-cage. Her arms were easily grasped thus preventing them from further brutalities. The iron clasp was reminiscent of all the times that we had lovingly grabbed one another, desperate for pleasure from groping the other's body. But then she realised her knee into my groin. Pain gripped my body in an iron grip. My vision blurred; her face twisted before me, and I released her arms in an instinctive action. I was defenceless. She clawed her nails into my face with sadistic precision.

Lorna, who I think had been knocked onto the floor following her scuffle with Eloise, had risen and in one swift movement, to protect her darling lover, shoved Eloise away from me. There had been no malice in her action. She had wanted to save me from Eloise's savage, perverse assault.

But her shoe heel jammed into the bed of gravel, toppling her rearward towards the edge. She disappeared over the edge in a cloud of dust and rocks and gravel rained down into the pools below.

Seconds later there was crack like a revolver as she slammed into the jagged rocks below.

Chapter 49

Ted flung open the rickety door, nearly ripping it from its delicate hinges. He was disconcerted by his sudden burst of mighty strength, fuelled by anger. But he didn't care about anything now. The door could fall away, for the little he cared. He was going to end it all.

He staggered across the yard, his eyes a blur of tears, the ground an unperceivable smear of water and mud. He moved in a daze towards the field that swooped down to the cliff path where Eloise had met her death.

Where he would meet his death.

Climbing the field's surrounding fence awkwardly due to his feeble frame the roar of a car engine zoomed into his ears before abruptly cutting out. Ignoring the distraction his feet padded down on the dying grass on the other side. He began his dissent down the slippery, treacherous turf.

His mind was full of blissful, tranquil images of his youth. They darted gracefully about his mind; a collage of his life. His ears played music; soothing but jubilant and gleeful music.

"Ted?" the questioning shout dissolved the images instantaneously. The voice was familiar but unwelcome. He quickened his pace, aware of Aaron's footsteps across the yard.

"Ted? Where are you going?" Aaron had immediately sensed that the solitary, purposeful, almost tragic figure of Farmer Ted was not simply going to attend to some chore further down the field. Could he know what his wife had done?

If Ted had raised a hand, turned, anything Aaron would have admonished himself for his hasty thoughts. But he did nothing, except to continue walking a little faster.

Ted tried to push the querying, panicky voice from his mind and tried desperately to drag back the images in which he could lose himself in reminiscence. But they

wouldn't come. His body shook with frustration and a mounting deliriousness. He was going to be deprived the chance of dying happy. Those memories of his childhood, his school life, his wedding, his life with Lorna. Everything always came back to Lorna. He had loved and still loved her dearly but forgiveness was a gift with which he hadn't been blessed. They would never be the same. He had been devoted to her. Learning that that was not reciprocated was cataclysmic.

Half his mind wished him to turn round and speak to Lorna but that would be worse than dying. Listening to Lorna dressing up the sordid images of her affair with a 16 year old. And in the end he would be persuaded to give their marriage another go. But that wasn't what he wanted. He couldn't face years and years of strained relations, treading on proverbial egg shells, worried her eye might wander yet again, treating her with kindness and love, bending over backwards for her with Nathan's smiling face engraved in his mind.

Aaron had leaped the fence. He couldn't go full pelt in his pursuit down the slope, for his inappropriate leather shoes (he really should invest in some trainers) might lose their grip on the slimy terrain.

Ted had climbed the final fence and was battling his way through the overgrown hedgerow that bordered the cliff path. And then he disappeared from view. The coarse thickets were impenetrable to the eyes. Only flickers of light from the other side were apparent.

Moments later, after his cautious dissent, Aaron bounded the wobbly fence and plummeted into the thorns. By the time he had clawed his way through his clothes were ripped and torn, his skin the same.

Ted was 20 metres further up the footpath, on the very section where Eloise had been, and was precariously swaying to and fro on the edge.

Ignoring his stinging scrapes to the flesh, Aaron set off at breakneck speed down the path; the munching of cornflakes sounding from under his feet. But Ted saw him approaching and raised warning finger.

“Stay back.” Aaron stopped as if, instead of a finger, Ted was pointing a revolver at him. “Or I’ll jump,” he threatened.

“Come on Ted, what’s this about?”

“Lorna’s being cheating on.”

Aaron remained silent, unsure of how to respond. “You knew didn’t you?” Ted accused.

No answer was given. “I’ve only just found out. It was in Nathan’s diary.” Aaron dug it from his inner jacket pocket, as if evidence was required.

“Everyone knew,” he rambled, “except stupid old Ted.”

“Look mate. Lorna really isn’t the woman you think she is. She hasn’t been completely truthful with me or you but there’s no reason to throw yourself off the edge. You can leave her.”

“Without her I’ve got nothing. But I can’t stay with her. Not now she’s betrayed me. This is the best way.”

“It’s never the best way. You may be ending your life but your problems stay behind.”

Ted stood meekly like a ghost, reflecting on Aaron’s wise words. Suddenly he turned round with a menacing accusation present in his eyes. “Here what did you mean? When’s Lorna lied to you?”

Aaron froze. He had revealed too much. He couldn’t tell Ted about his murderous wife. That would literally tip him over the edge.

Luckily Ted spoke. “You know don’t you? I’m not going to lie for her anymore. On Friday morning when Eloise died I said we’d both been working on the farm. Well that was a lie. Lorna was out all morning. She said she’d been at The Swan but I didn’t believe her. I didn’t express that though. You see Inspector I’ve suspected for a while that

she'd been "playing away" as it's vulgarly named. But suspicion is one thing. You don't kill yourself on suspicion. But having it confirmed this morning, well..." the sentence was left unfinished, letting Aaron imagine the crushing feeling of deceit. "She went to the Swan a lot; too much. And she hinted she'd prefer me not to tag along. I didn't mind her having mornings off from time to time, she worked far too hard, but nothing could rid me of my growing inklings. I'm sorry I lied but I wanted her to have an alibi. I wanted her protected from the evils of suspicion. With an alibi you would never think she was connected with Eloise's death. Without, and with us being so close to the crime, you might have harboured suspicions. If I'd given her the chance to say she was at the Swan then she'd have been dropping herself in it. You could have easily checked with Cyril. She never asked me why I lied. I think she must have known then that I was suspicious of where she really went."

Aaron was certain that had he asked Cyril her alibi would have been corroborated. But that meant nothing...

Unbeknownst to Ted, Aaron shuffled closer to him who piped on incoherently; glad to talk about his distresses of the past few months or however long his suspicions had been growing for.

"But don't get me wrong. I don't think for one moment she had anything whatsoever to do with poor Eloise's death but I just didn't want you to think she had. I didn't want where she'd really been going, coming out. I wouldn't have Lorna cast as the village slut. And I didn't want my suspicious confirmed by your investigations. I was in denial of the truth I suppose."

Ted suspicions were aroused when he turned and saw Aaron staring blankly at the floor, keen to avoid Ted's gaze. It was imperial that Aaron must drag Ted from the edge before he worked out what Lorna had done on the

morning of the 5th September. Ted's face contorted in consideration.

"Hang on." Oh no, he knew. "Where was Lorna really? Was she, on that instance, telling the truth? She couldn't have been with Nathan could she because he was with Eloise? So where was she?"

Mentally Aaron made a decision. He hated liars. He wouldn't lie to Ted. He had a right to the truth. Besides, he'd find out sooner or later. And hopefully that shock would give Aaron the chance to creep up stealthily behind him and haul him to safety.

"Ted." Ted froze; something in Aaron's voice alerted him of the horror to come. "I'm afraid Lorna was with Nathan on that morning. She killed Eloise. It's in Nathan's diary." He would have emphasized this by waving the diary but he had replaced the crucial piece of evidence in his pocket.

Ted cast a look at the magnetic current below, which enticed him to plunge himself towards it. The twisting current was very hypnotic. The tide lapped against the base of the cliff, eroding it away. Mesmerized by the rhythmic swish and the swirling blue he heard it. His call had come.

Aaron shuffled hastily towards him, his strides enlarging as he got closer and closer. Now he was close enough to tug him away but as he stretched out his arms, Ted's body became further and further away.

And in that death defying moment, when Aaron's heart shuddered, both figures lunged forward into the unknown...

Chapter 50

The death of a police officer touched the whole station. Even officers who had not known the deceased felt a sadness and sense of grief and the whole atmosphere of the station was sombre.

10 years ago an officer from Eastonshire Police Station had died. Whilst on duty. Barnfield had known him well. They had socialised after hours. In fact he had been with D.S. Paul Milligan when it happened. They had been crossing the road to interview a witness when a blue van, a Ford Transit, had slammed into Milligan knocking him unconscious onto the pavement. Barnfield had done everything in his power to save him but he had later died in hospital. The Transit had not stopped but Barnfield had mentally remembered the number. Once caught, the driver had been sentenced to 8 years imprisonment. Not enough for a life, in Barnfield's view. To think that that man would now be free made his skin crawl.

These old feelings of remorse at not saving his colleague and his hatred for that motorist had been brought to the surface by Aaron's brush with death. It had made him realise that although they had never quite seen eye to eye, except for when Aaron had smacked him, he had realised how grieved he would have been had Aaron plummeted from that cliff top. He had realised how regretful he would have been that they had been robbed an opportunity to patch up their differences. Aaron was an alright sort of bloke and in future he would make an effort to be pleasant towards him, so if he did go, and it was always possible in this job, he would not be thinking "What if?" Really they were very similar; both had nothing in their lives except for their job. A job they were similarly devoted to but just approached things in different ways.

Barnfield surveyed the lady sitting on the other side of the interview desk. Lorna barrow was emotionally drained; her face pale.

The door swung open with energy and Aaron entered. Determined as usual. He started the tape recorder, proclaimed the preliminaries with a renewed zest, took his seat and then the interview got under way.

“Mrs Barrow, do you admit to killing Eloise Smithers?” asked Aaron, showing Barnfield that he would be taking the lead. But Harry didn’t mind. This was Aaron’s case now. He had solved it, he could do the interview. Really Barnfield had no desire to be in on the interview at all. But Winchester had insisted, a gesture which Barnfield saw as rubbing his nose in the fact that he had not solved the case.

The reply was muted but still audible in the silence of Interview Room number 5. “Yes.” Then the silence resumed before she continued.

“But unintentionally. She was viciously laying into Nathan. I just shoved her away. I never meant for her to fall over the edge.”

“What were you doing on the cliff path?”

“I knew they always went there of a lunchtime. Aaron told me. So I popped down there. I’d seen them arrive and I’d decided to have it out with Eloise. It was time she knew the truth. She’d become obsessed with Nathan, poor thing. Incidentally that was why our relationship had started. Anyway it wasn’t fair on her going on thinking Nathan felt the same about her. He had once but her obsession had pushed him away. I was planning on leaving Ted and running away with Nathan. I’d have told him later but first we had to solve the problem of Eloise.”

Aaron dryly observed: “Well you did that. How did your relationship with Nathan start?”

She had been expecting the question. “Oh it’s a small village Inspector. We saw a lot of one another. There was a lot of chemistry. I found his boyish good looks and youthful energy all very handsome. He was fed up Eloise. I was tired of good old dependable Ted. I wanted excitement. Nathan gave me that. Actually we only kissed once but love isn’t about that is it? We knew we were right for one another.”

Aaron was unsure about this. In Nathan’s diary, a month before Eloise’s death, he had thought Eloise was so special

and that he would spend the rest of his life with her. But teenage love never lasts. The only time one marries their teenage sweethearts are when they meet again later in life. Given time their relationship would have petered out. But neither of them could see it. This surprised Aaron. Lorna was a grown woman. Couldn't she remember what teenage crushes were like?

"So, what happened after Eloise's death?" posed Aaron after gathering his thoughts.

"He told me to go home and not to admit being on the cliff path. He said he'd phone the police and tell them she had slipped to her death whilst they were gallivanting from school dinners. He promised that everything would be all right. I believed him. I knew you lot would never believe her death was accidental, you've just proved that now, so I went along with it."

"The next day when you came round I went to make coffee, remember?" Aaron said that he did and she continued. "Well I saw him coming to the farm, through the kitchen window, so I slipped out of the back door and spoke to him. I had heard that you lot had grilled him. I wouldn't have you suspecting an innocent boy because of my hasty actions. I told him I'd hand myself in. But he wouldn't hear of it. He said he'd sort it. That was the last time I... ever spoke to him."

She spluttered the last words as tears began to rein on the table.

Her account tallied with what Aaron had read in Nathan's diary of the day before his death. There had been no entry for the day of his death. But the day before he had talked of how he could never let the love of his life go to prison. And he was sure she would if the police heard of his relationship with her. They would think she had killed her in a jealous rage. But really she had been protecting him and so he must protect her. He thought by killing himself and leaving a note of admission that she would be

exonerated from blame. Far simpler would have been to hand himself in but he had been genuinely traumatised by Eloise's death. He couldn't go on with the knowledge that Lorna had killed his ex-girlfriend who had once meant everything to him. The niggling doubts that there had been malicious intent in Lorna's intent on Eloise, whether this was true, Aaron resignedly knew, would never be known. But he might as well make his death benefit the woman who now meant so much to him and let her escape prison and live a long, hopefully happy, life with Ted.

And how did Lorna repay the ultimate sacrifice made by Nathan? By flirting with Aaron's under her husband's nose. He would have challenged her with this but he did not wish Barnfield to know of it.

Aaron slammed his palm down forcefully onto the table. "You're an evil cold blooded killer Lorna!" accused Aaron making Lorna cower away from him. "Nathan's death wasn't murder. It was suicide. He was trying to protect you. The tragic chain of events to hit your village has all been caused by you pushing a 15 year old girl to her death."

Lorna was too dumfounded and horror-struck by Aaron's revelations to protest that it was merely accidental. "You killed Eloise. Nathan killed himself to protect you. He left a note admitting to Eloise's death by the way. His mother protected his name by making it look like murder and was consequently killed by Petula Smithers who thought Eileen had stopped justice for her daughter. And when your husband found out about your affair with Nathan he jumped."

"So effectively you killed Nathan. And you killed your husband."

Chapter 51

A month had passed. The day of Ted Barrow's funeral had come.

The trees were bare, wind rustled through the gravestones and echoed off the grey brick turret with its gorgons and stained glass windows; finishing touches to the charming postcard church.

Out of responsibility Aaron felt he had to be present. But he detested funerals. Sombre mournful occasions where everyone listened to praising tales of the deceased. And it wasn't just a vague sense of responsibility that had made him attend. He wanted to rid his sleepless nights of Ted's face and failing arms that he had desperately tried to grab and the pathetic call of "Help." He wanted to exorcise the ghost.

His plan had backfired. And in a twisted irony they only reason he had informed Ted about Lorna's involvement in Eloise's death was because he refused to lie to him. But now he had lied to everyone. No-one knew why Ted had really jumped. They all thought Ted had found out about Lorna's philandering and had consequently committed suicide. He had stood in Winchester's office and had been praised for Lorna's arrest. He had been told Ted's death was a regrettably sad incident but not his fault. He had done his best to talk him out of it. And all the while Aaron had stood there, praying the concealment was not visible on his face, as Winchester said he had proved himself again after the Barnfield incident which could be glossed over and forgotten about.

In truth Aaron had as good as murdered Ted. And that helpless face, gawping up at him as he dropped towards his death, would never be extinguished from Aaron's mind. To think that during the investigation Aaron had doubted his commitment to the police when Eileen's shed door had been heartlessly broken open by a searching officer. That paled into insignificance not to his act of corruptness that

had cost a man's life. He had acted on impulse instead of considering the consequences of revealing the truth to Ted.

Practically the whole village turned out for the funeral, with notable exceptions like the Smithers, serving to prove Ted's popularity in his community; a popularity not stopped by death. Cyril and Martine were there. Cyril seemed creepier and his face looked more wrinkled, his eyes sagged with tiredness. However Martine looked injected with a new lease of life. She briefly came over and spoke to Aaron.

Apparently she had found herself a new job in WH Smiths in the centre of Eastonshire. It paid as well as Cyril's had and the hours were not as demanding. She worked on a Saturday and did a little stint after school. In response to Aaron's inquiry her mother was very well.

The funeral was the last time he saw the inhabitants of Wellston-on-Sea and seemed to indicate the end of the case. Upon reflection it had been one of his most tragic cases. Because of her supposed love for Nathan, Lorna had pushed Eloise away from him and to her death. Because of his undying love for Lorna, Nathan killed himself in the hope of her exoneration and also because of his dead love for Eloise. But because of her love for her son, Eileen had tried to preserve his name by making his death look like murder. Once this leaked, Petula murdered Eileen because of her love for Eloise and for Sydney, as she desperately didn't want her son to go to prison for murder. Something she would, herself, soon be doing. And finally, due to Aaron, when Ted learnt of what Lorna had done he killed himself because, due to his love for his wife, he couldn't face what she had done.

It really had been an affair of love.