

UNCOMMON RELATIONS

PRELUDE

LAST YEAR

The baby seemed to dance in the firelight, his soft limbs flexing and straightening with every bounce on the new mother's lap.

Her father remembered Shaw's prophetic words: "If you can't get rid of the family skeleton, you may as well make it dance."

The women were absorbed in the baby. 'Feeling his feet,' his wife said.

'Voice of experience, Mum?' His daughter laughed, and the baby gurgled as if he'd heard. 'Was I this much fun?'

'Not at first, but you soon settled in, and believe me, I cherished every moment. I'd waited long enough.'

'Can't believe my luck, this one brought to us just when I thought I'd spend years filling in application forms...'

'Yes, it's a blessing. What goes around comes around...'

Here they were at the start of a whole story, and he, the man of the house, was not the main character nor even one who'd figure in the action. He was tangential to other peoples' stories. This wasn't a bitter thought, just the kind of resigned bystanding a man adopts when all the family is on his wife's side.

Without parents or siblings, even his country a distant memory, he had no children himself. His lovely wife had proved to be infertile so they'd taken on a child of her inconsequential sister who'd produced too many children. Now, here she was, his delightful daughter being a mother, bouncing a little baby not hers by birth.

The baby's legs gave way and she held him to her, felt him nuzzling into her neck. 'Time to dress you.'

His wife smiled down at the pair. ‘It’s just wonderful to see you with a live child to cuddle, and Dad feels the same, I know. He’ll always be here for support.’ They looked over to their mainstay for unneeded confirmation.

Sensing a question in their faces, he nodded jovially. ‘A fine fellow.’ He hadn’t heard what they’d been saying. His thoughts were on the unfairness of reproduction. His dear girl like her adoptive mother, infertile, while her birth mother was so incontinently productive. How cruel Nature could be! Discovering in her teens she’d inherited the same chromosomal abnormality as her aunt, was this the reason his girl developed a preference for her own gender? Or did it reflect on his fathering—was he no model for his daughter to seek in a partner?

He loved her. She must follow her own destiny, including the bouncing newcomer unexpectedly to be her child.

The baby was dressed now. ‘My handsome boy.’ She kissed his face and neck, then turned his face from one side to the other. ‘Does he look like anyone?’

Her mother answered slowly. ‘Not specially. I can see a bit of all of them, here and there, like they’re all rolled into one.’

‘Not the bad parts?’

‘It’s only at moments I can see likenesses. Don’t worry, this little one will be his own person, your person, your son.’

‘Mine and Honor’s.’

CHAPTER ONE

APRIL 13th, THIS YEAR

A little snort woke Terry...and he realised it was his own. Something small, knotty, irritating was pressing into his neck: his wife's Guatemalan worry dolls. He slid the circle of crocheted figures under the pillow, suitably smothered. Why the hell did she need it in bed?

A more sinister sound brought his bleary glance towards the window-pane: a patter of rain, mild in itself, but then a gushing of water, mid-pane. Shit—he should have cleaned out the gutters weeks ago.

How often a tiny happening lulls you into complacency, quietly escalates then later shatters you with a catastrophic outcome.

For a few minutes he tried to sink back into sleep but habit and necessity defeated him. He rolled out of bed into the suburb of his everyday life.

It took four steps from his bed to the window where the wet April morning awaited him the other side of the velour curtains. He tweaked them open an inch and watched the rain wash his small front garden, an oblong of gravel lined by pebbles, one of forty-six identical houses in Colliers Row. He'd bought a cement planter to differentiate his patch. This held a hosta whose limp leaves weren't rising to the challenge. Sad droplets of rain slid off them and disappeared into the gravel. A pale sun snaked slowly over the horizon. It fell a trifle short of his patch.

Next door, behind the laurel hedge planted for privacy, a white plastic chair awaited a warm moment so that its obese occupant, Maxine Rolls, could sit reading *Bella* while chomping Maltesers from a maxi-bag. Across the road the net curtains twitched, sure sign of the weather check by the grizzled couple, still strangers after six years. They even avoided nods of acknowledgement. No sun fell in their garden.

Terry sighed and went to find some underclothes. Another work-day. Some people, utterly ordinary one day, were famous the next. They'd won the lottery or were selected for reality TV; they'd witnessed a murder or, at very least, spotted a celebrity in their local. Their lifestyle and opinions were then broadcast, their wishes recorded, their personalities discussed. They gave up their jobs—too rich to work, bought a mansion with a pool and hot

tub, parked a gleaming Lamborghini in the drive. This was never him; always other people. He closed his sock drawer.

Gudrun was near to waking. She usually did around this time. She lay face down across the bed, arms spread as if fallen from a great height. Once he'd found a young sparrow on the pavement in just that position. He gauged the number of minutes before he had to leave for work, and the size of bed area he might be able to lie on if he snuck back. Dumping his clean socks on the floor, he slid back into bed, in case. He placed his butt on the bottom right hand corner and made a gesture towards one of Gudrun's arms, but without much confidence. Gudrun's lack of response did nothing to increase it. He lay like a pin in the available bed space, arms tightly by his sides. Second by second he shifted his whole length until at last he had sufficient purchase on the bed to unlock his muscles. There had been times when he had fallen – clonk – onto the floor after such a manoeuvre. He moved closer, stroked Gudrun's back, then the nearest arm but it remained still as though it belonged only to itself and not to the rest of the body. After several minutes, he gave up. His wife was not a woman hungry for sex and it was too early in the week for him to plead necessity. He got out of bed again, not so gently. After all...

He took his underclothes out to the passage, past the spare room that pre-Gudrun, had been occupied by his best mate, Leon. Such a good time that, two lads setting out in the world, building their lives, sharing the house. The wall-sized *Abstract Woman* poster was long gone together with the tri-game table where they'd slammed each other at ice hockey, and the *Bropener* that had saved all the surfaces in the house (“the EASIEST, MOST SATISFYING and FUN way to open a bottle!!!”) Post-Leon, this room could have been painted pale blue. He and Gudrun never entered it now if they could avoid it.

In the little brown-tiled bathroom they'd completed together last week-end, Terry peed into the new beige toilet. He turned the shower full on to experience the very satisfying difference between the new and the old: ultrasonic railgun versus cap pistol: schwoom, schwoom. It raised the spirits.

Back in the bedroom, it didn't take him long to dress. Choices were limited, his wardrobe small. He took out his jacket, clean shirt; his trousers hung on the back of the wooden chair from last night. The same greenish tie would do. He checked himself in the mirror. Now dressed, he could be in yesterday as much as today. He looked exactly the same.

Gudrun stretched and sat up. Did she only feel safe to do that once he was fully dressed? He was quite capable of throwing his clothes off again given an encouraging look from beneath the eyelashes, but Gudrun hadn't ever engaged in eye play.

'I'll get some tea,' she said.

'...and then I'll put on the eggs,' he predicted silently.

'and then I'll put on the eggs,' said Gudrun.

There were times he felt forty-eight not twenty-eight.

She got out of bed and moved past his ready-in-waiting arms to the door. She smiled as she slid her feet into brown moccasins and pulled on the muddy-coloured robe from Oxfam. Eggs were waiting to be poached.

He took out his diary to check his TODO list. *Rehearse positive thinking mantra* was the first item, and *Clean the gutters* was the second, with *Must finish project*, third. They were all repeats from the previous day.

When he went down to the kitchen, Gudrun was busy with spoons and saucepan, cups and kettle. She looked up at his reflection in a brown-framed mirror. It advertised stout and showed a rosy cheeked farm-girl enjoying it. The mirror wasn't an antique, but made some reference to a past neither of them had known. She put his mug down, stirring it first.

He sat. His home-maker handed him the plate with his two poached eggs on toast. He punctured the yolks and anointed his toast. This should be a satisfying start to any morning.

But while he sipped his tea, Terry thought about the sex he hadn't just had. About seven times a month he and Gudrun made love. She said that was what you'd expect of a married couple. How did he know whether she was right? The guys' boasts at work, their rundown of positions, durations, gyrations, that was just talk, wasn't it?

Gudrun took away his whistle-clean plate. 'Is it your appraisal this week?'

From one downer to another. He grimaced about the one he could discuss. 'Maybe. I must finish the Middle East project. It's already six months late. So I don't rate my chances of promotion. As for my self-ratings, I can hardly put *Excellent...*' he scratched his cheek, '...not even *Working Towards* unless I write that final section.' He stood and stretched, ready to go. 'Trouble is, rating myself *Normal* won't do for Lings.'

Gudrun stepped close beside him, looking at their joint images in the mirror. The rosy-cheeked girl appeared to sit between them. ‘Normal’s good,’ she said in a tone of great satisfaction.

He frequently couldn’t read her. ‘So did you choose me for my normality?’ He gave her a nudge and laughed. Then without receiving an answering laugh, shrugged the thought away. ‘You off to college today?’ Hopefully, she was. Better the arty Gudrun, eyes distant and dreamy, wielding a paintbrush or digging into the latest damp bundle of clay, than the stressed Gudrun, assistant social worker. That work seemed to overwhelm her. Evenings could be filled with diatribe about targets, schedules, client demands. It had been even worse when she was employed full time. After her... break, he’d call it, she’d gone part-time. “Then take up a satisfying hobby,” he’d said. Art college was the result. Now her work seemed to have changed, ad hoc client-sitting, even care-giving. He wouldn’t risk asking her if she’d been demoted. It didn’t matter. It was his salary they lived on.

She was washing up already. ‘No, I’m home today but on stand-by. If I’m not called out, I’ll work on my sculpture. Until it comes indoors...’

‘Right.’ He swallowed a groan. He’d made a space for her to work in the garage but she said it was the wrong ambience. Therefore, once she had sufficient clay on the support frame, the sculpture had to come indoors to be *brought to life*. Its trail of grey dust suggested the opposite to Terry.

‘...so if I do, can you bring in my latest?’

He tried to avoid pausing. ‘Okay. Yes, of course.’ Arty tasks were making her happy. He put his arms round her, his woman whom he must put to rights. She seemed to commune with herself and Terry’s hold felt loose and ineffective. He slid on his jacket. Time to go. Another time, when the moment was right, he’d move on to other purposeful things that would land them both in bed. He kissed her, a little harder than usual, breathing in her dandelion smell.

She stepped back. ‘Watch the time or you’ll be late again.’ She handed him his folder. ‘I’m going to make that plum chutney you like, after I’ve washed up.’

He smiled. ‘Great. We’ll have a cheese-board supper this weekend, then.’ She really cared for him so much. Married guys at work had to do all this domestic stuff, “take their share.” He wasn’t into that, and Gudrun didn’t make him.

He strode across to his shabby Seat parked outside the set of six garages opposite. Driving off down Colliers Row towards Hossington station, his universe seemed as good as could be expected, except for a sluggish clutch.

Expected, excepted; words so near, so far apart. As good as you can expect. Or—good, *except for riches and fame*. Secret fantasies lurked beneath his thrifty life. His own house, like his parents', had been chosen for practical, not aesthetic reasons. His more-or-less admin job, working for Lings Pharmaceuticals was uninspiring perhaps because he hadn't put much into it for a while. In his day-dreams, there were whiter walls, brighter colleagues, wider pavements, bluer skies, and he bought new instead of second-hand, wore smart not shabby, chose top of the range, bottom of the menu, back of the brochure, enjoyed the first issue, latest model and above all, had the freedom to choose.

The Seat groaned to a halt in sympathy. Terry parked near the station. He joined the usual press of people at the underground, down the stairs and along the platform to the overflowing tube. The doors closed. The tube glided off like toothpaste fitting neatly into its tunnel, no space wasted. Terry squeezed into a gap between strap-hangers, held upright by the bodies pressed around him. Swaying, he fell into his semi-dream world, the only way to make rush hour travel bearable. He ignored blokes with back-packs who might end whatever sort of life he was going to have.

Stations came and went. He dared not move a foot in case it trod one of the shoes just beside it. A coated arm-pit pressed his left cheek, frizzy hair swept his eyes if he turned. Breathing was difficult.

In one of those catatonic stares where the eyes glaze over and see without registering, his eyes lodged on one person and remained there while the press of people swayed him to and fro. The tube reached his stop and Terry jerked forward.

His glassy fixation cleared. A second glimpse and he blinked with shock. That person was someone he knew. The man started to move towards the door, ready to alight. Terry almost yelled 'No!' There were only seconds before other bodies blocked his view. He pressed forward urgently. He couldn't think who it was, who it could be. His brain felt detached from his cramped body. The man was someone so familiar, yet never dreamed of; someone he'd never met but somehow sensed, someone so close that he need not put a name to him. Was he gazing intently at himself?

CHAPTER TWO

The jacket was grey/green not brown; the hair was longer. Otherwise every detail was so familiar that Terry took it in in a second. He saw it every day in his mirror: a sturdy frame, close curling light hair on a squarish skull, wide-set ginger brown eyes in a lightly freckled face and a firm, undivided chin. This guy had them all.

The throng of commuters on the platform kept obliterating Terry's view as he tracked his doppelganger through an arch and up the stairs. Shit, he must keep him in sight. Loping, dodging and shoving his way forward, he peered through the crush of overcoats and shoulders approaching the ticket barrier. Hardly aware that he was holding his breath, his anxiety was worse than when he'd rushed along here, late for his first job interview.

At the exit, the other man was thirty yards in front of him. For a moment he seemed to look back. Terry's hand shot up to wave, then snaked down to his side, the Hello trapped like a jack-in-the-box in his throat. It felt so important not to be seen. A deep blush rose up his neck. He felt like a pickpocket, as if he'd lynched the other's identity and secretly begun to share it.

The clone paced along the street with Terry some yards behind, calculating the right approach. Brief sunshine highlighted the freshly whitewashed buildings then quick clouds blotted the tops of the tower blocks behind. Suddenly the man glided through the glass front doors of an office block. Terry could just see him nod to the porter before he disappeared into the lift. He should have caught him up, but what to say?

He let his breath out. The firm's name, Dibriers & Clint, was prominently spread in bronze italic lettering over the thirty-foot entry arch. Terry couldn't fail to recognise the name: anyone who had a loan or a cut-price credit card used Dibriers & Clint. Every major event seemed to be funded by them.

He stared upwards at Dibriers' non-reflective windows for some time, convincing himself of what had just happened. He really had seen his double. A second version of himself existed. Incredible! This morning, life had been boringly predictable: the futile attempt at sex, his eggs dribbling onto his toast, Gudrun's serge coat on the back of the door, the dandelion smell of her hair as he kissed her goodbye, the five paces to the front gate, the set of identical garages with his ageing car parked in front, the mindless commute—

everything he did every day. But now, instead of standing at a hot spot, exchanging morning gripes with his colleagues, he was craning his neck at the glassy edifice opposite, wondering which window hid his look-alike from view.

A shove and curse made him realise he was static mid-pavement, irritating passers-by. He moved away, shaking his head. Ling Pharmaceuticals, London, awaited him.

Disorientated, he shuffled past the familiar buildings, everything slowed down as if he'd been a victim of a traffic accident. He looked back at Dibriers. He'd come back as soon as he finished work. Essential to get answers to his many questions.

Six minutes and a few blocks away, Terry pushed the revolving doors of Lings and made himself enter as if nothing had happened. He felt conspicuous. He gave darting glances around, mouth tensed into a half-smile in case anyone questioned him, but no-one gave him a glance.

On his floor, his workmates were circled around a temp in striped tights by the coffee-room door. One of this gang noticed Terry slide into an individual work space. 'Terry Stedforth! That's right, bunk down behind your 'puter. We don't want you cramping our style. Don't look at him, Jade. He's a married man. Ha-ha-ha!'

'Ha-ha-ha.' Terry's grimace encompassed the ha-ha and his in-tray. His task list seemed meaningless and his cheeks were hot. He felt as inept as the temp. He cast a look around.

The others were absorbed in Jade, their coffee, or their spreadsheets. Suppose he'd committed some murder or internal fraud; the guilt blotched on his face would pass unnoticed by this lot. Later they'd say "Terry Stedforth? Oh, yes, I know him really well."

But did they? He hadn't always been Terry Stedforth, after all. Originally, he'd been Terry SomethingElse, "mewling and puking" and oblivious to the fact that people had names, or even that he was a person, being little more than a blob with an open mouth. Now that he'd seen this other version of himself he let himself think about all that. He'd never bothered before.

"Mum and Dad" were Will and Eileen Stedforth, simple, straightforward people who'd adopted him because they were childless. They'd told him when he was six that his birth mother hadn't been able to look after him. To Terry, it seemed quite understandable that if she had no husband and there were couples without children, it was only fair and right that they should mop up a spare baby.

‘So now we’ve told you we don’t have to tell anyone else. And you don’t, right?’ Mum sounded almost fierce, and he agreed. Why would he want to tell anyone about a mother who couldn’t look after him?

He’d been the Stedforths’ only child, the prince in their two-up, two-down; everything so cosy and predictable that he really hadn’t cared about “birth” anything and wasn’t curious. Now, though, completely by chance, he’d seen someone who surely must be a cousin, even a brother; certainly a very close relative. He desperately wanted to know this guy and for the first time, something of that very early and short episode of his life.

‘Lost in thought?’ The sarcastic tones of a supervisory colleague abruptly ended his reverie. Jeremy’s long lean face with its dark-framed eye sockets would fit a funeral where the piped music had failed. His quiet stride could take people unaware, but the halitosis usually gave a few seconds’ notice. Terry fixed his eyes on his work to avoid looking up and getting the full blast. Jeremy’s pixel eyes now regarded Terry’s computer screen.

Terry stuttered, ‘Er - playing with ideas. Just working on this...’

‘Appraisal’s soon, isn’t it.’

Was that a question or did Jeremy know the actual date and time? Terry didn’t. He straightened his back. ‘Soonish, I believe.’

‘I wonder what managers internal, and assessors external, will make of your productivity,’ sneered Jeremy, his voice like a creaking gate.

Irrelevantly, Terry noticed Jeremy’s tie. Up this close he saw the small orange and navy flecks on a grey background were actually a repeated pattern of Scottie dogs with oval dishes. The tie must have been a present, if an odd one. Some donor had believed there was something human in Jeremy. Perhaps once, someone had loved him; a woman even. Terry lifted a handkerchief against Jeremy’s aroma. He blew his nose hard.

‘Right! On with it then.’ Jeremy stepped away on his long bony legs, kicking each foot forward before placing it down carefully, as if it might sink into mud. Some wit had likened him to a heron stalking. True, Jeremy’s habit of standing alert and silent between work bays did resemble a heron camouflaging itself against reeds. Terry monitored his move towards the next potential prey.

He forced his thoughts to move swiftly away from his birth to his future: permanent contracts, out-sourcing, replaceability. No-one was safe nowadays, certainly not if they were

to biff someone straight in the nose when they deserved it. He eyed his fist and then his computer screen. After a feverish few minutes, and the passing-over of some telephone messages to a colleague, he lapsed again into thought. His parents had only told him the minimum— they hadn't much to go on, they said. They'd only mentioned a mother, but if he had a look-alike then it was possible that there was more family...

'Terry Sted-forth? Want tuna and cucumber rolls again?' Tilda, a girl on work experience, wavered on knock knees and high heels as she leaned over the screen around his work station. Her pencil was poised pointedly over her sandwich checklist as she fixed her eyes upon the box to be ticked. Terry nodded vaguely, lunch the last thing on his mind. He'd probably have nodded if she'd said timber and crocodile rolls.

'Crunchie bar?'

'Yes, okay.'

'Right,' and she tip-tapped away, pencil between her teeth, expert in sandwich orders.

He down-loaded some tables of production figures and noted the remaining list of unfinished tasks. He twiddled the pot holding six ballpoint pens and a Bart Simpson pencil.

Peering guiltily down the row of identical desks in his open-plan office he recognised his fingers hadn't moved across his keyboard for several minutes. He shuffled some papers while he surveyed the many heads, male and female, bent to their work or fingering their telephones. As on any day, in the background of various muted telephone communications around the functional trivia of the firm, someone several desks away coughed and sighed.

In the face of such an immense and possibly life-changing encounter, this scene seemed ludicrous. Listen all of you—I just found my double! But of course, he remained silent as well as largely unproductive for the rest of the day, his preoccupation being how best he could find his look-alike again.

Five-twenty at last, he tidied his desk and sloped through the main doors. He must get into place before the double's likely exit time.

Strange, the weather was still that fading drizzle from an overcast sky just as it had been when he left home first thing. How could anything be the same now he was not? He strode to Debrier and Clint and leaned against a bollard near a stationer's window, opening the Telegraph widely enough to camouflage him. For the next ten minutes he stared blankly at

several articles, peering every few seconds from behind it at the glassy building, turning and re-turning the pages in an attempt to look casual.

Suddenly he started up, dropping a sheet of his newspaper. Wasn't that his man right across the road? A passer-by obliterated his view. Terry darted forward. The double was crossing towards him alongside another guy. They were deep in conversation. Terry's eyes bored into his double as if to pinion him to the scene and crossed swiftly towards him. As their paths met in the middle of the zebra crossing, the second man glanced at Terry and stopped dead. He nudged his colleague. 'Good God, Gerry! Your double!' He pulled Terry back across the road with them both, saying, 'Sorry – I must seem mad – but look at you both! You're spitting images! Don't you know each other?' The guy looked from one to the other while the double just gazed at Terry wordless, his lower jaw slack.

At first it looked as if he'd scarper into the crowd with a dismissive gesture. 'Look, I'm not ...' but Terry grasped hold of his arm.

'Wait, sorry, but I saw you this morning. A shock. I can't let this go by. Can we - will you just let me buy you a beer so we can talk?'

The double looked at his arm, frowning at Terry's hold but Terry hung on; he had to.

'Gerry? You going to take up that offer?' The second guy nudged him, then hesitated, 'Hey, I mustn't intrude. Go have your beer and private natter. But I claim first rights on the story. Okay?'

The double waved off his friend and let Terry led him into a pub full of brass fittings and wall-mounted car-sections. Terry knew it well. Thankfully, the place wasn't that full, and it had some booths. He motioned to one of them and stood by its table. 'You're—Gerry?' He leant forward, hand outstretched. 'Terry Stedforth.'

The other hesitated, eyes on the door, then his hand came up to give the shortest shake. That was something.

'I don't really want to...'

Terry countered, 'What'll you have? Lager, bitter?'

Gerry looked both ways, pursing his lips. Then he caved in. 'Do they have Sunset Brew here?'

Terry pushed the heel of his hand against his forehead. 'Yes! That's what I drink.'

'You do! Weird.'

The barman looked over at them, recognised Terry and did a double take. His eyes widened, and he gave an inquiring look.

Gerry turned his back, put his raincoat on the bench, his newspaper on the table.

Terry went to the bar. 'Two pints Sunset Brew, please.' He ignored the barman's implied query and brought the glasses back to the table where Gerry was still standing.

'Thanks.'

They sat down, their backsides reaching the benches at the same moment.

Terry said somewhat breathily, 'Gerry - I didn't catch your surname.' His chest ached as if he'd run uphill at speed.

The other took a moment. He leant forward just a trifle, as if his name was being forced from him. 'Coutron-Ould. Ould with a U. Sorry to seem unfriendly, but I don't know what this coincidence is, or anything about you.'

'Same here,' said Terry. 'I mean, not knowing. Truth, when I spotted you on the tube this morning I was so gob smacked. I followed you, saw you go into Debriers, and decided I'd wait outside after work, hoping to catch you as you came out. I just had to know who you were, why we look alike.' His voice sounded high, his words gabbled. He stopped, embarrassed at himself.

Gerry sat still, his body rigid. He seemed to struggle to find some response.

Terry went on, 'Do you know? I mean, why? No?'

Gerry looked closely at his beer as if it was a glass ball. 'Look. I'm not sure I like this. It's – unsettling.' He took up his glass and sipped. 'Have you met anyone you resembled before?'

'Never. Have you?'

'No. I never expected to.'

'Ditto. Shock. Total shock.' Terry drank a large part of his pint, not just to buy time.

There was a silence. They both drank slowly, examining each other's every movement.

'Do you work round here, Terry?'

'Lings, in the commercial section, been there a few years. I live in Hossington.'

'I don't know Hossington. Never been there,' said Gerry as if for an alibi.

'Don't blame you. Not worth a visit.' He glanced below Gerry's face. The shirt looked expensive, the jacket very well cut. Perhaps he shouldn't suggest they were related. If only

he'd worn a better tie that morning! He waited, but Gerry didn't seem about to divulge where he lived himself so he tried, 'Your friend seemed stunned by how alike we are.'

Gerry shrugged. 'Yes. He'll want chapter and verse tomorrow. He really landed me into this; I would've hived off. It completely winded me, seeing someone like you, that is, like me.'

'You're saying! We must be cousins at very least?'

There was another long silence between the two of them while a noisy crowd wearing reindeer antlers and *Davina 19* bow ties occupied the stalls behind and across from them. Their exuberance drowned the music and any chance of Terry's words being overheard. Despite the noise, it would be easier to discuss things now. Terry risked it. He leaned forward, 'When's your birthday?'

Gerry looked at the laughing red mouths of the Davina-ites. 'January 24th. I'm twenty-eight.'

Terry drew a breath '... Shit! Twenty-eight? January 24th? Me too.' His hands flopped to the bench then clenched the table leg. 'So – what d'you think's the significance?'

Gerry was quiet, as if waiting for Terry to add something else.

What was there Terry could say? What did he know? Precious little. He rubbed the side of his chin and then noticed Gerry making identical movements. He cleared his throat. 'I wish I knew something that could throw light on this situation.'

Gerry said, 'Were you born around here?'

'No. Reading.'

Something like a groan came from Gerry's throat, quickly masked by a gulping of beer.

Terry looked across the table. 'Is that—?'

Gerry's voice was quiet, 'It's where I was born too. May I ask if you're adopted?'

Terry nodded. 'When I was a few weeks old.'

As if in response, a cheer went up from the reindeer males and a squeal from their women.

It was now or never. Terry spurted out his short history.

Gerry listened without interrupting. He drained his glass, then wiped his lips with a large white handkerchief. It was like a capitulation. He ran his tongue round his lips as if deciding whether to talk. He only began after turning to check either side for potential

eavesdroppers. 'Thought that'd be it.' He gave a small sigh. 'I was adopted too, but at around four months. My parents had three sons and wanted to adopt a little girl. They got me.'

'They didn't say anything about a twin?'

'No, they'd have told me. There was a brother they'd been asked to consider. He was a few years older, I think.'

'But they didn't say there wasn't a twin? If the dates and the place and the situation is the same we could have been taken from the same mother!'

Gerry nodded grimly. 'But not at the same time.'

'Odd. But if this is true, it's unnerving... but like winning the lottery. What you've always wanted but thought could never happen - a twin brother! I've been an only all this time!' He stretched across the table and clapped Gerry on the shoulder.

Gerry sat solidly, gazing at his beer. 'I'm not an only. My parents told me I was adopted when I was about three. I grew up with the idea and don't know much else. In fact, I don't really care. I like things as they've been all this time. My family are just excellent and I wouldn't change them.'

'Well, same here. I had a happy home life, only child, the prince.' Terry twizzled his beer glass. 'I never bothered about things or wondered at all. But - setting eyes on you this morning - shit - I've been thinking about it all day. I could hardly get any work done. I was scared I'd never get to see you again. Supposing you'd left work early!'

Two reindeers swept by knocking the table with a belated *Sorry*.

Terry turned back to his twin. 'Now I have met you, I must find out about the - our - birth family. The whys and wherefores. I want to know everything don't you?'

'Not really. Let's ... I mean, we could just shake hands and leave it at that.'

'No!' Terry jerked upright. Gerry must be still suffering shock; hadn't had enough time to take things in. 'We couldn't possibly!' He looked at his hands, then across to Gerry's identical hands, light hair, gingery, the fingers soft and square. 'Same birthday, birth place, same age. Never knowing about a twin? You can't just leave it! It's amazing, this, bumping into each other by chance. And we look so alike we can't ignore it. It feels like you could BE me.'

Gerry rubbed the flat of his nose, regarding Terry across the table doubtfully. Terry pulled his tie straight. He could do with a new jacket too.

Gerry's gaze turned towards the door.

Terry forestalled him.

'Did they, did your parents tell you about your mother?'

'Not much. I doubt if they know. They told me she had to let me go. I didn't feel very interested after that. If she didn't care, why should I?'

'Because—she could've wanted us back, later, if she was, like, very young.'

Gerry's expression indicated a sarcastic *Yeah*. 'She was already trying to part with the older boy. I do know that, because my parents told me he'd stayed some weekends when I first came to them. They're soft-hearted, they might have taken him too, but he had some behaviour problems. He didn't fit in.'

Terry sucked in a breath. 'I've got a feeling my parents had a boy on trial too. Same reaction. So we've likely got an older brother! Where'd he go?'

Gerry shrugged.

'Back to his mother? Didn't you ever ask after him?'

'No. I was a baby.'

'But later, when they told you about him, didn't you ask?'

'Why should I? He'd gone. What difference would it make now if I knew?'

'It might lead you to our mother. We'd know why she parted with us. What went wrong. Who our father is.'

'Probably best we never know. It doesn't matter, does it? We've both been happy, done well in some other family.' He folded his hands. His beer glass was empty. He stood up.

'Great to know about you, Terry, but—'

'Don't go yet. Let me get you another pint. We can't just leave it at that. If we don't try to find out something, we won't know who we were!'

'Who cares? It's who I am now that counts - the youngest son of the Coutron-Oulds.'

'You make it sound as if that's a well-known name.'

'The family is very well regarded; prominent where we live. My brothers are... Well, one brother's a vet, one's a patent agent and the eldest runs a sports gear business from his large riding stables. My father's retired, does consultancy work, but formerly he was a legal adviser in the finance world.'

Terry kept silent. His look-alike seemed a touch uppity. This didn't seem the right moment to say Dad was a retired electrical supervisor for the railways.

Gerry said, 'Look. Terry. Sounds like you've been the apple of your parents' eye, had a happy upbringing, managed to get a good job, so be satisfied. I've got a great family, a fantastic girl-friend – ' His face lit up. '—blonde, beautiful. She's a very successful P.A. and trainer, travels widely. I'm doing well on the management ladder. Why do I want to dabble in the past? Isn't that why the social services had me adopted, to get me out of whatever misery it was? They gave me a decent start and I've taken it. Whole-heartedly.'

Terry made a rueful face. 'My parents accept me as I am. I don't think I'm destined for glory. This is the most exciting thing that's happened to me. I have to follow it up.'

'Right. Your choice. We each have to make our own way,' and Gerry started to do so. Terry's hand jerked forward a few inches as if to stay him.

Gerry ignored it. 'We can keep in touch, but don't involve me in any investigations. The more you find out, the worse it'll probably prove to be. I'll stay out of that. Okay?' He stood up. 'All the best, Terry. I need to be off now.'

The barman leaned forward, enlarging his eyes again at the sight of them both. 'Seeing double, am I?'

Gerry turned away and muttered, 'I don't relish getting used to that.' He moved towards the door negotiating the out-flung legs of the reindeers.

Terry grasped his elbow. 'See you again?'

Gerry hesitated, then he said, 'Sure. Here's my address and phone number.' He slid a business card from a silver case.

Terry didn't have business cards, let alone a case, but grabbed a beer mat from the table. Leaning against the door jamb he printed his mobile number on it. He held the pen a moment, but didn't add his home address.

Gerry took the beer mat with a wry glance, 'Thanks.' He transferred the number into his iPhone and screwed the beer mat into a nearby bin, 'Perhaps I'll ring you.'

'Great. When?'

'Whenever,' Gerry said as he strode off. After a few steps he stopped, mid-pavement, and looked back with the hint of a smile. 'I will, though. See you.'

‘Soon I hope.’ Terry held on to the business card. He knew the work address, but Gerry’s apartment suggested a life-style very different from his own, as did the cut of his clothes. He held the card until Gerry was out of sight, then stood watching where his twin had stood, savouring the enormity of the past hour. What a weird experience, talking to another version of himself. It was like having his voice bounce back with sentences he hadn’t formed.

Gerry seemed to take the whole thing calmly.

Jesus! Terry wasn’t calm; didn’t even want to be calm. This was surely the best day of his life.

CHAPTER THREE

Terry raced to the underground as if the pavements were on fire. He must get home to tell Gudrun. He had a twin. He was a twin. Now he was not just a Terry, but a Terry-and-Gerry—a pair. He hardly noticed how he got to the platform, found a train, stepped into a carriage. The tube rumbled away, the other passengers unaware they were dressing the stage of Terry's drama. Ordinary old Terry now had a helluva story to tell. People would sit up, stare, just like that barman widening his eyes.

Gudrun would be cooking dinner right now. He was late home. She'd be amazed at his story. She'd have to sit and listen to him for once, instead of her clients. So often he'd witnessed her listening to other people; Maxine next door, for instance, about her diet problems. Gudrun would sit forward, her large-ish frame almost slumped over her knees, her shoulders rounded as if ready to take the burden of whatever problems she might hear. He began to imagine his opening words, *Guess what, Gudrun; you'll never believe this but I've met my double. And he's actually my twin.*

Lucky he had an empty seat beside him; he must be sweaty. He spread his legs out straight, glad it was no longer rush hour, and breathed out noisily. Unknown family. When he'd mentioned his adoption to Gudrun, she'd shrugged. He'd taken that as 'So what!' and other than her clumsy raising of the subject (Clang) when she met his parents, the subject had gone no further. Well, she'd be transfixed when she met Gerry. But would she welcome an unexpected brother-in-law? That was a point. She'd pretty well seen off other claims on his life.

By the time he'd chugged through outer London, he was hungry. He texted, *On train, home soon*, then saw hers of half-an-hour ago, *Sorry, callout. I'll be late. Meal in oven*. Just his luck! And by the time he reached his car, he was even hungrier.

He drew to a halt opposite his house. The porch glowed, illuminating the defects in his front door as well as a large note, pinned with royal blue drawing pins. DON'T FORGET SHIRLEY. He had, of course. True, Gudrun had said this morning she'd be working on her sculpture. Did he have to bring the thing in now? But he'd already retreated over the road to the garage, pulled the door up and - flinching again at the painful squeal - over. He must oil the hinges and get rid of that noise. Because he never put the car into the garage, it was an

easy task to forget. Also, he needed to fix some kind of battery light. He peered inside, but couldn't miss the life-sized lump near the front: Shirley.

She was one of the torsos, and a lot larger than he remembered the last time he'd seen her. That had been in her infancy. The college art display had given him a glimpse of what these arty students got up to. He'd whisked through two rooms of paintings so he could truthfully say he'd seen them, and dutifully walked around the third room where Gudrun's work was on display. Under her name there had been some little lumpy things. Next to them, "work in progress", with this suggestion of a body, loosely wrapped in clingfilm to maintain its moisture, its head of curls suggesting most of the work so far had centred on this. By comparison with a skilful and enormous Pegasus on the neighbouring stand, Shirley seemed quite a subdued and reasonable size; little more than a head and shoulders on top of a mound. Now a fuller figure slumped on a recycled bench, she seemed obscene.

There'd been no warning prior to the Open Evening that students' work would come home. Gudrun's early work, abstract pieces, and small, weren't a threat. It was easy enough to fix up some garage shelves for these ("until I decide on the glaze", Gudrun said). Later, "things to come home" included the "work in progress". Because his first impression was the mass of curls, Terry wilfully christened it "Shirley" after a child-star his mother used to watch on the Forties Film Favourites channel. She'd played these over and over and over again while she sewed, knitted or mended and Terry zoomed his cars down Hotwheels tracks behind the sofa. In each of those hated films, Shirley dimpled and tapped her way into everyone's hearts. Had Mum wanted a curly-headed girl like this instead of himself? Shirley, irritatingly talented, charming and cute, said and did things Terry could never attempt—and didn't want to. Since Gudrun's clay form was clumsy, lumpish and silent, christening it "Shirley" gave Terry perverse pleasure. Gudrun, ignorant of the significance, seemed flattered that the torso portrayed a character vibrant enough to be named.

Terry cast an eye upon the gross and grown-up figure on the bench beside him. In the Grecian style, he grinned to himself: legless. But the lumpen base suggested legs might emerge later. Currently, because the main weight was around the head and shoulders, the unworked end stuck up like an insult. Lying on one side, one hip uppermost, her head below the level of the seat, Shirley appeared to be silently vomiting. What was the best way of

lifting her indoors? She was like some awful apparition rescued from an asylum, an unwanted but desperate relative.

Without love, Terry leaned forward and gathered her into his arms, the clingfilm flopping wetly against him. Shirley was his size, minus lower limbs, and, wow, she was heavy. He got her out of the garage but had to leave the door open while he staggered to his front door. It was a mammoth struggle to get his front door key out of his pocket while balancing Shirley on his left side. Without legs or a smooth base she had nothing to stand on. They almost fell through the front door together. ‘Come on Shirley, will you sit, lie or what?’ he muttered.

Gudrun’s indoor sculpting took place under the stairs so he offloaded Shirley there, resting against a large wooden chair, and wrapped back the loosened clingfilm. He stood up, relieved of the burden. Opposite him, the hall mirror revealed she’d left whitish grains all over his jacket like a talcum’s’d nude lifted fresh from the bathroom. He should have changed from his work gear before tackling her. Curses.

The wretched thing lurched sideways. She so needed a bottom! He nipped to the kitchen for a couple of oversized swedes from the vegetable basket. That would prop her up. Shirley looked back at him dully, and certainly without dimples.

Now that she had some features, didn’t she rather resemble Gudrun? But when you were starting out in Art, he supposed, you had to use what you knew, like the feel and contours of your own face. Propped upright, Shirley’s hair seemed longer, similar to Gudrun’s, frizzly right down her back, rippled at even intervals. Her body was much chunkier with a thicker neck, too wide to get his fists around.

He stepped back, removing his engrained jacket. Another job, cleaning that up. First, he must pop back across the road to close the garage door. Shirley gave him a mulish look from the niche at the back of the hall. Lurking in the dark—best place for her.

Duty performed, Terry returned to the kitchen and washed his hands before taking the rapidly drying steak pie and beans from the oven. If only Gudrun would use a microwave like everyone else, but she balked at the idea of ‘radio waves’ going through food. He had pointed out that if microwaving was poisonous, all his pub meals were bound to be microwaved. ‘Then don’t eat there.’ As if he could veto agreed meeting places on the basis of microwaves.

But because of Gudrun's worries, they didn't own one. He chewed his food without enjoyment.

Eight p.m. His amazing news burned in his head but his wife was out. He'd intended to tell her before his parents, who presented a degree of difficulty. Meeting someone from his birth family might seem like demoting Will and Eileen, highlighting the fact they were adoptive not biological parents, a theme unspoken between the three of them. Still, he couldn't sit here keeping the news of Gerry to himself and his parents might answer some burning questions.

He took his jacket to the back door to brush Shirley's grains away. Like an illicit lover's dandruff, he grinned to himself. Grey smears remained. He'd have to wait until the clay had dried. He sprinted up to the bedroom for a substitute. As a softener, he put on the maroon and turquoise jersey Mum had knitted him. He hadn't worn it much, not just because the sleeves were too short but because he hadn't felt himself in it. He'd wear his Berghaus storm jacket over it. The vivid red suited his mood and his sense of danger.

On the two-mile drive to his childhood home, he rehearsed his words. He parked and went down the sideway to the back door which, as expected, was on the latch. His father was making tea in the kitchen.

'Hello son. What brings you this late? Nice surprise. Come and tell us the latest.' He motioned Terry forward. 'Your Mum's under the weather. She's gone up to read in bed. We'll have a cuppa upstairs with her.' Will added a third cup to the blue plastic tray and opened a new packet of biscuits.

Terry put his storm jacket on the back of a chair. He scrutinised the difference between himself and his Dad for the first time. Had people really believed Will Stedforth was his father all these years? A tall lean man, now sixty-eight, with bent shoulders, finely lined cheeks and long strands of dark hair: Terry, square, chunky, with curly, light hair that showed a touch of ginger. He led the way upstairs carrying the tea-tray and hoping his mother was well enough for the shock he was about to give her.

The two men sat either side of the bed. It had four posters, six pillows, a padded rose quilt and a patchwork throw—a bed not to be treated lightly. Eileen, despite her small figure, was in possession of it. Her smile widened as her eyes took in the jersey. 'Terry! How's my best boy? Top of the Pops yet?' This joke was too old to make him cringe, referring to Terry's

early teens when he used to strum a guitar. 'I thought I heard your voice but said to myself, *It's too early. Didn't hear a car. You're imagining it, old girl.*'

'And here I am, Mum, as bad as ever.'

She put her book aside and waited for her tea to be poured. Her face was dry-skinned and papery.

'How is it then, Mum? Bit early for bedtime. Are you one degree under?'

'I don't know, son, perhaps a touch.' She took a biscuit from the plate and nibbled it cautiously. 'I see you're in your jersey. It suits you, you know. Doesn't it suit him, Will?'

His dad always agreed with her. 'It suits him well, love. Took her weeks to knit that, Terry. Keeps out the cold, I bet.'

'Absolutely. Wouldn't be without it,' he lied, flexing his elbows and pulling his hands upwards within the sleeves to disguise their shortness. He wasn't too worried to find his mum in bed so early. She needed the luxury of tea in bed as remedy for the drudgery of everyday life. She didn't have enough interests now that Terry was adult, independent and, more than anything, married. He always dreaded some regretful remark about having no grandchildren to keep her busy.

he tried some light conversation. As a family, they'd always kept their words to the point and around well-worn subjects. They weren't inclined to parade their feelings. He stirred her tea with one sugar and placed the cup beside her. 'Have your tea, Mum. There's something I want to ask you both.'

'Oh, what's that, then? Anything happened for you to come over this late? Where's Gudrun? Nothing wrong I hope?'

'No. She's on a late duty. Drink your tea.' His mum always assumed that "News" or "Something to Say" was ominous. 'Nothing's wrong at all. Gudrun's fine.'

'Oh dear,' she said, as if he'd stated the opposite. What did she imagine, or did she have some uncanny sense of trouble?

'No, no trouble.' Terry spoke with deliberate calm. 'It's just, well, something interesting happened this morning. I came round to tell you about it, ask your advice.'

Now he had keen listeners.

Will said, 'Go on then. Let's have it. Not been promoted by any chance?'

‘Sadly, no.’ (Appraisal threatened the opposite. He mustn’t even think about it). ‘Something happened on the tube going to work this morning.’ He felt his breath coming quickly. ‘It was squashed, crowded as usual, but I caught a glimpse of someone, a bloke. I could just see between the bodies, staring till my eyes hurt to make sure,’ he took a gasp, ‘because he looked just like me. I mean JUST like me. It could have BEEN me.’

‘Never!’ His mum sounded sceptical. ‘You said it was very crowded in the tube. He probably wouldn’t have looked a bit the same if you’d seen him closer, or for longer.’

‘I did. I followed him. Apart from his hair - it was longer - he did look exactly like me and I thought that, well, under the circumstances...’ Terry looked at his shoes but pressed on, ‘...you might know if there could be someone; whether there was a brother or anything. You know?’

There was quite a pause. He looked up. She was gripping her teacup and staring down into it as if it held the answer.

His dad gave her an anxious glance. When she didn’t answer, he took a breath. ‘Well, son...’ Then he hesitated. Had he begun to say “son” out of long habit and was now swallowing it uneasily? ‘The brother... We were offered an older child first...’

Like Gerry’s parents! Terry leant forward. ‘What was he called?’

Eileen broke in rapidly, ‘No idea. It wouldn’t be him you saw. He couldn’t look that much like you. He was dark-haired, wasn’t he, Will? It’s not very likely you’d see him. Not round here.’

‘It wasn’t round here, Mum. This guy was in London, like me, on his way to work. He could have come up from anywhere within commuting distance.’

Will said, ‘The brother was a few years older than you. He came for a couple of visits, but...’

‘We decided against it. And they said he was disturbed, so I couldn’t have managed that.’

The same reaction! ‘I see. It probably wasn’t him, Mum. This bloke was my age. Just let me have any information you remember.’

Will rubbed his chin. ‘You never showed much curiosity before. We told you most of what we knew back when you were a tot. Your m—first mother was a girlie who’d been unfortunate. That’s what we supposed. I think there were others, other kids.’

‘Kid. We don’t know about more.’ Eileen sounded disapproving, final. ‘We never met the girl, the mother. She could have been from anywhere.’

‘Like London.’

‘Or Manchester. Or—’ she was obviously struggling to suggest far-off places, Cornwall, Durham.’

‘They keep children within their county, the authorities,’ Will muttered.

‘Whatever. We don’t know where the mother was from. After all those assessment visits, they tried to get us to take this older child even though I’d said from the beginning, *a baby*. We did try the lad out. He was no good for us. Then when they told us you were free for adoption, you were brought by the social worker. Social worker brought you,’ she added bitterly, ‘social worker took you away.’

‘Gudrun hasn’t taken me away. I’m here, aren’t I?’

‘Well not so often in the last couple of years since she...’

Will broke in to avoid trouble, ‘There are people who look alike that aren’t related, you know. After all, we’re all from the same gene pool if you go far enough back.’

Terry rocked back on his chair. How far should he take this questioning? Perhaps no further on this first occasion.

Will’s grey eyes spoke sympathy. ‘We’re not much help to you, are we? You can contact the social work office, of course. They might tell you something they didn’t tell us.’

Eileen took this up. ‘No. You don’t get told much when you adopt, you know. They ask all about you—oh yes! All kinds of the most personal questions, as though you were on trial or suspected of some hidden sin, past wrong-doing; questions, on and on and on, visit after visit. But when you want to know something about the child that’s going to be yours, the child you’re going to look after all his life, you just get *Oh, that’s confidential. We’ve told you all you need to know*. Ha! They said we were really lucky to be offered a baby. Mostly, it’s an older child or one with disabilities. They tried that on us, saying there’d be generous post-adoption support.’

‘Post-adoption?’

Eileen sipped her tea as if for comfort. ‘Pretty useless for us. We asked for some guidance about tantrums when you were two or so.’

Will laughed. 'Seems trivial now. All kids tantrum around that age. You see it all the time in the supermarkets.'

'Only about tantrums, Mum?'

'You do have that—streak. I thought it might be personality problems, from your genes.'

'What, bad blood?'

'No, lad.' Will patted Terry's arm and gave Eileen a meaningful stare. 'We're sure you haven't anything like that. Look how you've turned out!'

She took another gulp of tea. 'No, of course, you grew out of tantrums. And there was no information, anyway.'

'Like why my mother let me go for adoption?'

Eileen paused. 'I'm sure she wouldn't have said. We did ask for more background. The social worker told us the mother didn't want her information passed to her child. They're allowed to decide about that. So we were told next to nothing.'

Terry liked Eileen's "the" rather than "your" mother; it was heart-warming. He could see she was upset for his sake that his blood mother had agreed to part with him. But she was also upset for herself that she hadn't been his mother from the start. He leant forward, smiling close into her face, 'You've always been Mum to me.' Best not to pursue things. He motioned to the tray. 'Have another biscuit. Are you doing anything for the weekend?'

Eileen made a face. 'Oh, I don't know. The new social club's finished. It's whist on Sunday afternoon. We may not go. There's a new organiser. Bossy.'

He played safe and let the subject stay with whist and the social club.

After a decent interval, he left Eileen with a kiss. 'Must be off. Take it easy, now, Mum.'

Will followed him downstairs. 'She's off colour. She doesn't make much fuss but she's been put on warfarin for angina. So I don't like upsetting her.'

'Angina? Is that serious?'

'Don't worry, under control. But best no stress.'

Terry took the hint. They sat at the kitchen table putting the remaining biscuits back into the old Father Christmas tin. He waited, hopefully.

Will put his hands on the deal table. The veins stood out, marking the extent of their huge territory. Terry remembered when his nose just reached the top of that table, seeing those hands dominating the surface like friendly monsters. His Dad's everyday acts of peeling, chopping, carving, drawing, dissecting at that time seemed wondrous and unattainable. Terry's own hands had never become more than square and hairy.

He saw Will regarding him across the table with steady eyes. It felt like those past times, not many, when his dad felt a need to use firm words to show him where he'd gone wrong: a lie to get out of trouble, a comment made out of turn, a treasure surreptitiously pocketed, a failure to do his homework, occasionally something rather worse.

'I'm glad you stopped all that when you did, son. You realise, not being able to give birth gets to a woman. And it's a whole set of hurdles you feel you're leaping over when you apply to adopt. Eileen likes to feel you're her own child. Well you are our own, all but. The fact of adoption made no difference to us.'

'I know, Dad. Made no difference to me either. Enough said.' He pressed the lid down firmly on the biscuit tin. 'But if you do know anything, or remember anything else, you will tell me? I'm likely to bump into this guy again, and it'd be good to know as much as I can.' With a touch of guilt over his incomplete frankness, he chanced, 'There has to be a reason for us being so exactly alike.'

'*Exactly?* If you see him again I expect you'll see your mistake. Look—we've no more information than we've already said. But there was one thing...'

Terry stiffened.

'A letter once, came to the social worker. You were about thirteen. It was a different social worker again by then, of course. They change quicker than clean sheets. This one let us know another family member might want to contact you when you were grown up.'

'Male? Female?'

'Don't know. Funny, wasn't it, not saying more? They're very close-lipped, that lot.'

'The brother, perhaps? What was he called?'

'Really can't remember. Anyway, no-one did contact on your eighteenth, or after. And I've told you now, so you can leave the subject alone while your mum's around.'

Who could it have been? A father? A thrill went through him. So he'd wanted contact but—perhaps he'd died before Terry reached eighteen. But then it could have been an aunt, or

even Bobby. He said, 'Right. But how can I let that - family member - know that I want to hear from him, or her?'

'If you do want to, lad, if you do.'

Like Gerry, Will was implying such a person wouldn't be worth contacting. Terry tried a casual shrug. Will was so obviously keen for him not to want contact. 'I'm not likely to bother, when I think about it. But still...' Of course he'd want to!

'You'd have to go to Social Services, then. Ask, I suppose.' Will had always been punctilious about fairness, about doing the right thing. He looked at his hands then put them under the table, 'It was Carvale Social Services that handled it, brought you to us.'

'Carvale? Never heard of it.' The unknown name was immediately and indelibly registered in Terry's brain. 'That's really all, Dad? Not much to go on.'

'No. Not much is it? I don't know what the mother was thinking. Didn't send you off with as much as a spare nappy. But there, you haven't wanted for anything since, now have you?'

'Not a thing, Dad. Really. Life couldn't have been better. You've been ace parents. It's not that I want things any different. It was just such a shock seeing a double. You imagine! It did make me wonder about—things.'

'A double! Yes, I suppose so.' Will nodded to himself several times. Then he stood and put a heavy hand on Terry's shoulder. 'Well, put your mind at rest. If anyone had wanted to contact you they'd have written to us years ago. What are you now, twenty-eight? We've all lived here long enough. There's been nothing, I guarantee. Now you get back home, son. Gudrun may be back from duty. Just put it all this coincidence out of your head.'

As if he could! Terry pushed his arms into his jacket. They went to the front door together, and his father saw him out as he always did. Terry walked down the familiar path of his childhood. He was tempted to kick the oval pebbles like all those times he'd been sent unwillingly to Sunday School, or when his pockets were unexpectedly empty of sweets. The pebbles were planted in lines to form borders for the path. They'd always looked inviting but were too well embedded to be pulled out as missiles. He opened the wooden gate that had always been black when others in the terrace had sported dark green or maroon or chocolate. The Stedforth gate was still black.

He drove home. It was drizzling now, justifying the absurdly bright storm jacket that didn't suit his colouring, according to Gudrun, or his present mood. His visit hadn't gained him much he didn't already know, except that it was somewhere called Carvale that had dispatched him to Will and Eileen. It would nag at him that some relative had once considered contacting him. So why hadn't he or she?

From the bend in Colliers Row he could see the lights weren't on in his house. Gudrun wasn't back yet. Once indoors he checked his mobile. *Sorry—need to spend night at client's. Speak Breakfast.* He stood in the hall gritting his teeth. This agency work was worse than he'd expected when she'd come home pleased with this chance of additional income. True, there were many nights when "on-call" only meant staying in at the ready, but when she was called out, he really hated it. And wouldn't it frigging well be tonight of all nights.

He was yawning, needing sleep. It must be the emotion, or rather, pushing it away all these hours. He hung his jacket in the hall and went upstairs.

He used the bathroom and then took full advantage of the unaccustomed space in the bed. Sleep came more easily than he'd expected.

In the early hours he heaved himself over to throw an arm around the accustomed shape, but met emptiness.