



# DEVIL'S GAME

A Thackery and Ackroyd Mystery

**PATRICIA HALL**



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## CHAPTER ONE

She drove into the forest with her heart thudding as usual and smiled to herself. It was always like this, the raised heartbeat, the clammy hands on the wheel, the slight breathlessness as she tried to hold the small car steady on the uneven track through the close-packed ranks of trees. It was a moonless night and not even a star could be glimpsed overhead between the swaying branches, but she kept her headlights dipped. They all knew better than to attract attention to themselves, at least until they were well away from the main road – although here, high in a plantation on the slopes of a Pennine hill long after dark, they were unlikely, she thought, to be noticed. Little moved up here at night, not even the scattered sheep on the open moors above them.

She could just see the rear lights of a car ahead of her making for the usual meeting place, and in her mirror she caught a glimpse of someone else following behind, the lights dipping up and down in tune with the rutted track. She hoped there would be a good turnout tonight. It was the variety of the encounters which excited her, the not knowing who would be there, whose hands would touch her, the knowledge that she would not know tonight, or ever, who she had been with. She smiled at the thought of the pleasures to come.

They were beginning to obsess her, these nights when her husband thought she was safely at work on the late shift, to the point where she wished they would come round more often. She was beginning to anticipate for days in advance the long drive, not usually alone but tonight there had been no choice but the bumpy track through the woods which in itself aroused her, and then the climax in the circle of headlights, the thrashing bodies, the shouts and cheers of the onlookers. The fact that Terry, and the rest of her family, her workmates and friends and neighbours, would be appalled at what she had fallen into almost by accident, only made the excitement greater. They would never know, she thought, and anyway, what the hell did it matter to them? Why should she live out her life with no thrills, no excitement, stuck in the chronic boredom of a dead-end job, a couple of kids, and a husband whose idea of a great night out was the quiz at the local pub?

It was a workmate who had introduced her to these meetings, at the end of a fag break in the yard which had ended up with a ritual moan about the lack of excitement in their lives, and especially in bed, since the kids had been born.

‘D’you want summat a bit different?’ Charlene had asked, leaning forward confidentially. ‘A bit out o’ t’ ordinary?’

‘What do you mean?’ she’d asked.

‘A bit o’ dogging?’

‘Dogging?’ Karen had no idea what Charlene was talking about.

‘You must ha’ read about it.’

‘You mean doing it in public, like? Wi’ people watching? I don’t think Terry’d go for that.’

‘You go on your own, silly. That’s t’ whole point. It’s quite safe. There’s lots of people there. You can go wi’ any bloke you fancy but you’re not on your own. Far from it. It’s safety in numbers, like. You can’t get hurt or owt like that. You can come wi’ me, if you want. It’s a right turn-on, if that’s what you’re looking for.’

‘What’ll I tell Terry?’

‘Tell him you’re on a girls’ night out. Wi’me. There’s nowt wrong wi’that. You will be, won’t you? But it’ll be a bit more bloody exciting than most girls’ nights out, I can tell you.’

So she had gone with Charlene that first time, on her girls’ night out, in Charlene’s car, driving out of Bradfield and up into the high hills, and down this same long winding track through the conifers, this same clearing she was just pulling into, but on her own this time, taking her place in the circle of cars and feeling nothing but exhilaration at the prospect ahead. Perhaps the bloke who had turned her on until she screamed last time would be there again tonight, she thought. But it didn’t really matter. So far, it had worked for her every time. She had not been disappointed. The pool of light created by the encircling headlights had lived up to expectations and she only wished that the meets, every couple of weeks, could happen more often. She pulled on the handbrake and switched her headlights to full, illuminating the centre of the circle like a stage. This, she thought, as she slipped out of her coat and got out of the car in hot pants and a top which barely covered her nipples, was what life should be like.

\* \* \*

The newsroom at the *Bradfield Gazette* was abnormally hectic that morning, as reporters struggled with garbled first reports of a major pile-up on the motorway during the rush hour in which there had been fatalities and serious injuries. Insulated slightly from the hubbub by her concentration on the deadline for the feature she was writing on a local school which was being considered as a prospective academy, Laura Ackroyd bashed her computer keyboard urgently, blotting out the distractions around her. By ten o’clock she had finished and pressed the key that sent her work to the sub-editors who would fit it into the feature pages, and to the editor, Ted Grant, who looked very unlikely to take much notice of her efforts. He was almost galloping around the room, reading over one reporter’s shoulder after another as they put together the details of the motorway smash for the front page. His comments and advice were never less than trenchant and this morning, with a very tight deadline, they bordered on the manic.

She leant back in her swivel chair with a sigh, letting the tension drain out of her shoulders as she surveyed the controlled chaos of the newsroom, something she loved and resented in almost equal measure. How much longer would she be here, she wondered, driven out not by her own ambition as she had once expected, nor even by Ted Grant’s relentless aggression, which she had occasionally feared, but by a wholly new obsession which was beginning to dominate her every waking hour. Soon, she thought, for the hundredth time, she must resolve this. She could not go on much longer as she was.

Her brief respite was suddenly interrupted by the unexpected sound of her name hurled across the newsroom in the editor’s usual stentorian tones. He had retreated to his glass-walled office now, she noticed, and was beckoning her urgently in his direction from the doorway.

‘Who is this beggar, Sir David Murgatroyd?’ he asked without preamble as she came into the cluttered space from which he directed his reign of terror over his staff. Laura could see that he had the feature she had just completed on his computer screen in front of him.

‘He’s some sort of venture capitalist,’ Laura said cautiously. ‘I thought you might have known him. He claims to have come from these parts originally.’

‘Never heard of the beggar,’ Grant said. ‘Why’s he getting involved in one of our schools then? Everyone I talk to reckons Sutton Park should be closed down, and good riddance to it.’

Everyone you talk to in the Clarendon bar, Laura thought cynically, where she knew from pa

experience that the assembled wisdom of Bradfield's ageing and wealthy conservatives, with and without a capital C, was distilled into a particularly potent racist and sexist bile.

'The inspectors say the school has improved out of all recognition over the last few years,' she said mildly. 'A new head, better discipline, exam results going up. As I say in my piece, the teachers and parents are not best pleased at the idea of handing the place over to some peripatetic millionaire. The scheme would throw loads of money at the place, which can't be bad, but control would go to this man Murgatroyd. And he's a fundamentalist Christian by all accounts, so I don't know where that leaves all the Muslim kids who go to Sutton Park now.'

'Aye, well, you've said all that here,' Grant said dismissively. 'I reckon what this piece needs before we use it, is a profile of this Murgatroyd bloke. Let's find out who he is and what his motives are, shall we? We'll hold it for the minute. How can I write a leader one way or t'other unless I know what sort of alternative he thinks he's offering? And you might ask him what he thinks he's going to get out of it, an'all. It seems a funny sort of thing to do with your money, however much of it you've got, propping up a run-down comprehensive.'

'I'll do some digging around then, shall I? See if I can get an interview with him?' Laura asked, not displeased with the idea. 'If you like, we could do a full page about it next week if I have any luck. I've got something Jane did on the plans for the Mela which could just as well go in today.'

'Aye, do that. People keep telling me I need to keep the flaming ethnic minorities happy. We'll use this school stuff later when we've got summat a bit more meaty to go on. You should have thought of that yourself. I don't know why I'm having to teach you to suck eggs after all this time.'

Unmoved by Grant's parting jibe, which she knew was at least partly justified, Laura went back to her desk and began an intensive trawl of the Internet for details of Sir David Murgatroyd's career. He was right: she should have done this before, she thought wryly. She must focus better, at least while she was within range of Ted Grant's unforgiving surveillance, and not let her own private obsessions interfere with the job. If she was going to leave the *Gazette*, she wanted to leave under her own steam and at a time of her own choosing, not booted out ignominiously for making mistakes that only a court reporter could be forgiven. She owed herself more for the years she had spent here, locked into her home town by quite other considerations than the nature of the job.

\* \* \*

DCI Michael Thackeray glanced up slightly wearily as DS Kevin Mower entered his office. The bullet wound in his back, which had nearly taken his life the previous year, had been playing up in the night and he had slept only fitfully, lying rigid at the side of the bed hoping that he would not wake Laura.

'Quiet night?' he asked hopefully, taking in the sheaf of papers Mower carried.

'Traffic's up the wall, guv,' Mower said. 'A lorry careered into a queue of cars at the M62 junction and there's complete mayhem out there. As far as CID's concerned it was quiet enough. A burglary in Southfield, place ransacked when the owners came home from the opera in Leeds. Forensics are out there now so we may get something from them. But the lads are getting wise to DNA. The canny ones are wearing coveralls, and gloves and masks, would you believe? There was one toerag nicked re-handed in Harrogate by an off-duty DI who said it could have been one of our own forensics team on a murder inquiry the way he was all dressed up for the job.'

'It's lucky they're not all quite as bright as that,' Thackeray said. 'We might have to shut up shop.'

'And a good job most killings are spur of the moment. The last thing on your average murderer's mind is whether he's leaving DNA behind.' Thackeray nodded, his own mind obviously not really on

what the sergeant was saying.

‘So, no other overnight excitement then?’ he asked eventually.

‘Uniform are talking to some bloke whose wife didn’t come home after work last night, but sounds like another domestic. She’s got bored with the husband and kids and has done a runner, expect. They’ll keep me informed if it looks like anything more dodgy.’

‘A day to catch up on the paperwork, then,’ Thackeray said, glancing at the pile of files in his tray without enthusiasm. More likely, he thought, another day with time to wrestle with the problem Laura Ackroyd had set him and which he knew would have to be resolved soon if their relationship was to have any future. Her desire to have a family was growing, that was all too obvious, while his own reservations only deepened. And he did not know how to tell her that.

‘Thanks, Kevin,’ he said. Mower glanced at him warily. He knew better than to probe too deep into Thackeray’s private life but he had known his boss and Laura long enough to recognise the signs that things were not going well. It really was time those two sorted their future out, he thought unsympathetically as he closed the door carefully behind him. They’d had time enough.

On the other side of town, on the edge of the new housing complex that was still being built to replace the dilapidated blocks of flats on the Heights, known not just to its inhabitants but to the whole town as Wuthering, young police constable Nasreem Mirza was sitting uncomfortably on the edge of Terry Bastable’s sofa. She was by now well aware that whatever it was that worried Mr Bastable, whose broad face looked pale and drawn, he really did not want to fill her in on the details. And she knew exactly why she was unwelcome, even though Mr Bastable had called the police himself and she had been dispatched to see him within half an hour. She had spotted the small, fading red, white and blue BNP poster in the front window, no doubt left over from the last council election campaign, and drawn her own conclusions even before the man had opened the front door and she had seen his face harden into hostility rather than welcome or relief. He was a muscular figure, in a tight T-shirt, revealing several indecipherable tattoos and with a close-shaven head which in itself exuded aggression.

‘Are you the best they could send?’ he muttered as he led her into the house, his expression surly. Nasreem knew better than to respond and settled herself in an armchair without being asked.

‘So tell me what’s happened, Mr Bastable,’ Nasreem said, her Yorkshire accent as broad as Terry’s own. ‘We can’t do owt about it unless you tell me the facts.’ She got out her notebook and pencil and busied herself trying to impart a sense of calm efficiency, in spite of the fluttering anxiety in her stomach. Whatever he thought about the colour of her skin, he had no choice but to deal with her, but she knew that this antagonism, which she met every day from some local people, only added an edge to the need for her to do a good job. If anyone was going to mess up her career by making a complaint, she thought, it would inevitably be one of these racist bastards.

‘She told me she were on t’late shift,’ Terry mumbled. ‘I look after t’kids when she’s working late. She takes the car and is usually back about midnight. I had a few bevvies and fell asleep on t’sofa. I didn’t wake up till gone seven this morning, and didn’t realise she’d not come back till I went upstairs with a cup of tea for her about half past. She weren’t in bed and the car’s not outside.’

‘No messages?’ Nasreem asked. ‘Phone, text...?’

‘Nowt,’ Terry Bastable said. ‘And when I rang Shirley’s, which is where she works, they said she weren’t on t’rota for last night any road. She weren’t supposed to be at work at all till tomorrow.’

Nasreem sighed. Anyone asking the questions she knew she had to ask would be unwelcome, she thought, but her interrogation would be more unwelcome than most to this man who sat bolt upright on the sofa, rigid with a fury which she guessed was pretty equally aimed at his errant wife and her

own unwelcome presence in his house.

~~‘Has she ever done anything like this before?’ she ventured.~~

Bastable shook his head irritably.

‘‘Course not,’ he said. ‘She’s steady, is Karen. Not like some.’

‘And have you been getting on well together? No domestic problems which might lead her to go on her own for a bit?’

‘We’re happily married, aren’t we?’ Bastable said. ‘As far as I know, we are, any road. No, no domestic problems, none at all.’

‘No hint that she had begun to see anyone else?’

Bastable glowered at Nasreem, his face beginning to look flushed, and shook his head vehemently.

‘Nowt like that,’ he snapped.

‘But she said she was on the late shift, when she wasn’t...’

‘Summat must have happened to her. Summat bad,’ Bastable said, and Nasreem could see the fear in his eyes. ‘She went off in t’car. I always make her go by car because she comes back late. Maybe she thought she was on shift... Made a mistake like, with the rota, and summat happened on the way there or on the way back. You hear of women getting abducted, don’t you? Women disappear. It’s not just kiddies who get taken.’

‘It’s unusual, Mr Bastable,’ Nasreem said gently. ‘Most adults who disappear go of their own free will, you know. Generally we wait for a few days, just post them as missing, and they turn up again. In this case we can also look for the car, if you give me the details. It would also help if you could tell me what she was wearing when she left the house.’

Bastable looked at her blankly.

‘I didn’t notice,’ he muttered. ‘Her coat, I suppose. It were chilly last night, weren’t it? Her coat dark...blue. No, green. That’s right, green wool, but dark, almost black. Fits a bit tight, like. I don’t know what she had on under it.’

‘Have you looked to see if she’s taken a suitcase or holdall? Whether all her clothes are still here?’ He shook his head dumbly.

‘Could you check that for me, d’you think?’ Nasreem asked. Rigid with suppressed emotion, Bastable got to his feet and went thundering upstairs, where Nasreem could hear him opening cupboards and drawers and slamming them shut again. She glanced round the living room of the small house with its large flat-screen TV and PlayStation in one corner, computer games strewn where the children must have left them before they went to school, and she wondered if they had any idea where their mother might have gone. Judging by the school photographs of a blond boy and a red-headed girl on the mantelpiece over the gas fire, they must be ten or eleven, probably still at primary school. Wherever Karen Bastable was, they would no doubt be devastated if she never came back. She sighed and waited until Terry Bastable came back into the room and slammed the door behind him.

‘I can’t see owt missing,’ he said. ‘She’s got a lot of stuff up there, stuff I’ve never even seen before, bit saucy, some of it. But if she’d gone off by her own choice she’d have taken some of her new stuff. Stands to reason. She’d been out shopping just last weekend for holiday gear because we’re going to Majorca as soon as t’kids finish school for Easter. Some of the stuff’s still in t’Primark bag not even taken out yet. And all the suitcases are still in t’cupboard on the landing. I don’t believe she’d run off. It’s not what Karen would do. She loves the kids even if...’ He didn’t finish the sentence although his sudden doubt about his missing wife’s commitment to him was written in his face.

‘Even if you have your problems?’

‘We don’t have problems,’ Bastable said loudly. ‘What would you know about it with you

arranged marriages and all that bollocks, any road? My marriage is grand.'

But Nasreem did not believe him. She changed tack suddenly.

'Do you have a bank account? Can she draw money out that you can check on?'

'There's never owt in our account to draw,' Bastable said bitterly. 'We've paid for us holiday, so there's even less than nowt.'

'But you'll check?'

'Aye, I'll check, but it's wasting time, isn't it? I need to know where she is, what's happened to her, the kids need to know. I need you lot to start bloody looking. She'd never go off like this without a word.'

'But it does look as if she might have had plans last night which she didn't want to tell you about, she said she was going to work and didn't,' Nasreem said. Bastable scowled and clenched his fists, a baffled bull, but said nothing.

'I'll complete a missing person report for her,' Nasreem went on quickly. 'And I'll log in the details of the car. That's really all we can do for now.'

'Well, it's not enough, is it?' Bastable said angrily. 'You're not taking it bloody seriously.'

'I'm sorry, Mr Bastable,' Nasreem said. 'If you're unhappy about the procedure you can always come down to the station and talk to my sergeant. But you'll get the same answer, I'm afraid.'

'You've not got enough time for folk like us now, all the hours you're putting in tracking off terrorists and illegals and God knows who in this country,' Bastable shouted, jumping to his feet suddenly that Nasreem flinched. She stood up herself and deliberately turned her back on the angry man although her heart was thudding as she walked to the door. She turned briefly, her hand on the handle.

'I'm sorry, Mr Bastable. I'll do what I can. Let me know if she comes home, will you? That's the most likely outcome, you know. Honestly it is.'

'Paki cow,' Bastable spat as she closed the front door behind her.

Karen tried to move but she had been secured too tightly for that. She was still wearing the clothing she had stripped down to in the forest clearing as she moved back to her car as the meet in the forest began to disperse. She was surprised when a man she had not noticed before, with a scarf pulled up over the lower half of his face, approached her just as she was reaching for her coat.

'Do you feel like another quick turn?' he had asked, his voice muffled by the scarf, and when she had hesitated, he had suddenly seized her from behind pushing her head down, and before she could scream or attract anyone's attention, he had pulled a heavy bag over her head. She had seen pictures of hooded prisoners on television and had never imagined just how suffocatingly disorienting the procedure could be. She had struggled for breath and drawn in only dust and fibres and found herself choking helplessly within seconds. Even as she tried to fight him off, she felt her arms being strapped to her side, and soon knew that she was being bundled into the boot of a car. She tried to scream, but the thick material around her face muffled her cries and she was dimly aware the noise of departing vehicles was fading away. There was nobody left to hear her.

She had no idea how long the journey had lasted but eventually the car stopped and there was complete silence. How long she lay there she had no way of telling. She thought she fell asleep at one point, but could not be sure. She groaned occasionally as her limbs cramped, and she felt freezing cold. And then at last she glimpsed a dim light even through the thick fabric across her face and realised that the boot was being opened and she could see it was already daylight. She had been in the boot all night, she thought, trying to get a good look at the man who was gazing down at her, but he

tugged her blindfold down lower so that she could only glimpse him from the waist down.

‘You bastard,’ she stuttered, through the thick fabric. ‘What the hell are you doing?’ But he did not respond and she was shivering so convulsively now in the sharp morning air that however much she wriggled and tried to struggle she could not resist the strong arms which took hold of her and dragged her out of the boot and along the ground so violently that she cried out in pain. Eventually she managed to lash out with her feet and catch her attacker so sharply that he too cried out.

‘Bitch,’ he said, flinging her to the ground in frustration. ‘Bloody whore.’ She tried shouting and screaming again but the sound seemed to get lost without even penetrating the suffocating mask, and eventually she simply accepted that there was no one to hear her anyway, just as no one had heard her in the forest. She could hear her attacker breathing heavily now, as if in the grip of some overpowering emotion. And she simply began to moan, a high, keening sound, equally muffled, but she was by then beyond rational thought, the hard ground beneath her cold and wet, with sharp stones which tore at her half-naked body.

‘Please, please, let me go,’ she said, sobbing in despair. ‘Please, please don’t hurt me.’

But as if he needed to hear her beg, her pleas seemed to act as some sort of trigger and her attacker pulled off the suffocating hood and stood over her, his face still barely visible behind his scarf and hat pulled low over his eyes.

‘Now, you little cow,’ he said. ‘You still seem to be gagging for some more fun and games. And I can’t bloody wait.’

It was then that the pain began, and there was nothing left for Karen to hear except her own gasping, panicking breath and then her desperate screams as the uncaring sun rose faintly and looked down from a pale, misty sky and she begged him in the end to kill her quickly.

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## CHAPTER TWO

Laura Ackroyd picked at a piece of toast at the breakfast table and watched Michael Thackeray pour himself coffee. He looked tired, she thought, and she knew that he was still occasionally sleeping badly, the residual pain of his gunshot wound keeping him awake. But she was sure that there was more to it than that. What she wanted to discuss – and perhaps soon must – would not help at this time of day, she decided, spooning marmalade onto her plate. Given his present mood, she would leave until later.

‘You’re not in a hurry this morning?’ he asked, sipping hot coffee and pulling on his jacket.

‘I’m going straight up to the Heights to talk to Joyce,’ Laura said. ‘Part work, part social.’

Laura’s grandmother Joyce Ackroyd still lived resolutely on her own on the housing estate she had helped to create in her political heyday in the Sixties and Seventies, unwilling to accept her increasing physical frailty and showing no sign of diminishing mental energy as she pursued one cause or another close to her very old socialist heart.

‘What’s she up to now?’ Thackeray asked with a smile. He approved of Joyce in spite of Laura’s anxieties about her obstinately independent lifestyle, in the teeth of encroaching arthritis and the reduction of her neighbourhood to a building site.

‘I want to know what she knows about David Murgatroyd, or Sir David, apparently. He was knighted in the last honours list for services to education. He’s the one who wants to turn Sutton Park into an academy, but he’s an elusive fellow. I know he was born in Yorkshire and has one of his homes here. That’s on top of others in London and Monaco and the Caribbean, no less. But when you try to track him down or find out how he made his millions, or maybe billions for all I know, it’s like hitting a brick wall. I know Joyce has got herself involved with the Sutton Park governors who don’t want to be taken over, so I thought she might have gleaned a bit more info than I’ve been able to so far. Ted is very keen on a profile but I could write it on the back of a postage stamp so far.’

‘I thought you could find out anything about anyone on the Internet these days,’ Thackeray said.

‘Not this lad,’ Laura said. ‘Date of birth, the names of his companies – all private equity jobs so far – almost no details – and a few cuttings on the six academies he’s sponsored so far. That explains the recent knighthood, of course. That’s about as much as I gleaned yesterday. Another couple of academies and he’ll get a peerage, no doubt.’

‘Such cynicism in one so young,’ Thackeray mocked, pulling on his coat and kissing the top of Laura’s copper curls by way of farewell.

‘Michael, will you be home reasonably early tonight?’ she asked quietly. ‘We need to talk.’

He looked at her for a moment, the light draining from his eyes.

‘I’ll try,’ he said, but as he closed the door behind him she wondered if he really meant it.

Later that morning, in her grandmother’s tiny living room, nursing a cup of instant coffee as she flicked through the pile of paperwork Joyce had presented her with, Laura marvelled at how efficiently she managed to keep in touch with the various protest movements and campaigns she thought worthy of her political experience and commitment. And surprisingly, Laura thought, in spite of the advance of the smart new politicians of all persuasions who now seemed to dominate the town

there were still people who seemed to value Joyce's old-fashioned wisdom, though her knees would no longer let her wave a banner at their protest marches as she once had.

'The person you want to talk to is Steve O'Mara,' Joyce said. 'I'll give you his phone number. He's one of the parent governors and he's really angry about the whole affair. I think he was on the panel when the new head was appointed and he reckons she's doing a brilliant job. He's afraid that the new regime will simply ignore the local kids who go to Sutton Park now, and go all out to recruit middle class youngsters from further away to make the place look good. That's what's happened in other places by all accounts. And the parents will lose what little say they have now in how the place is run. This beggar Murgatroyd will control the governors, the school rules, appointments, the lot. Where's the accountability in that? And from what we've been able to find out from the other schools he's taken over, he's one of these born-again Christians.'

'I know, I know,' Laura said. 'I've heard most of this already. What I want now is to get hold of Murgatroyd and put some of these objections to him. But he's an elusive man, is Sir David. He claims to have local connections but I've not tracked down anyone who knows him, or even remembers him from way back. Have you heard of him?'

'There used to be a David Murgatroyd out Eckersley way years ago. Too long ago to be this one but maybe a relation. All I can recall is that he was a county councillor for a while, Tory of course and was one of those who tried to stop the West Riding going for comprehensive schools in the Sixties because it meant closing Eckersley Grammar. Made no difference, of course. There were only a handful of Tories on the county council back then when Harold Wilson got in. Not like the other ridings where they still ruled the roost, of course: all those landowners and farmers. Mind you, they all went comprehensive in the end, when they realised how much money they were wasting on all those small grammar schools and bog-standard secondary moderns. Maggie Thatcher closed more grammar schools than anyone else, you know.' Joyce chuckled in satisfaction.

'But Murgatroyd...' Laura edged her grandmother back to the matter in hand. Her knowledge of the politics of her beloved county was encyclopaedic but inclined these days to be rambling.

'Aye, David Murgatroyd,' Joyce acquiesced amiably enough. 'I don't reckon he was involved in politics for very long. As I recall he resigned quite quickly. I think there was some family tragedy, but I really can't remember what it was. You might find something in the archives at the *Gazette*, I should think. Bradfield Council and the county never had a right lot to do with each other. We were textile and they were mining and the rural bits in between. We didn't have a right lot in common, even in the Labour Party. We weren't in the pockets of the miners' union, like some.' Laura could see the pain of old battles lost in her grandmother's eyes, but she had more urgent things on her mind and she pressed on.

'So if that David Murgatroyd is my man Murgatroyd's father, he could well have been born in the county. According to *Who's Who*, which has a very brief entry, he was born in 1960, so he would have been a small child when his father was involved in politics.'

'Look in your own archives,' Joyce said. 'It's sure to be there. Eckersley wasn't part of Bradfield in those days but it was close enough for the *Gazette* to keep an eye on.'

'I'll do that,' Laura said. 'And I'll catch up with Steve O'Mara. What about the new head at Sutton Park? Is she really doing a good job?'

'Debbie Stapleton? Yes, I reckon she is. Steve's no fool and he rates her very highly. And the exam results are getting better, for what that's worth. You should talk to her, too. Steve said she's absolutely gutted with what's happening. Feels she's been sold down the river by the council, which seems to have fallen for this scheme hook, line and sinker.'

‘I bet she does,’ Laura said, finishing her coffee. ‘Right, I’d better get into the office or Ted Grant will think I’ve jumped ship.’

Joyce glanced at her granddaughter, with her red hair and green eyes, a combination of colouring and character which reminded her so sharply of her own impulsive youth that it brought tears to her eyes, and eventually asked her the question that kept her awake at night.

‘And are you? Thinking of jumping ship?’ Laura shook her head sharply.

‘Of course not,’ she said. ‘What gives you that impression?’

‘Oh, I know you, miss,’ Joyce said enigmatically. ‘Do you think I can’t tell when you’re unhappy?’

‘I’m fine,’ Laura said firmly.

‘And that man of yours? What’s he doing? Is he going to make an honest woman of you?’

Laura laughed at the question although she knew that she wanted it answered a hundred times more urgently than Joyce did.

‘We’re fine,’ she prevaricated. ‘Always busy, but fine.’ Joyce did not believe her.

Back at the office, Laura took Joyce Ackroyd’s advice and delved back into the paper’s own dusty archives and soon found some of what she was looking for. David Murgatroyd had indeed been county councillor in the mid-Sixties and had resigned before his four-year term of office was up. But it was the reason for that resignation which intrigued Laura. Murgatroyd, who had died suddenly in 1974, had been a wealthy textile manufacturer who, like many before him, had abandoned the smoky environment of Bradford, where he had amassed his millions, and bought a country pile, Sibdon House, just outside the small market town of Eckersley, ten miles or so up the valley of the Maze and well out of sight of the belching mill chimneys of the industrial belt. Once there, he had apparently established himself as lord of the manor and local politician. But as Laura flicked through the cuttings, it soon became apparent that his comfortable lifestyle was built on sand.

His wife, younger than he was, had given him two children in his middle age: a son, and a daughter six years later. Exactly what happened was not fully spelt out in the archive. Local papers had none of the intrusive carelessness with people’s private lives that the tabloids had begun to wallow in after the birth of Murdoch’s *Sun* years later, and the details of the family tragedy in the *Gazette* were minimal and muted. But it was clear from the inquest report that Murgatroyd’s wife had suffered some sort of breakdown – post-natal depression Laura guessed – and had drowned herself and the baby in a reservoir not far from their home. The jury had returned a kindly open verdict. Mrs Murgatroyd had left no note.

Laura felt suddenly cold. The stark details recorded by the coroner were close enough to Michael Thackeray’s bitter experience to make her shudder. This was one investigation she would not be sharing with him in much detail, she thought. But she was intrigued to uncover whether the young David Murgatroyd, whose life story she was investigating and who seemed still to have a house in the county, was in fact the son of the late county councillor and had been left motherless at seven and an orphan in his teens. It was quite possible, she thought, that he still owned his father’s house and the simplest way to find out might be to go up to Eckersley and ask.

Ten miles above Bradford, where the fells rose sharply towards the lowering, windswept watershed which separated the steep industrial valleys of West Yorkshire from the more rolling plains of industrial Lancashire, two men bounced on a tractor along the rutted track through a coniferous plantation. They were pulling a long, low trailer, which swung wildly if the driver accelerated too fast as he often seemed tempted to do. The two men wore earmuffs, which insulated them not just from the roar of the heavy diesel engine but also from the natural rustle and sough of the forest floor, littered

deep with pine needles; not much of a habitat for birds but home to a few small creatures who scuttled beneath the trees, and to an occasional deer which had strayed to this upland retreat from its more fruitful pastures lower down the valley.

The tractor eventually reached its destination, a clearing where the sun could just penetrate and some thin green vegetation survived, and where stacked piles of felled logs were waiting to be loaded onto the trailer and taken to the sawmill. The driver killed the engine, took off his ear protection and his hard hat and glanced at his companion.

‘Who the hell is that?’ he asked, waving at a compact blue car parked almost out of sight beneath the trees and partially obscured by bushes. His companion shrugged and jumped down from the tractor and sauntered over to the car, which turned out to be an elderly Astra. He was followed by the driver who was lighting up a cigarette and sucking in the smoke gratefully.

‘No one here,’ his mate said, peering through the misted windscreen. ‘Someone left their coat.’ A dark-coloured item lay crumpled on the front passenger seat as if it had been discarded in a hurry. He tried the passenger door and looked surprised when it swung open.

‘Careless beggar,’ he said, peering into the interior. ‘Gone for a walk, d’you reckon?’

‘Bloody funny place to come rambling,’ the driver said, glancing round the clearing and the almost impenetrable ranks of trees which enclosed it. ‘Any road, it’s nowt to do wi’us. If they’ve not come back when we finish up this afternoon we’ll report it in.’ He paused for a moment and looked at the ground more closely. ‘There’ve been a few cars up here since last week,’ he said thoughtfully. ‘Look at them tyre tracks. Summat funny’s been going off.’

‘Darren said he thought cars were coming up here at night,’ his partner said. ‘Noticed it a few times, he said. I’ve not seen owt missen, but then rain washes out tracks pretty fast.’

‘You’d not think they’d come all this way for a bit of nooky. Even in my day we made do with the edge of Broadley Moor and most of t’kids seem to be happy with a bloody car park these days. They don’t care who sees them at it.’

‘At it like bloody rabbits, teenagers today,’ said his companion, a small grey-haired man, with a sour look. ‘We’d best get a shift on. We’ll be up here all day, else. And there’s no overtime to be had you can bet on that, no bloody fear.’

The two men returned to the trailer and set about their day’s work, casting only an occasional glance at the apparently abandoned blue car. Only when they left the clearing with their last trailer load of logs did they mention it again.

‘I’ll drop you off, and tell Gordon about it when I get back to t’yard,’ the driver said. ‘It’s a bit odd that.’ But when he had unloaded and completed his paperwork, Gordon has already gone home, and he promised himself he would report it the following morning. If he remembered.

Laura was glad to be out of the office. She had made another call to the only number she had for David Murgatroyd’s business enterprises and had met a brick wall for the fourth time. Mr Murgatroyd did not give interviews, she was told by a press officer. Mr Murgatroyd’s interests were private. They were no public companies and so no public information. There would be no change in that position however many times she approached them.

Irritated, she had reported her failure back to Ted Grant and got his reluctant acquiescence to a trip out of town to attempt to discover where the mysterious would-be benefactor of Sutton Park School had quite possibly started his life.

Now, with the weight of Ted’s hostility off her shoulders, she determined to forget her private worries and enjoy the trip up the valley of the Maze towards Eckersley where, just beyond the

gargantuan and monstrously ugly building society offices which dominated the small town, monument to the Yorkshire tradition of thrift and canny investment, she turned off the main road and headed up into the steep hills above the river.

The small village of Sibden lay a mile or so from, and five hundred feet above Eckersley, in a narrow wooded valley where a beck tumbled vigorously down from the moors to the river below. A cluster of stone cottages huddled around a pub and beyond that a high stone wall commenced on the left-hand side of the narrow lane. Laura continued slowly up the hill alongside the wall, until it was broken by a solid stone archway and high wrought-iron gates, firmly closed and, she could see even from the car, with an electronic keypad to one side and under surveillance from CCTV. There was no indication what or who lay beyond the gates, and nothing to be seen through them except a well-kept gravel drive which disappeared into rhododendron shrubberies and trees. She guessed that this must be Sibden House, the former home of David Murgatroyd senior, and still quite possibly, given the level of security, of the man she assumed to be his son.

She pulled off the road and into the entrance and got out of the car. Whoever lived here, she thought, neither wanted nor expected casual callers. In fact, as she looked at the high stone wall more closely, they seemed quite determined to deter them. The wall was topped with several strands of vicious-looking razor wire.

Without much optimism, she pressed the bell push at the top of the keypad and was quite surprised when a male voice asked her who she was and what she wanted. She introduced herself and was rewarded with a prolonged silence. Then the voice came back sharply.

‘Sir David Murgatroyd is not in residence,’ it said. ‘And he does not give interviews to the Press. Please take this as a final answer.’

Laura made to protest but the intercom had been switched off at the other end and she was left fuming, with a chill wind whipping round her making her glad she had put her jacket in the car. She reversed out of the entrance in front of the forbidding gates and drove slowly back to the village and found a parking space outside the Leg of Mutton, a dilapidated-looking public house with a few mildewed picnic tables at the front and only a glimmer of light inside to indicate that it might possibly be open to the passing traveller in search of a drink and a bite of lunch. No gastropub here, she thought wryly, and guessed it would not be long before an establishment like this either closed or was transformed into something a bit more stylish. The door creaked as she opened it and she found herself in a shabby barroom, with beer-stained tables, and no other human presence in sight. She stood at the bar for a moment, uncertain how to attract attention but eventually a middle-aged man, with a beer belly hanging over his jeans, slouched from the murky regions at the back and scowled at her.

‘We’ve nowt to eat,’ he said. ‘Delivery’s not turned up this morning.’

‘I’ll have a drink then,’ Laura said quickly. ‘Can you do me a Bloody Mary?’

The publican looked startled, as if this was something he had seldom concocted, but turned to the vodka optic accurately enough and shuffled through the soft drinks until he found a can of tomato juice so dusty that it looked as if it had sat on his shelves untouched for years rather than months. Laura decided against asking for ice, in case it turned out to be an unwarranted provocation.

She paid for the drink and leant on the bar to take a sip.

‘I’ve just been up to Sibden House,’ she confided. ‘I wanted to see David Murgatroyd but they say he’s not there very often.’ The publican stared at her stony-faced, his small blue eyes betraying not a scintilla of interest.

‘Oh aye?’ he said.

‘Do you know him? Mr Murgatroyd? Or Sir David, as he is now.’

‘Nobody knows *him*. He’s never there, is he?’

‘Doesn’t do much for the village, then?’ Laura asked.

‘Why would he? Most o’ t’ old village has gone, any road. It’s all weekend cottages now. Come for that new golf course Joe Emmet has opened on what should be good grazing land. Bring their food with ’em from Marks and bloody Spencers, they do, and bugger off back to Leeds first thing Monday morning. Never set foot in here.’ Laura thought that the landlord’s complaint might be better justified if he made more effort himself to smarten the place up and attract customers, but she said nothing, sipping her drink slowly.

‘So does Sir David come for weekends, then? Is this just his country pad?’ For some reason her last question unlocked the publican’s tongue.

‘I don’t know what it is,’ he said, looking even more surly, but evidently provoked by some anger which Laura did not comprehend. ‘It were left empty for long enough after his father died, my mother said. This one were only a little lad then and he got sent away to school when his mam topped herself. You know about that, do you?’

Laura nodded non-committally.

‘It were only about ten years back young Murgatroyd turned up again and did the old place up. It had gone to rack and ruin by then, but brass were no object. He brought in big contractors from outside. No work for t’ locals, was there? And like a bloody fortress when he’d finished. Alarm cameras, the full bloody monty. And even now we never see him. I don’t know what he’s got hidden away in there, that needs all that security. But they say he’s a millionaire now so maybe t’ place is stuffed full o’ gold bullion. You can bet your life he pays no tax on it, if it is. They don’t, do they? It’s poor sods like us who get screwed while folk like him get all the breaks.’

‘You won’t remember his father, I don’t suppose?’

‘My Mam spoke highly of him.’

‘Is she...?’ Laura probed.

‘Passed on, didn’t she? Last year.’

‘I’m sorry,’ Laura said.

‘Don’t be,’ the publican said with finality. ‘She had a stroke. Couldn’t bloody speak for three years and we got no help wi’ her to speak of. It were a blessing when she went.’ That was another path Laura did not wish to tread, so she simply nodded sympathetically.

‘Is there anyone left in the village who might remember the older Murgatroyd, this one’s father?’ she asked quickly.

‘You could try old Fred Betts. He were a gardener and I think he worked up there way back. But he’s in an old folks’ home now, so I don’t know how much he’ll remember. He may have gone ga-gone for all I know.’

‘Which home?’ Laura asked.

‘Old Royd, down in Eckersley, on t’ road up to Broadley over t’ moor. You can’t miss it. They say on a bad day you can smell it from half a mile off.’

Laura took a deep breath and pushed her drink away. She had not wanted it in the first place and now she knew she could not take another sip without gagging. She turned towards the door without a word and left the bar, hoping she never had to set foot in the place again. If the landlord was typical of Sibden, she thought, it was no wonder that the weekend visitors had as little as possible to do with the pub. The place exuded decay and rancour and she wondered how far the Murgatroyds, son and possibly father, were responsible for that.

She drove thoughtfully back into Eckersley, joined the old main road and turned off over the bridge

that crossed the bypass to climb the steep hill up the opposite side of the valley, towards Broadley and the open moorland which lay between Eckersley and its more elevated neighbour. Before the suburban bungalows gave out and the cattle grids signalled the approach of the sheep-friendly open road, she pulled into the car park of Old Royd Nursing Home. The place had been the subject of a scandal not so long ago, she recalled, when the owners had been accused of sedating some of their residents in the interests of a quiet life for the staff. It was under new and, she hoped, better management now. The door was answered by a young woman in a blue overall who seemed surprised when she asked to see Fred Betts.

‘He’s likely asleep,’ she said. ‘He does a lot of sleeping, does Fred.’ It was an unwise comment, Laura thought, in view of the place’s history, but the girl was young enough perhaps not to know what had gone on a few years previously. She was led down a long corridor which, in spite of the publican’s comments, smelt fresh enough – in fact somewhat over-disinfected – but that was undoubtedly better than the alternative, and when her guide knocked on one of the doors she was answered by a voice which sounded unexpectedly vigorous.

‘You’ve got a visitor, Fred,’ the girl said, and left Laura in the doorway to face a small, wrinkled man muffled up in blankets in his wheelchair, who gave little sign of life beyond his eyes, which were bright blue and piercingly alert.

‘I thought it might be my daughter,’ Fred Betts said sharply. ‘But I expect she’s too busy.’

Laura smiled, knowing that she could not make up for a daughter, though at least she might break the monotony of life in a home for a while. She explained who she was and why she was here and saw the old man’s eyes become distant as he considered events which he could probably remember more clearly than he could recall what had happened yesterday.

‘He were all right, were old Murgatroyd,’ he said at length. ‘A fair boss and a fair man, but obsessed with his work. Never enough time for people was his trouble and it did for him in the end. Not that I’m saying he deserved what happened to him, mind. No one deserved that.’

‘I’m writing about his son,’ Laura said. ‘But it’s very hard to make any contact. The house is locked up and he doesn’t give interviews, apparently.’

‘He were always a close one, the lad, even as a babby. Never said much. And after his mother died he were sent away to school. And then his dad passed on an’ all, died of a broken heart, they reckoned – and I don’t think young David ever came back to Sibden after that. I never saw him, any road. The staff were laid off soon after the old man went, and the house was just abandoned. The gardens turned to a jungle. It were a crying shame after all the work that went into them previous. A terrible waste.’

‘What happened to his mother exactly?’ Laura asked.

‘She were a lovely lady. A bit nervy, like, even in t’beginning. She near jumped out of her skin one day when I came up on her unexpected, like, in the gardens. And she were left alone a lot in that place. Old Murgatroyd had his ambitions and he were away a lot. But she never got over t’second baby. A little girl, it were. Jennifer. The lad were about six or seven by then, and the housekeeper said he doted on t’baby. But his mother never recovered. She went a bit funny. And one night she took the little lass, and just walked into t’reervoir on Broadley Moor with her. They found them the next morning, the baby’s hands tangled up in her hair, they said. Lovely red hair she had, a bit like yours. Both drowned. Ten months old, the baby girl were. What did she ever do to hurt anyone?’ Even after all those years, the old man’s eyes filled with tears. ‘A crying shame, it were,’ he said.

‘I read the inquest report,’ Laura said. ‘But the boy? He must have been devastated.’

‘He got sent off to boarding school as soon as he were old enough – if you think eight’s old enough. His father never had much time for him, and after that he were more interested in burying himself

his political work than looking after his lad. By the time the boy were fourteen or so, the old man were dead any road. Left the lad a small fortune, but there'd been little love lost. When he came home f t'holidays he used to mooch around the house and garden on his own most o't' time. Came chattering to us working in t'garden, as if we had time to listen. Never brought friends back and he had no friends local, like. Not so far as I could see, any road. A lonely lad in a lonely, sad house. Like his mother were a lonely wife. I don't think old Murgatroyd meant any harm. He never saw it coming with his wife, that's for sure, but other folk did.'

Laura drove back to Bradfield slowly and headed straight home. She was not sure that Michael Thackeray would keep his promise to come back early, but she planned a meal which would survive until he eventually arrived. Then, she thought apprehensively, they really must talk. Soon it would become obvious that the worry that had oppressed her for the last few weeks had become a certainty and she had absolutely no confidence that he would greet the news that he might be about to become a father again with anything other than horror. And with the tragic story of David Murgatroyd's loss of his wife and baby daughter fresh in her mind, Laura was only too aware of why that might be so.

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## CHAPTER THREE

DS Kevin Mower had no doubt about the mood his boss was in when he went into his office the next morning. Difficult would have been the most charitable adjective he could ever conjure up for Thackeray after all the years he had worked for him, which did not mean that Mower did not have respect and even affection for the older man, but these were feelings he had learnt to keep to himself. And this morning the atmosphere resembled one of those days when a threatening sky seems to press down on the world and lightning can be seen flickering on the horizon.

‘Guv,’ he said tentatively, closing the door behind him. ‘You’ve seen the reports on this missing woman?’

‘Why wasn’t I told about this yesterday?’ Thackeray said. ‘It seems to have been obvious enough to the young copper who interviewed the husband that something serious was up.’

‘Well, she told her sergeant that, but he didn’t agree, played it down, so it didn’t go in her written report. There was absolutely no evidence that Karen Bastable hadn’t left home of her own free will. They filed a misper report and circulated the car number. When I spoke to him he was still a bit dismissive of PC Mirza’s worries. She told him Bastable was a racist bastard and he’s obviously got it up her nose. That may be why he discounted her concerns.’

‘Do you know PC Mirza?’ Thackeray asked.

‘I’ve met her actually,’ Mower said. ‘She was with “Omar” Sharif at a race relations course at HQ a couple of months ago.’

‘And...?’

‘She seemed a sharp cookie,’ Mower conceded. ‘Sharif seemed to rate her too. Reckoned she’d do well.’

‘Right. So talk to her before you go and see Bastable. Get her take on the situation. If this woman’s car’s been found ten miles from home and a couple of miles into Bently Forest, which is not exactly the spot you’d go for a picnic at this time of year, it casts a whole new light on her disappearance. And if I’ve got to persuade Jack Longley to start a major search in that sort of terrain, I’m going to need all the facts at my disposal. What time did the forestry workers report this?’

‘The message came in at about 8.30 this morning from their foreman. But they actually saw the car yesterday morning parked in the clearing where they were working. Apparently they just thought someone was walking in the woods but when no one had come back by the end of the day they decided to report it to the foreman, but he’d gone home, so they did the same. They only mentioned it this morning when they went in to work.’

‘So we’ve already lost twenty-four hours?’ Thackeray said incredulously. ‘Don’t they carry mobile phones, these silly beggars?’ Mower shrugged.

‘If they do, they obviously didn’t think it was worth calling in. Incredible. Though to be fair, you’re lucky to get a decent signal in some of those remote areas.’

‘Did it rain up there last night? It was pouring down when I got home.’

‘I think it was pretty general. So forensics will have a hard time finding anything useful at the scene,’ Mower said.

‘Right. First things first. Get uniform to make sure the car is still up there, and cordon it off.’ Thackeray said. ‘We don’t want anyone putting muddy fingerprints all over it before we’ve had a thorough look. Then talk to PC Mirza before you go to see the husband. Take her with you if you like. She might be useful in spotting if he’s changed his story at all. There’s only two possibilities, if she drove to a remote spot like that. She’s either still up there, alive, or quite possibly dead. Or she left someone else’s vehicle. Again, she could have gone off willingly with someone. Or perhaps not.’

‘Guv,’ Mower said.

Thackeray sat immobile for a long time after Mower had closed his office door behind him but his mind was not on the possible disappearance of Karen Bastable. He had not gone home early the previous evening, as he had promised Laura, and when he finally arrived he had found her already in bed reading.

‘Have you eaten?’ she had asked ungraciously, when he had pleaded pressure of work. But he had shaken his head, then slumped in a chair watching TV and not gone to bed himself until he had been sure she was asleep. He guessed that she wanted to talk about a commitment he had rashly made a few months before, a last desperate throw, he thought now, to keep Laura with him and one which he had come to regret. Now life had returned to something more like normal, he realised how hard that commitment would be to keep, how much, in fact, it terrified him. However much Laura wanted a child, he did not think that he could possibly become a father again.

Sergeant Kevin Mower warmed to PC Nasreem Mirza. She described her interview with Terry Bastable with a glint of humour in her dark eyes.

‘You don’t let the racist bastards get you down, then?’ Mower asked.

‘You can’t, can you? They’d only think they were winning. It’s been worse since the London bombs, of course, but I’m not going to be blamed for what those idiots did.’

‘Do you want to come with me to talk to him again? You obviously weren’t happy with what he told you.’

‘It was more that there was something I thought he wasn’t telling me,’ Nasreem said. ‘I’ll certainly come if you want me to. If my sergeant’s happy.’

The sergeant was happy enough, but it was obvious that Terry Bastable was not when the two officers arrived on his doorstep.

‘Have you found her?’ he demanded as he reluctantly let them into the house, reserving his glare for the Asian PC and addressing himself entirely to Mower.

‘We’ve found her car, Mr Bastable, apparently abandoned, but there’s no sign of your wife, I’m afraid.’

Bastable threw himself onto the sofa and ran a hand across his forehead, as if to wipe something away.

‘I’ve not had a bloody wink of sleep,’ he said. ‘Couldn’t stop thinking about her, where the hell she might be.’

‘You’ve heard nothing, I take it?’ Mower asked. ‘You’d have called us...?’

‘Nowt,’ Bastable said. ‘She’s gone without a bloody word. She wouldn’t do that, would she? Not our Karen. Summat bad must have happened or she would have got in touch. The kids are up the wall...’

‘Have you any idea why she might have driven up to Bently, that big Forestry Commission plantation beyond Haworth?’ Mower asked.

‘I’ve no bloody idea,’ Bastable said. ‘I didn’t know there was a plantation beyond Haworth. I’ve

never bleeding heard of it.'

'Well, in view of the fact that her car was found abandoned in such a remote spot, we'll have to start a search up there,' Mower said carefully. 'There's still no firm evidence that anything untoward has happened to your wife, Mr Bastable, but it's looking more likely than yesterday.'

'I told this P—, this *officer*, that summat untoward had happened, didn't I?' Bastable spat back. 'Karen would never have just gone off wi'out a word. Never.'

'There is just one thing you could do at this stage to help us,' Nasreem said calmly. 'Would you like me to have a look round the house, just to get an idea of what she was like, the sort of clothes she wore, that sort of thing?' It was obvious from Bastable's face that he wanted to say no, but he glanced at Mower's implacable expression and thought better of it.

'I suppose so,' he said, addressing Mower again. 'Though I've told *her* already.' He scowled in Nasreem's direction. 'She's taken nowt with her that I know of.' PC Mirza glanced at Mower, who nodded, and she left the room to go upstairs. From below they could hear her moving quickly around the bedroom above them, opening drawers and cupboards. Bastable sat forward, as if tensed to spring out of his chair. His hostility to Nasreem Mirza was palpable and Mower determined to warn his sergeant not to send her here on her own again.

'Calm down, Mr Bastable,' he said. 'This is all just routine.'

'Not for me, it's bloody not,' Bastable grunted.

'So tell me some more about Karen. What about her friends?' Mower asked. 'Have you contacted anyone to ask if they know where she might have gone?'

Bastable glared at Mower for a long moment before he replied.

'What friends?' he asked. 'You mean a boyfriend? You mean she might have a boyfriend?' His colour rose and for a moment Mower thought that he might take a swing at him with one of his fiercely clenched fists.

'I didn't mean that,' Mower said quietly. 'Though if you've any evidence...?' He left the question hanging in a heavy silence. Bastable did not reply and gradually he sank back into his chair, deflated.

'I meant her friends, girlfriends, workmates perhaps, or women she goes out with occasionally. Anyone she worked with who she might have talked to?' Mower persisted. 'She must have some women friends, surely.'

'Girls' nights out, you mean? She doesn't do owt like that,' Bastable said. 'I don't like gangs of women out to get pissed. That's no way for a married woman to behave. Mind you...' He stopped again. 'Just recently, she's been out a few times with Charlene.'

'Who's Charlene?'

'I've not met her. She talks about someone called Charlene at her work,' Bastable said. 'You'll have to ask at Shirley's.'

'Right, I'll check her out,' Mower promised. PC Mirza came back into the room and shook his head imperceptibly and the sergeant got to his feet.

'We'll launch a search around where the car was found, probably later today, Mr Bastable,' he said. 'But it's an isolated spot and it'll take some time. We'll keep you in touch with what's happening, and if there's anything else that you think we should know, don't hesitate to contact us, will you?'

Bastable had slumped in his chair now, his eyes closed.

'She wouldn't have gone of her own free will,' he muttered. 'Not Karen. Summat bad's happened to her. I know it has.'

Back in the car, Mower glanced at Nasreem.

'What did you think?' he asked.

‘It all looked perfectly ordinary upstairs,’ she said. ‘Though she’s got a lot of sexy underwear, will say that. A few things I’d never seen before. Must have come from one of those special shops. My parents would go potty if I came home with anything like that.’

‘Perhaps she and Terry have an exciting sex life,’ Mower said mildly. Nasreem shuddered slightly.

‘Rather her than me,’ she said.

‘Are you married?’ Mower asked tentatively.

‘No, I’m the despair of my parents’ life,’ Nasreem said, with a shrug. ‘It’s not as if they’re particularly religious. There was no nonsense about covering my head, or anything. And they were happy to support me at school and college and with my career. It’s just that at my age, most Muslim women are married with kids. It’s obvious they’d like grandchildren. They always do, don’t they, parents?’ She shrugged and glanced at Mower. ‘It’s just the problem of finding the right man. The longer I’m independent, I guess, the harder it’s going to be.’

‘I know the feeling,’ Mower said, the image of the beautiful Indian girl he had once loved and then lost flashing briefly into his mind. He seldom thought about her these days. Their affair had been brief and had ended tragically. But that was as close as he had ever got to marriage, he thought, and he could not imagine that it would ever happen again.

‘Right,’ he said. ‘Let’s go and chase up Mrs Bastable’s friend, Charlene, and see if she knows anything about where she might have gone or who she might have been meeting.’

Sutton Park School occupied a motley collection of dilapidated buildings on a steep hillside overlooking the centre of Bradfield. Its core, originally a boys’ secondary school, was a grim stone pile which in the expansionist Sixties had proved inadequate for its new mixed intake as a comprehensive school, and had been surrounded and almost overwhelmed by extensions and temporary classrooms. As Laura Ackroyd drove into the car park and reversed into a solitary slot marked for visitors, she pulled a wry face. She knew the temptation there must be here to accept a multimillion pound rebuilding programme and began to wonder why the governors and staff could possibly object to what they had to give up in return for becoming an academy. Could passing control to Sir David Murgatroyd be so dreadful that they would rather continue to live and work in this municipal slum? On the surface, it seemed like a small price to pay.

She locked her car and followed the notices which led her to a cramped reception area and then to the office of the head teacher, Debbie Stapleton, a smartly dressed plump woman with a warm smile in spite of the lines of strain around her eyes.

‘Come in,’ the head teacher said warmly, holding out her hand. ‘Your grandmother said you would give us a fair hearing in the *Gazette*. We could certainly do with some support.’

‘Tell me about it,’ Laura said, accepting the chair Debbie waved her into and switching on her tape recorder. ‘Why have you been singled out to be an academy?’

Debbie waved a hand at the view from her window, where puddles of rainwater stood on flat roofs and scaffolding surrounded a dilapidated outcrop from the original stone building, although there were no workmen in sight.

‘The place is falling down,’ she said. ‘And we’ll get no money for rebuilding for years and years unless the council goes for academy status.’

‘That sounds a bit like blackmail,’ Laura said.

‘You said that, not me. I couldn’t possibly comment.’ Debbie Stapleton’s face relaxed into a smile. ‘I’m not allowed to.’

‘So what’s so bad about it?’

‘There are two objections, really,’ the headmistress said. ‘One of principle, the other specific to this school. In principle, I personally don’t think that control of schools should be taken away from the local community. The governors here are not political apparatchiks. They represent all the people who have a stake in the school, and the whole of the community we serve: local business, the minority ethnic groups, we even have the local vicar on board, plus parents, staff, students. That would all go. The governors would be appointed by the sponsor. But to be honest, if that were the only objection I don’t think I could carry the existing governors with me. They’d look at the plans for shiny new buildings, computers, laboratories and the rest and they’d go for it.’

‘So what’s the second objection?’ Laura asked.

‘David Murgatroyd,’ Debbie said. ‘The second objection is personal. This is a multi-ethnic school. We take most of the Muslim children from around Aysgarth Lane. Plus most of the white children from the Heights, and quite a lot of black youngsters. They have all sorts of problems, but we’re beginning to make a success of it. They do well here. Exam results are improving. Discipline is improving. The inspectors are happy – or much happier than they were before I came, anyway. We don’t need Murgatroyd. He’s some sort of born-again Christian. He’s been accused in Parliament of forcing his views on the academies he’s already running. They’re imposing rigid regimes and throwing out anyone who won’t conform – children or staff. Where will our difficult kids go if they can’t come here? St Mark’s is very successful at filling its places with middle-class kids. Who’s going to look after the rest if we don’t?’

‘I’m trying to write a profile of David Murgatroyd, but he’s a very elusive man. I’ve not been able to get near him for an interview.’

Debbie Stapleton laughed.

‘No one can get near him, according to my teachers’ union people. The closest anyone gets is one of his bag carriers, a man called Winston Sanderson. He’s been to talk to our governors but they were less than impressed. Not because he’s black, which he is; Jamaican heritage, I think. People simply don’t like his uncompromising views, which presumably echo his boss’s. Intelligent design, no proper sex education, homophobic prejudice...you name it. Of course, we have some parents who’d go along with some of that, especially some of the Muslims, but we’ve succeeded here so far by emphasising tolerance of difference. You can’t realistically ban bullying because of the colour of someone’s skin and then let it rip if they have a different sexuality. Bullying is bullying, in my book, and we don’t put up with it here.’

Laura was surprised at how passionate Debbie Stapleton suddenly became. She flushed and glanced away for a moment and Laura saw that her eyes were filled with tears.

‘I was bullied at school myself,’ she said quietly. ‘This man Murgatroyd stands for everything I hate.’

Laura paused for a moment to let the headmistress compose herself.

‘Would you survive the change yourself, as head, I mean?’ Laura asked.

Debbie shrugged. ‘I’d have to apply for my own job. I shouldn’t think my face would fit.’

‘Do you have any contact details for this man Sanderson? Maybe I can get to Murgatroyd through him.’

‘You could try,’ Debbie said. ‘He left me a mobile number. Apparently he travels a lot. Murgatroyd himself is based in London.’

‘He is a Yorkshireman, by birth anyway, apparently, and he has a house up here,’ Laura said. ‘He seems to have hung on to the family home in Sibden, but he wasn’t there when I went up to see if I could catch him.’

‘Right,’ Debbie said. ‘Mr Sanderson did say they stay there sometimes. In any case, Dav Murgatroyd is coming here in a week’s time. Sanderson said his boss would want to talk to the governors himself after they gave him quite a rough time at the last meeting. It’s scheduled for the 16th. You ought to be able to catch both of them then.’

‘Fine,’ Laura said. ‘I’ll certainly try to pin them down then if I can’t make contact before that, though my editor is pressing me for something sooner rather than later.’ She wrote down Sanderson’s mobile number carefully.

‘These people can’t career around the country taking over schools without explaining to people exactly what they have in mind for them, can they?’ she asked.

‘Oh, I wouldn’t bank on it,’ Debbie Stapleton said. ‘That seems to be exactly what Dav Murgatroyd is doing. And I don’t anticipate being here very long myself if he gets away with it at Sutton Park. As I said, I’m quite sure I’ll be the first to go.’ She gazed out of the window for a second with a weary expression. ‘All that work here and that’s the thanks I get,’ she said quietly.

‘You must have succeeded Margaret Jackson as head,’ Laura said. ‘I met her when a boy was killed here some years ago. Did you know about that?’

‘Oh yes, that was one of the reasons my partner said I’d be a fool to take this on. But it was ancient history, really, and it wasn’t anything to do with the kids here, was it? I think they were much more affected when Margaret died so soon after she left. That upset a lot of them.’

‘Yes, I knew she had cancer,’ Laura said. ‘It was a bad time for the school. They were lucky not to be closed down then, I think.’

‘They’ve been on the brink so long that I think the staff have got used to it. But we have made real progress in the last couple of years. That’s what’s so galling about this takeover bid. But people will be seduced by the promise of new buildings. You can see what a dump the place is. It may be blackmail, but it’ll probably work.’

‘Well, good luck,’ Laura said. ‘I’ll give you a call about the 16th if I haven’t succeeded in tracking Murgatroyd down before then.’

Karen Bastable’s friend Charlene Brough was not at work when DS Kevin Mower and PC Nasreen Mirza went looking for her. She was off sick, according to her supervisor, who reluctantly provided an address for her on the other side of the Heights from where the Bastables themselves lived – a tightly packed warren of newly built houses with tiny gardens that had been intended for first-time buyers but which were almost all occupied now by families with young children, trapped there by the housing market.

Mower knocked at the white PVC front door and glanced upstairs at the tightly curtained bedroom windows.

‘If she’s really sick, she could be asleep,’ he said. He knocked again and eventually the door was opened a crack by a woman in a black lacy negligee. She hesitated for a moment when Mower introduced himself before grudgingly easing the door open to let them in. She led them into an untidy living room and waved them into chairs before lighting a cigarette and drawing the smoke deep into her lungs. She was a small woman, pale and thin to the point of emaciation, with untidy blond hair still uncombed and smudges of black make-up around her eyes that only accentuated the deep hollows of tiredness.

‘I’m sorry to bother you if you’re not well, Mrs Brough,’ Mower said. ‘But we’re becoming increasingly worried about your friend Karen Bastable.’

At the mention of Karen’s name Charlene shuddered and flung herself down on a chair by the

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