

Susan Hill

A SIMON SERRAILLER MYSTERY

THE PURE IN
HEART



Also by Susan Hill

FEATURING SIMON SERRAILLER
THE VARIOUS HAUNTS OF MEN

Fiction

GENTLEMAN AND LADIES
A CHANGE FOR THE BETTER
I'M THE KING OF THE CASTLE
THE ALBATROSS AND OTHER STORIES
STRANGE MEETING
THE BIRD OF NIGHT
A BIT OF SINGING AND DANCING
IN THE SPRINGTIME OF THE YEAR
THE WOMAN IN BLACK
MRS. DE WINTER
THE MIST IN THE MIRROR
AIR AND ANGELS
THE SERVICE OF CLOUDS
THE BOY WHO TAUGHT THE BEEKEEPER TO READ

Non-Fiction

THE MAGIC APPLE TREE
FAMILY

Children's Books

ONE NIGHT AT A TIME
CAN IT BE TRUE?
THE GLASS ANGELS

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For
my moles everywhere

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Blessed are the pure in heart:
for they shall see God

The Gospel According to St Matthew

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One

At first light the mist was soft and smoky over the lagoon and it was cold enough for Simon Serraillo to be glad of his heavy donkey jacket. He stood on the empty Fondamenta, collar turned up, waiting cocooned in the muffled silence. Dawn on a Sunday morning in March was not a time for much activity on this side of Venice, where few tourists came; the working city was at rest and even the early churchgoers were not yet about.

He always stayed here, in the same couple of rooms he rented above an empty warehouse belonging to the friend, Ernesto, who would appear any moment to take him across the water. The rooms were comfortable and plain and filled with wonderful light from the sky and the water. They were quiet at night, and from the Fondamenta Simon could walk about among the hidden backwaters, looking out for things he wanted to draw. He had been here at least once, and usually twice a year for the last decade. It was a working place and a bolt-hole from his life as a Detective Chief Inspector, as were similar hideouts in Florence and Rome. But it was in Venice that he felt most at home, to Venice he always returned.

The putter of an engine came just ahead of the craft itself, emerging close beside him out of the silvery mist.

‘Ciao.’

‘Ciao, Ernesto.’

The boat was small and workmanlike, without any of the romance or trimmings of traditional Venetian craft. Simon put his canvas bag under the seat and then stood up beside the boatman as the boat swung round and headed across the open water. The mist settled like cobwebs on their faces and hands and for a while Ernesto slowed right down until, suddenly, they seemed to cut a channel through the whiteness and emerge into a hazy buttery light beyond which Simon could see the island ahead.

He had been to San Michele several times before to wander about, looking, recording in his mind what he saw with his eye – he never used a camera – and he knew that at this hour, with luck, he would find it deserted even of the elderly arthritic widows who came in their black to tend the family graves.

Ernesto did not chat. He was not a voluble Italian. He was a baker, still working out of the cavernous kitchen generations of his family had used, still delivering the fresh hot bread round the canals. But it would be the last, he said, every time Simon came; his sons were not interested, they were off to universities in Padua and Genoa, his daughter was married to the manager of a hotel near San Marco and when he stopped baking the ovens would go cold.

Venice was changing, Venetian trades were in decline, the young would not stay, were not interested in the hard life of daily work by boat. Venice would die soon. Simon found it impossible to believe it hard to take the prophecies of doom seriously when the ancient, magical city was still here, floating above the lagoon after thousands of years and in spite of all predictions. Somehow, somehow, it would

survive, and the real Venice, too, not merely the overloaded and expensive tourist city. The people who lived and worked in the backwaters of the Zattere and the Fondamenta and the canals behind the railway station, and would still do so in a hundred years' time, propping one another up, servicing the hotels and the tourist area.

But 'Venice she dying', Ernesto said again, waving his hand at San Michele, the island of the dead, soon this was all there would be, one great graveyard.

They swung up to the landing stage and Simon climbed out with his bag.

'Lunchtime,' Ernesto said. 'Noon.'

*

Simon waved his hand and walked off towards the cemetery, with its well-tended paths and flowered marble memorials.

The sound of the motor boat faded away almost at once, so that all he could hear were his own footsteps, some early-morning birdsong and, otherwise, the extraordinary quietness.

He had been right. No one else was here – no bowed old women with black headscarves, no families with small boys in long shorts carrying bunches of bright flowers, no workmen hoeing the weeds on the edges of the gravel.

It was still cool, but the mist had lifted and the sun was rising.

He had first come upon the memorial a couple of years before and made a mental note about it, but he had been spending most of his time that year at all hours of the day among the market stalls, drawing the piles of fruit and fish and vegetables, the crowds, the stall holders and had not had time or energy to take in the burial island in detail.

He reached it and stopped. On top of the stone plinth was an angel with folded wings, perhaps ten feet high and flanked by three cherubs, all with bent heads and expressions of grief, all gravely and impassively beautiful. Although they were idealised, Simon was sure they had originally been taken from life. The date on the grave was 1822, and the faces of the angels were characteristically Venetian, faces you still saw today, in elderly men on the vaporetto and young men and women promenading in their designer clothes on weekend evenings along the riva degli Schiavoni. You saw the face in the great paintings in the churches, and as cherubs and saints and virgins and prelates and humble citizens gazing upwards. Simon was fascinated by it.

He found a place to sit, on a ledge of one of the adjacent monuments, and took out his drawing pad and pencils. He had also made himself a flask of coffee and brought some fruit. The light was still hazy and it was not warm. But he would be absorbed here now for the next three hours or so, not breaking off to stretch his legs occasionally by walking up and down the paths. At twelve Ernesto would return for him. He would take his things back to the flat, then go for a Campari and lunch at the trattoria he used most of the time he was here. Later, he would sleep before going out to walk into the busier parts of the city, perhaps taking a vaporetto the length of the Grand Canal and back for the delight of riding on the water between the ancient, crumbling, gilded houses, seeing the lights come on.

His days scarcely varied. He drew, walked, ate and drank, slept, looked. He did not think much about home and his other, working life.

This time, though ...

He knew why he was drawn to San Michele and the statue of the wildly grieving angels, just as he had haunted the dark, incense-filled little churches in odd corners of the city, wandering about inside

watching the same old widows in black kneeling with their rosary beads or lighting candles at one of the stands.

The death of Freya Graffham, who had been a DS under him at Lafferton Police Station for such a short time, had affected him far more than he might have expected and for longer. It was a year since her murder and he was still haunted by the horror of it and by the fact that his emotions had been engaged by her in a way he had not admitted to himself while she had been alive.

His sister Dr. Cat Deerbon had said he was allowing himself to feel more deeply for Freya simply because she was dead and so unable to respond and therefore unthreatening.

Had he felt threatened? He understood perfectly well what his sister meant but perhaps, with Freya it had been different.

He shifted his weight and resettled the sketch pad on his knees. He was not drawing the whole statue but the face of each angel and cherub individually; he intended to come back again to do the complete monument and then work up each drawing until he was satisfied. His next exhibition would be his first in London. Everything had to be right.

Half an hour later he got up to stretch his legs. The cemetery was still deserted and the sun was full out now, warming his face as he walked up and down the path between the black and white and grey gravestones. Several times on this particular visit to Venice Simon had wondered if he might ever come to live here. He had always been passionate about his job – he had taken the opposite path to that of his entire family, doctors for three generations – but the pull of this other life, of drawing and perhaps living abroad to do so, had become increasingly strong since Freya's death.

He was thirty-five. He would make Superintendent before long. He wanted it.

He did not want it.

He turned back towards the grieving angels. But the path ahead was no longer empty. Ernesto was walking towards him, and when he saw Simon, he raised an arm.

'Ciao – something wrong?'

'I've come back for you. There was a phone call.'

'Work?'

'No, family. Your father. He needs you call him right back.'

Simon put sketchbook and pencils back into the canvas satchel and followed Ernesto quickly to the landing stage.

Ma, he thought, something's happened to her. His mother had had a slight stroke a couple of months previously, the result of elevated blood pressure and too much stress, but she had made a good recovery and it had apparently not left any after-effects. Cat had told him there was no need for him to cancel his trip. 'She's fine, it wasn't major, Si. There is no reason for her to have another. Anyway, she isn't right, you can get back quickly enough.' Which was what he must do, he thought, standing beside Ernesto as they sped back across the now sunlit water.

The only surprise was that it had not been Cat but his father who had telephoned. Richard Serraille disapproved of Simon's choice of career, of his commitment to art, of his unmarried state – of his period.

'Did he sound worried?'

Ernesto shrugged.

'Did he mention my mother?'

'No. Just you call.'

The motor boat shot up to the Fondamenta, turned neatly and stopped.

Simon put his hand on Ernesto's arm. 'You're a good friend. Thanks for coming back.'
Ernesto merely nodded.

*

Simon ran up the dark staircase from the empty warehouse to the flat and threw his satchel and jacket on the floor. The telephone connection had improved since the new digital lines had come in and he heard the ringing tone in Hallam House at once.

'Serrailer.'

'It's Simon.'

'Yes.'

'Is Mother all right?'

'Yes. I rang to tell you about your sister.'

'Cat? What's happened?'

'Martha. She has bronchial pneumonia. They've taken her to Bevhams General. If you want to see her alive you should come home.'

'Of course, I ...'

But he was speaking to a dead line. Richard Serrailer wasted words on no one, least of all his policeman son.

There was an evening flight to London but it took Simon half an hour on the telephone and in the end the help of a contact in the Italian police to get himself a seat on it. The rest of the day was spent packing, sorting out the flat and arranging for Ernesto to take him to the airport, so it was not until he was on the crowded plane that he had leisure to think. And he had not thought, not until now. His father's telephone call had been an order in all but name and he had obeyed without question. His relationship with Richard Serrailer was so poor that Simon behaved towards him as towards one of his superiors in the force and with about as much emotional involvement.

His seat was over a wing so there was little chance to look down on to the lagoon when they took off, which was as well because he minded leaving Venice more than usual, leaving his refuge, his work and his calm, private space. Walking about the city, over canal bridges, through the squares, down the little dark passageways between the tall old houses, sitting looking and drawing, talking to Ernesto and his friends over an evening drink, Simon Serrailer was a different man from the DCI at Lafferton. His life and concerns were different, his priorities changed entirely. Time on the journey was time in which he moved from one to the other, but tonight he was being hurtled back into his everyday life without the usual relaxed period of adjustment.

The sign to fasten seat belts went off and the drinks trolley was being manoeuvred up the aisle. He asked for a gin and tonic and a bottle of mineral water.

Simon Serrailer was one of triplets. His GP sister, Cat, was the second, their brother Ivo, a doctor in Australia, the third. Martha was ten years younger, born when Richard and Meriel Serrailer were in their mid-forties; she was severely mentally and physically handicapped and had lived in a special care home for most of her life. Martha might or might not recognise Simon. No one could tell.

The sight of his sister had always moved him profoundly. Sometimes she lay in bed, sometimes she was in a wheelchair, her body propped up and strapped in, her head supported. If it was fine he would wheel her into the garden and round the paths between shrubs and flower beds. Otherwise they sat in her room or in one of the lounges. There was nothing he could do for her. He talked to her and held her

hand and kissed her when he arrived and left.

Over the years he had come to worry less about whether she knew him or gained anything from his company; if his visits had no significance for her, they became important to him, in some thing of the way these visits to Italy were important. With Martha, he was someone else. The time he spent beside her, holding her hand, thinking, talking quietly, helping her to sip a drink through a straw or eat from a spoon, absorbed and calmed him and took him away from everything else in his life.

She was pitiful, ugly, drooling, unable to communicate, barely responsive and as a boy he had been embarrassed and upset by her. Martha had not changed. He had.

His parents mentioned her occasionally but her situation was never discussed in depth or detail and emotions were always kept out of such conversations. What did his mother feel about her or for her? His father went to visit her but never spoke of it.

If she was unwell her condition always became acute very rapidly yet she had survived for twenty-five years. Colds led to chest infections then pneumonia. *'If you want to see your sister alive ...'* But that had all happened before. Was she going to die this time? Was he sorry? How could he be? How could anyone? Did he wish her dead then? Simon's mind veered away. But he needed to talk. When he got into Heathrow he would ring Cat.

He drank more of his gin. In the locker above his head were two sketchbooks full of new drawings from which he would select the best to work up into finished pieces for his exhibition. Perhaps he had got enough after all and the extra five days in Venice would simply have been spent mooching about.

He finished his drink, took out the small sketch block he always carried and began to draw the elaborately plaited and beaded hair of the young African woman in the seat opposite.

The plane droned on over the Alps.

Two

‘It’s me.’

‘Hi!’ Pleased, as always, to hear her brother’s voice, Cat Deerbon sat down ready to talk. ‘Hang on Si, let me shift myself.’

‘You OK?’

‘Fine, just don’t know how to get comfortable.’ Cat’s baby, her third child, was due in a couple of weeks.

‘OK, I’m as settled as I can get ... but listen, it costs a fortune on the mobile from Italy, let me call you back?’

‘I’m at Heathrow.’

‘What ...?’

‘Dad rang. He said I’d better come home if I wanted to see my sister alive again.’

‘Oh, tactfully put.’

‘As ever.’

‘Ma and I decided we weren’t going to tell you.’

‘Why?’

‘Because you needed your holiday and there’s nothing you can do, Martha won’t know you ...’

‘But I will know her.’

Cat was silenced for a second. Then she said, ‘Of course you will. I’m sorry.’

‘No need. Listen I won’t be back till pretty late but I’ll go straight to the hospital.’

‘OK. Chris is out on a call and he may well go in to see her again if he’s up that way. Will you come over here tomorrow? I’m getting too big to be behind the wheel safely.’

‘What about Ma?’

‘I just can’t tell what she’s feeling, Si, you know how it is. She goes up there. She goes home. Sometimes she comes here but she doesn’t talk about it.’

‘What exactly happened?’

‘The usual – cold then chest infection now pneumonia ... how many times have we been there? But don’t think her body is up to fighting it now. She’s barely responded to the treatment and Chris says they’re now wondering how aggressive that ought to be.’

‘Poor little Martha.’

Her brother’s voice, concerned and tender, echoed in her ears as Cat put down the phone. Tears filled her eyes, as they did so easily in pregnancy ... even the sight, that afternoon, of one of her daughter’s soft toys, lying scrunpled on the grass after it had been left out in the rain had made Cat soften to weeping. She heaved herself awkwardly off the sofa. She had forgotten almost everything about how she felt to be expecting a baby. Sam was eight and a half now and Hannah seven. They had not planned

this third child. She and Chris were the only two partners in their general practice and stretched to the limits of their time and energy. ~~But though she meant to take the odd surgery as soon as she could~~ realistically Cat knew that she would be out of action for the next six months and part-time at work for the year after that. Besides, now the baby was coming and she had got used to the idea, she wanted to be at home with it and give more time to the other two, not rush back to the exhausting grind of medical practice. There would not be a fourth child. This one was precious. She was going to enjoy it.

She lay on the sofa trying to sleep but unable to stop the cycle of thought. How odd and yet how typical of their father to make the phone call to Venice and in those terms. *'If you want to see your sister alive, you'd better come home.'*

Yet how often did he ever see Martha? Cat had scarcely heard the girl's name cross his lips though he had once infuriated her by calling Martha 'the vegetable' in Sam and Hannah's hearing. Was he ashamed of having a brain-damaged child? Or angry? Did he blame himself or Meriel?

And what had been the reasoning behind his call to Simon, the other child for whom he had precious little time?

Simon, the person she loved, aside from her husband and children, above all other.

The cat Mephisto appeared from nowhere to leap softly on to the sofa beside her and settle down.

All three of them slept.

Three

The streets were dark and almost deserted though it was barely ten o'clock. But the lights of Bevham General Hospital blazed out and as Simon Serrailler turned into the slip road an ambulance overtook him, siren wailing, speeding towards A & E.

He had always liked working at night, liked it from his first days as a uniformed constable on the beat, liked it now on the few occasions when he had to take charge of a night-time operation. He was fired up by the sense of emergency, the way everything was intensified, every movement and word seemed significant, as well as the strange closeness engendered by the knowledge that they were people working on important and sometimes dangerous jobs, while the rest of the world slept.

He got out of his car in the half-empty car park and looked at the great slab of hospital building, nine storeys high and with various lower blocks at angles to it.

Venice was light years away, yet for a second he had a flash picture of the cemetery at San Michele as it had been in the cool light of that Sunday morning, of the ribbons of gravel path and the pale, stony grieving statues. There, as here at the hospital now, so much emotion was somehow held, packed in every crevice, so that you breathed and felt and smelled it.

He walked in through the glass doors. By day, the hospital foyers were more like the concourse of an airport, with a mall of small shops and a constant passage of people. Bevham General was a teaching hospital, centre of excellence for several specialties, with a huge number of staff and patients. Now when outpatient areas and offices were dark, the real hospital atmosphere crept back into the quiet corridors. Lights behind ward doors, the screech of a trolley wheel, a low voice, the rattle of cubicle curtains ... Simon walked slowly towards ITU, and the atmosphere, the sense of life and death together, pressed in on him, raising his pulse.

'Chief Inspector?'

He smiled. One of the few people here who knew him professionally happened to be the sister on duty.

The ward was settling for the night. Screens were drawn round one or two beds, lights on in a side ward. In the back ground, the faint bleep and hum of electronic monitors. Death seemed very close, if it hovered in the shadows or behind a curtain, its hand on the door.

'She's in a side room.' Sister Blake led him down through the ward.

A doctor, shirtsleeves rolled up, stethoscope dangling, came out of a cubicle and shot off, checking his pager as he went.

'They get younger.'

Sister Blake glanced round. 'Down to about sixteen I'd say.' She stopped. 'Your sister is in here. It's quiet. Dr Serrailler has been with her most of the day.'

'What's the outlook?'

~~‘People in your sister’s condition are prone to develop chest infections ... well, you know that, she had them often enough. All the physio in the world can’t make up for the lack of essential movement~~

Martha had never walked. She had the brain of a baby and virtually no motor function. She had never talked, though she made babbling and cooing noises, never gained any control over her body. She had been in bed, in chairs and wheelchairs, her head propped up on a frame for the whole of her life. When she was a small child, they had taken it in turns to carry her, but her weight had always been leaden and none of them had been able to manage her beyond her third year.

‘That’s the ward phone and there’s no one on the desk ... understaffed as usual. I’ll be there if you want anything.’

‘Thanks, Sister.’

Simon opened the door of Room C.

It was the smell that hit him first – the smell of sickness he had always loathed; but the sight of his sister in the high, narrow, uncomfortable looking bed cut to his heart. The monitors to which she was attached by various wires and leads flickered, the clear bag of fluid hanging from its stand bubbled silently now and then as it was fed, drip by drip, into the vein in her arm.

But when he went closer to the bed and looked down at her, the machinery became invisible and irrelevant. Simon saw the sister he had always seen. Martha. Brain-damaged, inert, pale, heavy, drool dribble coming from the corner of her slightly open mouth. Martha. Who knew what she had ever registered about her life, the world, her surroundings, the people who cared for her, the family who loved her? No one had ever really been able to communicate with her. Her awareness and understanding were less than those of a pet.

And yet ... there had been something of the life spark within her to which Simon had responded from the beginning, and which was deeper and greater than compassion or even a sense of simple kinship with someone of his own flesh and blood. Before she had gone to live in Ivy Lodge, he had often taken her out to the garden, or strapped her into his car and driven her for miles, sure that she enjoyed looking out of the window; he had pushed her chair around the streets to divert her. He had always talked to her. She had certainly known his voice, though she could have had no idea of the meaning of the sounds that voice made. Later, when he had gone to see her in the home, he had become aware of an intent stillness that came over her as soon as she heard him speak.

He loved her, with the strange, pure love which can receive no recognition or response and demand neither.

Her hair had been brushed and lay loosely round her head on the high pillow. There was no real character or definition in her face; time seemed to have passed over it leaving it quite unaffected. But Martha’s hair, which had always been kept short so as to be more manageable for her carers, had recently been allowed to grow, and shone in the light of the overhead lamp, the same white-blond colour as his own.

Simon pulled the chair out, sat down and took her hand.

‘Hello, sweetheart. I’m here.’

He looked at her face, waited for that change in her breathing, the flicker of her eyelids, which would indicate that she knew, heard him, sensed him, and was comforted, reassured.

The green and white fluorescent lines of the monitor flowed on, making small regular wavelets across the screen.

Her breaths were shallow as they passed rustily in and out of her lungs.

‘I’ve been in Italy, drawing ... lots of faces. People in cafés, people riding on the vaporetto. Venetian faces. They’re the same faces you can see in the great paintings from five hundred years ago, it’s

face that doesn't change, only the clothes are modern. I sit in cafés and drink coffee or Campari and just look at the faces. No one minds.'

He talked on but her expression did not change, her eyes did not open. She was somewhere further away, deeper down and more out of reach than she had ever been.

He stayed for an hour, his hand over hers, taking to her quietly as if he were soothing a frightened infant.

He heard a trolley being pushed down the ward. Someone called out. An immense tiredness came over him so that for a moment he almost put his head down on the bed beside Martha so that he could sleep.

The bump of the door brought him up.

'Si.'

His brother-in-law, Cat's husband Chris Deerbon, slipped into the room. 'I thought you might need this.' He held out a poly styrene cup of tea. 'Cat said you'd got here.'

'She doesn't look good.'

'No.'

Simon stood up to stretch his back which always ached if he sat down for long. He was six feet four

Chris touched Martha's forehead, and glanced at the monitors.

'What do you think?'

Chris shrugged. 'Hard to know. She's had this all before but there's an awful lot against her.'

'Everything.'

'It's not much of a life.'

'Can we be sure?'

'I think so,' Chris said gently.

They stood looking down at Martha until Simon finished his tea and threw the cup across into the bin.

'That'll see me home. Thanks, Chris. I'm bushed.'

They left together. At the door Simon looked round. There had been nothing since he had arrived, no flicker, no indication, apart from the rusty breathing and the steady blip of the monitor, that the body on the bed was a living young woman. He went back, bent over Martha and kissed her face. The skin was damp and slightly downy, like the skin of a newborn baby.

Simon thought he would not see her alive again.

Four

‘Gunton?’

There had to be something of course, even today, just to let him know that nothing changed, until eight o’clock the next morning.

He turned.

Hickley was holding up the garden fork. ‘Call this clean?’

Andy Gunton went back into the long shed where all the tools were kept. He had cleaned the mud off the fork as carefully as he always did. If Hickley, the one screw he had never managed to get on with, had found a blob of dirt between two of the tines, then he had stuck it there himself.

‘No dirty tools, you know how it works.’ Hickley shoved the fork into Andy’s face.

Go on, the gesture said, go on, try me, answer back, cheek me, have a go at me with the garden fork ... do it and I’ll have you in here another month, see if I don’t.

Andy took the fork and went over to the bench under the window. Carefully, he wiped every prong and probed the cloth down between the blades, then he rubbed the handle over and over. Hickley watched, arms folded.

Beyond the window, the kitchen garden was empty, work over for the day. For a single, strange moment, Andy Gunton thought, I’ll miss it. I’ve sown seeds I won’t harvest, I’ve put in plants I won’t tend as they grow.

He caught his own thought and almost laughed.

He turned and handed the recleaned fork to the screw for inspection. He didn’t resent Hickley. There was always one. Hickley wasn’t like the other screws here who treated them more as teachers with pupils and got the best out of them as a result. To Hickley, they were the still inmates, the enemy. Scum. Was Andy scum? The first few weeks behind bars, he had felt like it. He had been shell-shocked by everything, but most of all by the reality he could not get his head round, that he was inside because, in the middle of a botched robbery, in panic he had shoved an innocent man and the man had crashed to the concrete, fractured his skull and died. The word *killer* had rung round and round his own head like a marble in a basin, *killer, killer, killer*. What else was a killer but scum?

He waited while the man inspected the garden fork. Go on, get your microscope out why don’t you you won’t find an effin speck.

‘Put it away.’

Andy Gunton slid the handle slowly into the metal holder on the shed wall. ‘Last time,’ he said.

But Hickley wasn’t going to wish him well, would have choked sooner than congratulate him on his final release. ‘Don’t let the bugger wind you up,’ someone had advised on his first day out here eighteen months ago. He remembered it again as he walked, without a word or a backward glance at Hickley, out of the shed, through the market garden away to the east wing of Birley Open Prison.

Through one of the ventilators in the kitchen block came the smell of boiled egg; through an open window the sound of a ball to and fro across a table tennis table, pock-pock, pock-pock.

Once, overhearing him say, 'There's always a first time,' one of the screws, during his first week in Stackton Prison, had snarled back at him, 'No, Gunton, there isn't always a first time but there's sure as hellfire always a last one.'

In the raw and still shell-shocked state he had been then, almost four years ago, the words had thwacked into his memory like an arrow on to a target and stuck there.

There's always a last. He stopped at the door to his own residential block and looked round. Last working day. Last time he'd clean a garden fork. Last eyeball-to-eyeball with Hickley. Last war-boiled egg with beetroot and potato. Last game of pool. Last night on the bed. Last. Last. Last.

His stomach churned momentarily as the giddy thought of the outside world came to him again. He had been there, first on shopping trips with a screw, then on the greengrocery run, delivering, but it wasn't the same, he knew that. Open prison began to loosen your shackles bit by bit but you still had them, you still belonged inside and not out, you were still conditioned by where you ate and slept, the company you kept, your past, the reason you were there.

Your body might be allowed out, but your mind stayed behind, your mind could not, dared not, take it in.

He unlocked his door. The late-afternoon sun touched the mushroom-coloured wall making it look even dingier. The whole place needed painting. They must have tried quite hard to start with, someone had probably been proud of themselves for their efforts to make it look as little like a prison cell as possible, and the public areas more youth club or office block. Now, though, everything needed recovering, repainting, refurbishing, replacing and never seemed scheduled to get it.

Last time, last time, last time. Out of here. Out ...

Andy opened the window. He remembered the first few days and how he couldn't get used to the little thing, being able to open his own window when he wanted to. He'd kept on doing it, opening and closing the window, opening and closing it.

He leaned out. Tomorrow, this room would belong to someone else. Another man moved from closed to open prison would do it all over again. Open the window. Close it. Open it. Close it, over and over. Tomorrow.

There was a bang on the door and Spike Jones was in the room before Andy had time to call out. Spike was OK.

'They're getting up a five-a-side.'

'Nah.'

'You what?'

'Anyway, I've handed in me boots.'

'Right. You taking Kylie Minogue?'

'She's yours.'

Spike laughed, picking up the rolled-up poster which was propped against the cupboard. He wouldn't be leaving Birley for another ten months. He'd always had his eye on that picture.

'You ent brooding?'

'Get off.'

Brooding. Andy turned back to the open window. Brooding. No. That had been at the start, in the first days and weeks at Stackton, when he hadn't known day from night and thought his mind was going. Brooding. He hadn't done that since coming here and getting out into the market garden. He wasn't about to take it up again.

The evening passed, like all the rest of them, and he was glad of that. He wouldn't have wanted anything to be different. He ate in the canteen, stood outside with a couple of the others watching the floodlit five-a-side, having a roll-up, went back in and played pool for an hour. At ten he was in his room, watching *The West Wing*.

He woke confused and sweating out of a nightmare. Security lights round the perimeter meant that it was never completely dark. It was just after three.

Then the shock of what was going to happen hit him again and he was terrified so that his stomach clenched and his throat felt tight. Four and a half years of prison life, of learning to conform, putting on a front, keeping his own real self so concealed that now he scarcely knew who that self was, of routine, of rules, of learning, and of every emotion there was played out, four and a half years swinging from rage to despair to acceptance to hope and back again. In five hours the four and a half years would be over. In five hours he would be out there. In five hours this room, this place would be nothing to him and, even more, he would be nothing to any of it. History. His name off the register, his face forgotten.

Five hours.

Andy Gunton lay on his back. If it was like this after four and a half years of a sentence, how was it for the ones who came out after fifteen or more? Did they feel this sudden wash of panic at the thought of being without walls, without props, without the deadening routine which after a short time became the only thing you clung to for safety?

He remembered the first week at Stackton. He had been twenty. He'd known nothing. The stench of the place and the racket, the dead faces and suspicious eyes, the need he had had not so much to breathe out or run away but simply to vanish, to dissolve, the droning snores of Joey Butler, his first cellmate that he never got used to, never slept through deeply enough, the red scaly patches on his skin which erupted in eczema after a couple of nights on the prison mattress and did not properly heal until he had come here – all of it came back to him, he lived through it all again, lying awake looking at the dull glow of the lights on the wall. They said it did one of two things to you. It took your soul away so that you never belonged to yourself again, you belonged in prisons for ever after and just went on doing whatever it took to get back there, or it scared the lights out of you, changed you, chewed you up and spat you out. Cured you.

He had been cured from the moment he had handed in his own clothes and put on the prison uniform. He could have been let out then. It had worked. He wasn't coming back.

How could he have dreamed he would feel like this, four and a half years on, terrified to go, clinging to the familiar, half longing to be told of a mistake, that he had another term to serve, that this room would be his tomorrow night after all?

He went on staring at the light on the wall until it began to change and soften to pale grey as the dawn came up.

Five

Simon Serrailier had slept deeply and woke to the sound of the cathedral clock ringing eight. The flat, the perfect space he had created with such loving care for himself, was cool and silent, filled with the bland light of a March morning. He pulled on his dressing gown and padded into the long sitting room, curtainless and tranquil with its polished elm floor, books, piano, pictures. The light was not blinking on the telephone answering machine. No one had rung to tell him his sister was dead.

He filled the grinder with coffee beans and the filter with water. In half an hour the first cars would pull into the spaces at the front and the sound of the early arrivals at work echo up the stairs. The rest of this Georgian building had long been converted into offices for various Diocesan organisations and a couple of solicitors. Simon's was the only residential flat. He had usually left for the station by eight and was not often home until after seven, so he rarely met anyone else – during the day the building had a life of its own, about which he knew little. It suited him, self-contained and private as he was content in his orderly space. He relished his job, had enjoyed almost every day of his life in the police force, but his refuge here was essential to him.

Now, mug of coffee in hand, he went to three of his own drawings framed and hanging on the wall to the right of the tall windows. He had done them on his last visit to Venice and he saw at once that they were better than anything he had produced during the previous few days there. He had not worked so well for a long time, unsettled as he had been by the events of the previous year. The murder of Freya Graffham had hit him hard and not only because the death of a fellow officer was always a blow from which it was tough to recover. No, he said, and went briskly back to the kitchen for more coffee. Don't go there, not again. He dressed in jeans and sweatshirt and took the canvas satchel he used to hold his drawing things. The offices were opening, voices came through half-open doors, kettles boiled in cubby-holes. Strange, Simon thought. The building felt different, no longer his. Strange. Strange to be wearing jeans instead of a suit on a weekday morning, strange to be here instead of overlooking a beautiful canal in Venice. Strange and disorientating.

He drove fast out of Lafferton.

The hospital might have been a different place too. He had difficulty finding a parking space, the foyer streamed with people on their way to outpatient appointments, porters pushing wheelchairs, gangs of medical students, flower deliverers, two women setting up a charity stall. Down here the smell of antiseptic was barely detectable.

The lift was full, the wards were noisy. Somewhere, someone dropped a bucket and swore. But in Martha's room, nothing had changed. The monitors blipped on, the fluorescent green wave lights rippled across the screens, the liquid in the plastic bag above her head drip-dripped. At first he thought that his sister looked the same but when he went closer, it seemed to Simon that the colour of her skin had

darkened slightly. Her hair was damp, her eyelids tender as the soft skins of mushrooms.

He wondered, as he always did when he saw her again, how much went on in her mind, what she recognised and understood, whether she thought and if so how deeply. That she *felt* he was in no doubt. Her feelings had always moved him for she expressed them as a baby, crying and laughing readily and absorbedly, ceasing as quickly, though he had never found it easy to make out what might have stimulated her emotion or whether the response was to something external or inside herself.

Her handicap so affected her features that it was hard to detect any family resemblance there but Simon that only made her more completely, uniquely herself.

He pulled the chair up close to her bed.

He was too absorbed in his drawing to notice the door opening. He wanted to catch the spirit of his sister by freeing her, on paper, from the medical apparatus that surrounded her and as he looked at the hairs on her head, the curve of her nostril beneath the wide nose, and the eyelashes, like the hairs of a fine paintbrush on her cheek, he saw that she was beautiful, as a child is beautiful, because neither time nor experience had in any way marked her face. Drawing her eyelids with the finest pencil line he almost held his breath.

‘Oh, darling ...’ The front of her hair glittered with raindrops. ‘Cat told me you’d come back.’

They looked at the still, oddly flattened figure on the bed.

‘I’m sorry.’

‘You mustn’t be.’

‘Every time I come in through that door I feel torn in two,’ Meriel Serrailier said. ‘Afraid she will be dead. Hoping she will be dead. Praying but I don’t know who to or for what.’ She bent now and brushed her lips against Martha’s forehead.

Simon pulled the chair back for her.

‘You were drawing her.’

‘I’ve been meaning to for a long time.’

‘Poor little girl. Have the doctors been in yet?’

‘Not this morning. I spoke to Sister Blake last night. And Chris was here.’

‘It’s hopeless either way. But none of them will say so.’

He put his hand on his mother’s arm but she did not turn to him. She sounded, as she always did when she spoke about Martha, cool, detached, professional. The warmth in her voice, familiar to the rest of them, seemed absent. Simon was not deceived. He knew that she loved Martha as much as any of her children but with an entirely different kind of love.

His drawing lay on the bedcover. Meriel picked it up.

‘Strange,’ she said. ‘Beauty but no character.’ Then she turned to face him. ‘And you?’ She looked at him with disconcerting directness. Her eyes were Cat’s and Ivo’s eyes, very round, very dark, not her own blue ones. She waited, still and quite composed. Simon picked up the drawing and began to cover it with a sheet of protective film.

‘I wish your father hadn’t rung you. You needed a holiday.’

‘I’ll get another. I’m going for a cup of tea. Shall I bring you some?’

But his mother shook her head. At the door Simon glanced round and saw that she was stroking his daughter’s hair gently back from her face.

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