

CROSSROADS

A New Beginning

by Malcolm Hulke

This novel is based on the first two years of the enormously successful television serial *Crossroads*, produced by ATV Network in Birmingham, and first seen on the screen in 1964.

Viewers who have never missed an episode, and members of the cast and production team who have been with the show from the beginning, may feel the novel presents some of the events in the life of Meg Richardson and her family and friends differently from how these events were portrayed on television. These changes result from the different structural demands of a novel compared with the shape of a daily serial.

An adaptor has to take some liberties, and I make no apology. What I have tried to do, within my capabilities, is to be faithful to the underlying spirit of *Crossroads*. That, as faithful viewers well know, is based on three cardinal values - friendship, family bonds, and love.

M.H

Chapter One

'I name this motel Crossroads, and God bless all who stay here!'

Meg released the bottle of champagne. It swung on its pink ribbon and crashed into the base of the flagpost. Meg's excellent aim, and now the hoisting of the Union Jack as the resident handyman Philip Winter pulled on the ropes, was applauded by the staff and well-wishers who stood outside the front entrance of the new red-brick motel.

Dick Jarvis, Meg's tall good-looking brother-in-law, stepped forward, clapping loudly. 'Speech!'

'Yes - speech!' This was the Reverend Guy Atkins, cheeks pink with excitement, his unruly white hair ruffled by the afternoon breeze.

Meg looked at the friendly expectant faces. Her idea to hold an official opening had been more in fun than as a serious ceremony. The way everyone went quiet, she realised they actually expected her to say something. She had not prepared for this.

She said, 'First, I want to thank you all for being here today.' Her mind raced to think of something that might be 'second'. She continued, raising her voice, 'I am indeed lucky to have so many good friends. In particular - she decided that sounded better than 'secondly' - 'I want to thank Mr Prescott my bank manager. We often think of bank managers as hard men who send us nasty letters when we have an overdraft. Thanks to Mr Prescott, I have the biggest overdraft you can imagine!'

She gestured to the newly-built main building that contained the offices, reception foyer, kitchen and dining-room. By ingenious architectural design the new building combined unnoticeably with the family house to which it was attached. The building, and the forty chalets in the grounds beyond, had been built with money borrowed from the bank.

'The motel is my overdraft, and I want to thank Mr Prescott for all his patience and kindness in helping me to raid his bank vaults for the money to pay for it!'

Dick Jarvis, clapping loudly at this, turned towards Mr Prescott, and the others joined in. Mr Prescott beamed self-consciously, his balding head glistening with the perspiration of embarrassment. He seemed to swell with pride and pleasure within the tight confines of his buttoned double-breasted business suit.

'I want also to thank Hugh Mortimer,' Meg continued, 'for building the motel.'

Hugh Mortimer, a dapperly-dressed man in his early forties, stood with his hands thrust in the pockets of a navy blue blazer, the thumbs hooked over the lips of the two pockets. It was one of his companies, Mortimer Developments, that had undertaken the design and construction of the complex.

That's enough of that,' Meg continued. She deliberately adopted a Scots accent to remind the guests of her origins. 'There's a wee dram for all o' you waiting in the hoose!'

To counter Meg's assumed Scots brogue, Kevin McArthur, the tousle-haired manager and family friend, put on his best Australian accent. 'This way, sports. The last identity to get at the grog's a Pommy!' He ushered the guests toward the entrance that led into the new reception foyer and bar.

Kitty Jarvis moved to where Meg was standing. No one seeing them together would have realised they were sisters, with Kitty the elder by only three years. Kitty's dark hair was already flecked with grey strands, and sallow lifeless cheeks betrayed the heavy smoker. Meg's fair hair was thick with strong natural waves, her complexion flawless. She was aware of being the physically stronger of the two, the pillar her older sister sometimes leaned on.

Kitty took Meg's hand in hers. 'I'm proud of you, Meg. I wish I'd had the guts to do something on this scale.' Kitty owned a corner shop in Heathbury, the nearest industrial town to the village of King's Oak. The meagre profits from newspapers and tobacco supplemented Dick's income as manager of a small pottery.

Meg said, 'I was lucky to have the land.'

During almost all their married life, Meg and Charles Richardson had lived in the large old Victorian house that he inherited from a spinster aunt. The house stood in its own half acre of garden. Charles, whom Meg met in her late teens when they were both art students, was never a businessman. He sold many of his Warwickshire landscapes at ridiculously low prices. He had, though, an inborn instinct that land was always a good thing to own. Over the years the half acre was extended first to include an adjacent field that came up for auction, and later a number of allotments. As Charles's health slowly declined and his earnings decreased, Meg turned their big roomy home into a guest house. By the time of her husband's death two years ago she had a track record with the bank for sound business endeavour. Against the

collateral security of the land, now consisting of five acres, plus Meg's personal business acumen, the bank was willing to make a long-term loan large enough for the transformation. Planning permission was sought and obtained from the local Council, whose members recognised the advantage to the community of a motel that would attract wayfarers to the village and employ local people and services. For eighteen months the five acres of land were turned into a muddy battlefield as men and machines laid foundations for the chalets, and dug ditches to carry mains water and sewerage pipes. The noise and mess made it impossible to keep the guest house business running. Meg turned her home into a hostel for the workmen who nightly serenaded her with a mixture of Irish ballads and calypsos from the West Indies. Eventually concrete roadways replaced the mud, and chalets, each equipped with a bathroom and toilet, rose from the foundations. On a small packet of land that Charles had acquired on the other side of the main road, a petrol station was built- now the Crossroads Service Station.

Kitty said, 'You were lucky, but I'll am still proud of you.'

In the reception foyer, Meg's secretary, Ruth Bailey, her brow hair elegantly coiffured for the occasion and wearing a clerical grey tailored dress that conveyed authority while emphasising her femininity, was making sure that everyone's glass was filled. Behind the bar Diane Lawton and Marilyn Gates, the two blonde village girls Meg had recruited as waitresses, were making, none-too-professional job of pouring champagne into a line of sparkling new glasses.

Sandy Richardson, Meg's fifteen-year-old son, the pockets of his best school blazer bulging with mysterious contents, came up to Ruth. 'Do you think mum will mind if I go now?'

Ruth turned, and was aware of the boyishly freckled face, the sandy-coloured hair temporarily held in place by massive dollops of haircream. It pleased her that since she came to work at the motel Sandy, and to a lesser degree his eighteen-year-old sister, Jill, often treated her as a second mother. She said, 'Don't you want some lemonade?'

He shook his head. Already his plastered hair was starting to break free from the grease. 'No thanks. It's boring here.'

She smiled. 'I'll tell your mother you wanted to get on with your homework.' She glanced round the crowd of drinking, talking people. 'Do you know where your sister is?'

Sandy shrugged. 'I saw her go to the back somewhere. Anyway, I'll push off.'

'Pushing off,' Ruth knew, meant that Sandy would return to his room, tune his transistor to Radio Caroline, and continue the intricate job of making a Lancaster bomber out of balsa wood. He had been working on it for weeks. Ruth also had a shrewd idea where Jill had gone.

Though today was the official opening, the motel had been functioning at a low key for the past two weeks, and for the past month Meg had been recruiting staff. In consultation with Ruth, Meg had decided they should have a general handyman. They advertised in a Birmingham newspaper, and the only applicant was Philip Winter, a 42-year-old man who described himself as a jack-of-all-trades and was vague about where he had worked before. His clothes were old but well kept, he was very pale but otherwise seemed to be healthy as an athlete, and he had a presence that hinted at some previous post of authority. The soft lines of his face and his appealing brown eyes begat instant trust. After a ten-minute interview at which Ruth was present, Meg asked Philip to leave them alone for a private discussion. The moment he went out of the room, both Meg and Ruth giggled with glee at their wonderful find, and agreed unanimously that they really didn't care why a man of his qualities should be seeking such a menial job. He was called back into the room, offered the post. The following day he arrived with the one small brown paper package that was his entire luggage, and took up residence in what had been one of the workmen's sheds. And from that day, Jill had taken to mooning after him, spending hours watching as he set bulbs in the newly-created flower beds or attended to small details of carpentry that the builders had overlooked. Ruth concluded that Jill had elected Philip to the role of surrogate father, and hoped it went no further than that.

While Dick Jarvis chatted to the Reverend Guy Atkins about the much loved roses in the vicarage garden, he kept his eye on the bank manager, hoping for a chance to speak to him. Mr Prescott was trapped in a corner, smiling deferentially to every sentence shot at him by a slim middle-aged lady with rinse blue hair who had stayed overnight at the motel and showed every intention to drink as much free champagne as she decently could manage without being sick. From time to time Mr Prescott mopped his large forehead, and by expression - it was impossible for him to get a word in—indicated his deep sympathy with the lady's problems. At last the lady seemed to exhaust herself, shook Mr Prescott's hand a number of times, and departed with repeated apologies for taking up so much of his valuable time.

Dick was quick to make his move. He said, 'Excuse me, Reverend. Something I want to see Prescott

about.' He left Guy Atkins, who was in mid-sentence about greenflies, quickly collected a full glass of champagne from the bar, and hurried to Mr Prescott before anyone else could get at him.

'I think this might revive you,' he told the bank manager. 'I could see you pinned to the wall by that woman. Do you know her?'

'No,' said Mr Prescott, accepting the champagne. 'She just started talking to me.'

Dick spoke with feeling. 'Honestly, some people won't leave other people alone. Cheers.' He raised his own glass.

Mr Prescott sipped his champagne. 'She heard Mrs Richardson's very kind remarks outside. So she decided to tell me how many mistakes her own bank had made in the past year. I suppose being a bank manager's a bit like being a doctor or a telephone manager. As soon as people know what you are, they want to tell you how often the system has broken down for them.'

'Stupid bitch. You should have sent her packing.' Dick knew he had the ability to demonstrate sympathy for other people, even if he didn't actually listen to what they said. 'Anyway, I think you've done a great thing here, giving that loan to my sister-in-law.' He emphasised the relationship, in case Mr Prescott had forgotten who he was.

'Not me personally,' said Mr Prescott, mildly. 'The bank did it.'

Dick grinned, confidentially. 'But I bet you pulled a few strings, a man in your position. As a matter of fact, I've been having some ideas about expanding the shop, turning it into one of those supermarkets like we hear about from America.'

'For newspapers and cigarettes?' Mr Prescott looked doubtful, and edged away without letting Dick notice.

'I'd thought about that,' said Dick, who hadn't given it any thought until this moment. 'We'd have to sell lots of other lines. It could be a good investment for your people.'

Mr Prescott put on the professional smile he reserved for people who were not going to get loans. 'We'll have to talk about it sometime.' He edged further away, not now concealing the move. 'I'll have to get back to the bank. If you'll excuse me, I must say goodbye to your sister-in-law.'

Mr Prescott made for the door to the drive. He had found Dick's approach embarrassing for three reasons. First, he didn't like Dick but couldn't put his finger on any reason for the dislike, and this made

him feel guilty. Second, he hated people smarming up to him for a loan at social gatherings (initially Meg had seen him at his office, by pre-arranged appointment, and arrived with a detailed plan of capital outlay and anticipated earnings). Third, in his capacity as bank manager he knew that the pottery where Dick worked was about to go into liquidation. Dick, and many others, would shortly be unemployed.

The Reverend Guy Atkins, beaming cherubically on two glasses of champagne, listened as attentively as he could to the blue rinse lady's opinions of The Beatles.

'I've got nothing against them personally,' she insisted, 'but it sets a bad example when people of that age and lack of education can make so much money by singing rubbish.' The pearl necklace on her mottled breast rose and fell with the vehemence of her feelings.

Guy said, 'I'm sure you're right.' Forty-five years as a servant of the Church of England had taught him enormous tact. Personally he liked the Beatles and their music very much, and was observing their rise to fame, and its effect on young people, with engrossed interest.

'It must be difficult for you,' she snapped, 'a man of God, when all we get on the wireless these days is love and sex and filth.'

He said, 'I imagine we shall survive. May I get you some more champagne?'

'No thanks. It's not quality, you know. It's some cheap muck they've bought to give away.' She looked at her expensive miniscule wrist watch. 'Christ, I'm going to be late. I travel in cosmetics, you know. I've got fifteen stupid sluts waiting for me in Coventry, to teach them how to sell it. I'm afraid you'll have to get on without me.' She turned on her stiletto heel and hurried away.

Guy helped himself to a third and final glass of champagne which seemed superb quality to his simple taste, drank it while chatting to Diane and Marilyn, then went to look for Meg to bid her farewell. He found her outside the front entrance talking with Hugh Mortimer. They were, he thought, a fine looking couple. He always watched with interest the moment any single inhabitant of his sprawling parish started to show interest in someone of the opposite sex. His hope, unashamedly sentimental, was that he would soon be beaming at them across his open copy of The Book of Common Prayer as he read the wedding service. It was a professional hope too, because next to the outbreak of war nothing so certainly filled his

church these days as a popular local wedding.

About these two, though, he had misgivings. They had both lost their spouses to the last enemy and both had put a brave face on bereavement for the sake of their children. They had carried out their respective businesses, concealing their grief because other depended on them. Guy was fearful of the damage this repression of emotion might have had on them. All too often he had seen good people, hardened by death, made incapable of accepting friendship and love when, by chance or God's grace, it came their way again.

Guy shook Meg's hand warmly. 'Sorry to butt in, but I have to go. I do hope the motel is a great success.' He bade farewell, too, to Hugh Mortimer, then got on his bicycle and, a little unsteadily cycled away.

While Guy entertained sentimental thoughts about Meg and Hugh, they had been discussing business. As well as Mortimer Developments, Hugh was also a director of Fairlawns Hotel which majestically dominated one end of the village.

Hugh said, 'I thought we could have a reciprocal arrangement about over-booking.'

'What had you in mind exactly?' Meg hoped her reply would conceal her lack of inn-keeping experience at Hugh's level.

'I'm proposing the usual friendly co-operation that exists between most rivals in our trade. When we over-book and, heaven forbid, the reserved customers turn up, we'd like to be able to send people on to you. Naturally you can do the same to us, provided we've got rooms available.'

Meg asked, 'How do you explain to clients that the room they've reserved is no longer available and it's ten o'clock on a cold night?' Meg emphasised the 'you' to suggest that she had already devised her own method. In truth, she had never dreamed of deliberately over-booking.

'Obviously if you don't over-book you lose money because there are always clients who don't turn up and don't bother to let you know. With us,' Hugh continued, apparently taken in by Meg's ruse, 'we never confirm that a particular room has been reserved. We could come a cropper with the law if we did that. As for dealing with over-bookings in general, we do all the usual things.'

He outlined some of the hotel trade's favoured devices. For instance, on arrival the guest was informed by a solicitous reception clerk that a mysterious crack had appeared in the ceiling of the room reserved for them. It was feared plaster would

fall during the night. This bad news was followed instantly with the good news that a room was available in a nearby hotel. The tired traveller, who never demanded to see proof of the structural calamity, was always very glad to seek refuge in the other hotel.

Meg said evasively, 'Well, I suppose that's one way to operate.'

She avoided saying that she didn't always like the business side of Hugh's character. Hugh was always affable and courteous- and during Charles' long final illness, had proved himself a good neighbour more than once. He had given a great deal of personal attention to the architectural planning of the Crossroads development, ensuring that the chalets had a scattered look instead of being built in regimented rows (the seeming lack of symmetry cunningly concealed the absence of a chalet bearing the number 13). During the building, Hugh's visits to the site had been frequent and attentive. But there was a ruthlessness that sometimes disturbed her.

Hugh smiled. 'Who knows, the question of over-booking may not arise.' He seemed to have detected Meg's misgivings about him. Then, as though not caring what Meg thought of him, he added 'But it's the public's fault if it does. People have no scruples when they're dealing with people in our trade.'

Meg said, 'You're forgetting I ran a guest house for five years Hugh. My guests were my friends.'

'But you're in the motel business now,' he reminded her, 'and that makes you vulnerable. When one of your guests has burnt the first hole though your best carpet with a cigarette, something they'd never do at home, you'll see what I mean.'

Kitty and Dick emerged from the reception foyer. Dick was already fondling his car keys.

'We'll be on our way now,' Kitty said. 'Andy's going to be thrilled to see all this.' She was referring to their brother, Petty Officer Andrew Fraser, serving on the shore establishment at Gibraltar.

Dick pulled on the fashionable light green Kangol cap he always wore when driving, even though his car was a closed family saloon. 'Very nice of you to invite us, Meg. And nice meeting you again, Hugh.'

They went over to where Dick's Austin Westminster was parked next to Hugh's Jaguar.

'I must be getting along, too,' said Hugh. 'I do hope all goes well.' He walked off to his car, waving cheerfully.

Meg watched the two cars drive away. She felt very alone and wished she had asked Kitty to stay for the evening. Hugh's remarks about being vulnerable

troubled her.

She turned to go into the motel. Mrs Blundell, the motel's housekeeper, a tall heavily built woman who always conjured up in Meg's mind images of a lady prison officer, was coming out to speak to her.

'If the party's over,' said Mrs Blundell, 'I'd like you to come and look at chalet number seven.'

Meg asked, 'What's wrong?'

'I'd just like you to see it with your own eyes, Mrs Richardson.' Mrs Blundell's strongly-made face was at its most severe, indicating she would reveal no more until Meg had done her bidding.

'Certainly, right away.' Meg went with the housekeeper round the side of the main building, following the roadway that led to the chalets. 'Who's staying in chalet seven?'

Mrs Blundell spoke over her broad shoulder. 'No one now, by the looks of things. But there was a Mrs Tomlinson, if that was her real name. She left ten minutes ago.'

Meg vaguely remembered Mrs Tomlinson's pearl necklace and blue rinse hair, and some talk of working for a cosmetics firm.

At the chalet Mrs Blundell threw open the door dramatically. 'What do you think of that for an afternoon's work?'

The chalet had been gutted of all its soft furnishings - sheets, pillows, blankets, towels. The thief had taken advantage of the fact that at a motel, where one could drive a car up to the door of a chalet, there were no porters involved who might notice that luggage on departure was heavier and bulkier than on arrival. The towels, which in hotels and motels were always the second most favoured items to be purloined (first were coat hangers), all carried the name of the motel in large indelible lettering: this deterred some guests but encouraged others who liked to show friends how clever they had been. The sheets, blankets, and pillow cases had sewn-on name tags which anyone could remove in a few minutes.

Mrs Blundell remained at the open door like a guardsman on duty. 'Shall I phone the police or will you? We've got the number of her car, even if the name she gave was false.'

Meg said, 'Let's forget it.' She knew motels and hotels rarely called in the police because it always reflected badly on their business. However, her motive was more personal.

'You've been robbed,' Mrs Blundell insisted. 'If you let this go people will walk all over you.'

Meg came out of the chalet, closing the door. 'You sound like someone I've just been talking to, Mrs Blundell. Perhaps Mrs Tomlinson felt she needed those things.'

'With a pearl necklace and those expensive clothes she flaunted herself in?' Mrs Blundell clearly hadn't liked the slim Mrs Tomlinson.

'We don't know what goes on in other people's minds,' Meg replied. 'I'd rather pretend it hadn't happened.'

Mrs Blundell tramped heavily beside Meg as they returned to the main building. 'Now you've begun this place, you can't afford to be soft with people like that.'

Meg stopped. 'But can I afford to become hard?'

'I don't see what you mean, Mrs Richardson.'

'I may be a business-woman now,' Meg answered, 'but I intend to remain a woman.'

Mrs Blundell looked her most stern. 'If I may say so, Mrs Richardson, that's no way to carry on.'

Meg said, 'We shall have to see, won't we? Anyway, I must get on with some work now.'

Mrs Blundell watched Meg walk away and go into the main building. Then she shrugged and went off to one of the store rooms to replenish the robbed chalet.

Stephanie Harris, known to herself and everyone else as Stevie went into the bathroom of the chalet she shared with her father and pulled two Kleenex tissues from the wall-fitted box because she knew that in a few minutes she was going to cry. For a moment her attention was diverted by seeing her own reflection in the bathroom mirror. She was, she decided, quite pretty, but she wished her short dark brown hair was curly instead of straight, and even more she wished she wasn't so small for her thirteen years of age and wondered when people would stop treating her as a child. The thought of being treated as a child brought her mind back to the business at hand, and she returned into the chalet's main room.

With a sense of purpose she sat on the edge of her bed and opened the little suitcase that contained all her most treasured possessions. Not hurrying, for she wanted to delay the most precious moment. She first looked through the bed-time storybook an uncle had given her years ago, then turned her attention to a little plastic money purse bearing gold lettering that read Un Cadeau de Boulogne; the purse contained

five French coins, and she tried to read and understand the printing on them. She put the coins back into the purse and finally picked up the one letter her mother had ever written to her, she had received it the previous year when she spent a week away from her parents with a school friend who had moved to Worthing. The photograph of her mother was inside the letter. Slowly she pulled the photograph out and stared at it. Her mother, rakishly slim in well-cut slacks and a boyish blouse, was standing in the public garden behind the mansion block of flats where they all used to live. Almost instantly salty tears welled up in Stevie's eyes and rolled down her cheeks.

The arguments between her mother and father had started a long time ago. Stevie took her mind back to a happier time when the three of them lived in the flat in London. In those days they were like any other family, except that her father spent a lot of time away on business.

In those days, when George Harris was home he slept in the big bed with Lil, and sometimes Stevie was allowed to crawl in with them on Sunday mornings. During the times George was at home he and Lil went out some evenings and the teenage girl from the next flat came in and stayed until they returned. Stevie liked those evenings because she could lie in bed looking forward to the moment when she would hear her parents come back, usually laughing or talking about the play or film they had seen or the friends they had dined with.

Then came the day of the school fire. One of the teachers dropped a lighted cigarette into a waste paper basket in the staff room. The basket, a wicker one, ignited and set fire to some curtains. There was a great amount of smoke, very little damage, and a large number of fire engines and enthusiastic firemen. Some of the younger children took fright, or pretended to be frightened because that was expected of them, and the headmaster closed the school because it was clear no one was going to get on with any more work that day.

Stevie arrived home two hours earlier than usual. She had her own key, and though it turned in the lock the flat door wouldn't open. She rang the bell. Nothing happened. She rang again, because she knew the door could only be bolted from the inside. After the third ring she heard her mother calling through the door, 'Who is it?' Stevie shouted back that it was her. The door was opened by her mother; with her free hand she was fastening the buttons on her blouse. There was a man in the living room with his jacket off smoking a cigarette that he had just lit. Lil said the man had called to talk about a stereo record player that she intended to buy George for his birthday. So it was important that the man's visit be kept a secret. Stevie swore on her honour not to tell.

A few weeks later she heard her parents argue for

the first time. She had gone to bed at her usual time, but it was early summer there was a heat wave, and she couldn't sleep. Suddenly she heard her mother shout. She slipped out of bed, opened the door an inch and listened. Perhaps someone had broken in and her parents were in danger. Then she heard her father's voice, the words barely audible but the tone definitely angry. Her mother shouted again and then there was silence. She crept back into bed and didn't sleep much that night. It was all too similar to what had happened to a school friend, whose parents were now divorced.

The next day her father went away on his business before she woke up. On that occasion he stayed away a full ten days and Stevie noticed that he didn't phone home once. She also noticed that on three school days her mother wasn't in when she came home: once Lil didn't come back until 9pm and Stevie took herself to visit the teenage girl next door to have someone to talk to.

When her father returned it was only for three days. On the evening of the second day she heard another argument, this time longer and louder. The following morning she discovered her father had slept alone in the little box room.

Both her parents started to be very nice to her, giving her presents and treats. She knew what this meant from her friend's experience. The marriage was breaking up and they were bidding for her affections. She also realised that her parents expected her not to understand about such things. Sometimes she talked to the neighbour's cat about it, but didn't really expect him to understand. She desperately hoped that by some miracle, performed by the God she was taught about regularly every morning in school, things would go back the way they were.

The moment she most dreaded finally arrived. She was called into the living room and both her parents were sitting there, and her mother said they wanted to talk to her.

Her mother said, 'Stevie dear, we've got something to tell you that may upset you, but there's really no reason why you should be upset. You know how you used to have a little friend called Jack and you were best-friends, and then one day you started to find other friends and so did Jack? Well, that's what has happened between your father and me...'

Stevie thought this sounded very stupid because she and Jack were children, they had not sworn on oath before this God person in church, they had not had sexual intercourse (her school was progressive on biology), and they had not created a baby. But she realised her mother had to think of something to say, so she listened quietly. When Lil finished Stevie asked the question uppermost in her mind, 'Are you going

to separate or have a divorce?’

Lil looked shocked at her daughter’s precociousness. ‘Darling, you shouldn’t know about such things!’

Stevie knew that being a child she wasn’t supposed to understand what was in the newspapers every Sunday, even though the State and her parents had made great efforts to ensure she could read by the age of six. She didn’t care, though, what she was supposed to know or not know. What these two adults decided was going to affect her personally, possibly for the rest of her life.

George, who always treated Stevie with some respect for her intelligence, now spoke. ‘Your mother’s decided to go away for a time. School holidays are coming up, so I thought you might like to travel around with me.’

In all the divorces and separations Stevie had known about from her friends, the children had always stayed with the mother. George’s suggestion made her feel rather special. The black cloud gave way to the hint of a silver lining.

Her first trip with George was a breathtaking experience. They drove in one day from London to the Highlands of Scotland and stayed in a real hotel in a little town called Fort William on the side of a loch. George Harris worked for a manufacturer of marine engines and had come to see a millionaire who lived on a yacht. Stevie saw Ben Nevis, the inside of an ocean-going yacht, and was given afternoon tea by an old man who owned one million pounds. Then they visited Clydeside where she spent her first full day in an hotel with nothing to do; after that they visited an inland marina on the River Nene in Nottinghamshire that was full of small boats, ducks, and tame geese. A day later they were back in London. By then Lil had gone. The little gas jet under their refrigerator had blown out and all the food had gone bad. The flat seemed empty and, despite the summer’s heat, cold.

The next trip was to Christchurch where Stevie saw a great many beautiful ocean-going yachts, then Penzance, followed by Cardiff and North Wales. Within two weeks Stevie had become an experienced traveller. She learnt the knack of travelling with minimum luggage, and on entering a hotel she could tell if it was going to be friendly-and-comfortable, or unfriendly-but-comfortable, or friendly-yet-uncomfortable, or just plain awful. What she had not learned was how to fill whole days when her father was seeing clients. She read quite a lot, sometimes wrapped big bathroom towels round herself and paraded before a mirror pretending she was in evening dress, and sometimes she went for walks in parks. When George was not working he was extremely good to her. He took her to the pictures, and she noted

how in northern cinemas people laughed much louder than in London; and he often made side trips as they travelled for her to see the railway museum at York and Brunel’s iron suspension bridge outside Bristol. He so obviously tried to compensate her for what had happened that she never told him how often she was thinking about her mother.

She loved her father, particularly the smell of his cigarettes, the fact that he cleaned his teeth three times a day, bathed morning and night, and always wore clean underwear. She enjoyed being driven by him because he did it efficiently and never got angry with other drivers. But she also loved her mother, even if the story about the stereo record player had been a lie. Those Sunday mornings when she climbed into the marital bed, she always preferred her mother’s side. She knew she started life inside her mother, her flesh and bones were of her mother’s making, and this made her feel very close to Lil. She had always known her mother wasn’t as intelligent as her father, that she was vain and a liar and sometimes let the milk boil over. But she could nuzzle into her mother; her mother’s flesh was soft and giving, and it was her own flesh. What’s more, her mother was a woman, and that condition was fast approaching Stevie. Her first menstrual period might come any time now, and she supposed she would have to go into a chemist’s shop on her own.

Stevie wiped her cheeks with the Kleenex, put the snapshot of Lil back inside the letter and closed the lid of the suitcase. Then she washed her face, and wandered out of the chalet wondering what to do. Her father wasn’t due back at the motel until 6pm, and she had three hours to kill.

A boy with sandy-coloured hair was coming along the driveway head down, kicking a stone. His eyes were so concentrated on the stone that he did not see Stevie in his path. She waited, amused until the kicked stone came within feet of her. She moved forward and kicked it hard to the other side of the driveway. The boy looked up.

‘Hey! That was my stone.’

She said, ‘A boy your age should have something better to do.’

He said, ‘I’ve made a Lancaster bomber.’

‘They’re old fashioned.’

He said, defensively, ‘We won the war with them.’

‘No we didn’t. We won the war because of the Russians and the Americans, and the Germans were

starving and all their cities were flat, more flat than London.'

He grinned. 'Because of all the bombs from Lancaster bombers. Do you want to see it?'

She said, 'I don't mind.' This was the first person she had had a conversation with since talking with her father at breakfast that morning. She was eager to look at a model aeroplane, or at anything that brought her into contact with people, but felt it unladylike to seem too enthusiastic.

'All right. I'll show it to you.' He stuck his hands in the pockets of his grey flannel trousers and walked towards the motel's main building.

Stevie hurried beside him. 'What's your name?'

'Alexander Richardson.' he said. 'People call me Sandy.'

'How old are you, Mr Jarvis?'

It was the third time that morning Dick had been asked about his age. The person now asking, a Mr I. Levy according to the name plate on the desk, looked younger than Dick's own son.

'Does it really matter?'

Mr Levy looked up from the form he was completing. 'I'm afraid it does. Employers always want to know.'

'This is a private employment agency,' Dick said, 'not a Labour Exchange. Can't you lie a little?'

'It's a matter of superannuation,' said Mr Levy patiently.

Dick said, 'I've got another twenty years before I'll be an old age pensioner. I'm forty-five.'

Mr Levy was impressed. 'Really? I would have said about thirty-nine.' He added quickly, 'But we have to be honest. Employers do want to know.'

Dick looked at the younger man's expensive suit, the gold signet ring, the size of the desk and the quality of the other furniture in the interviewing office. He did not believe that people got these things through being honest. They got it through luck, inheritance, having the right family background, or the good fortune of going to the right school. Dick had had none of these things. What he did have, he knew, was a good physique that he looked after, and a handsome face that belied his age.

'I'll do my best.' said Mr Levy, when he had completed the form, 'but truthfully I can't hold out much hope of getting you a managerial job.' He paused. 'You wouldn't consider taking something slightly lower grade?'

That question had also been put to Dick three times by three other private employment agencies that morning. 'I've told you my qualifications,' he said. 'I can't see any reason to take a low grade job.'

'The problem,' said Mr Levy, who was now glancing at the little clock face hidden from Dick's view, 'is that your qualifications are experience. Employers love bits of paper - diplomas, certificates, degrees.' He smiled, to show he thought the employers were foolish. 'That's how it is these days.'

Dick wondered what other days the young Mr Levy might know about. He felt humiliated being interviewed by anyone as young as Mr Levy.

'You wouldn't, said Dick, 'have anything going here, would you?'

'In this agency?'

'Why not? Older men might prefer to be interviewed by someone nearer their own age.' Dick hoped the barb would go home to Mr Levy.

Mr Levy smiled. 'That's quite an idea, Mr Jarvis, but I'm afraid this is a family business.'

'Of course, it would be.' Dick tried to convey sarcasm without making it too obvious. 'I imagine you have a big family.'

'We did once,' said Mr Levy, rising now to indicate the interview was over, but still smiling politely. 'Most of my relatives were killed in the gas chambers. Good day, Mr Jarvis. We'll see what we can do.'

A policeman was standing near Dick's parked car. Dick dawdled by a shop, pretending to look in the window, until the policeman looked the other way. Then Dick got into his car, started the engine, and drove away in one slick movement. The policeman shouted something but Dick was already well down the street. There was talk of the Council introducing parking meters and traffic wardens in the centre of Birmingham, but it hadn't happened yet and Dick hoped it never would. The war, in which he had fought with some distinction, had been for freedom, or so the politicians said. As a motoring man Dick had no wish to be regimented. The existing system, whereby the police had to catch a motorist with his unlawfully parked car, appealed to Dick. It gave the motorist a chance, and it gave the police something to do.

As he drove down New Street it occurred to him that he had no idea where he was going. For the fourth

morning in succession he had left home early, letting Kitty and Brian believe he was going to work at a new job. The closing of the pottery had been sudden as accidental death. By the time of liquidation the firm had no money at all, not even a fund for golden handshakes. Dick had never saved. A resolution he had made twenty years earlier when, as an Army driver, he saw three truckloads of young men his own age blown to pieces two days before the German High Command admitted total defeat. He told Kitty that he had lost his job because he knew the closing of the pottery would be in the local newspapers. After three weeks of job hunting he had what seemed a favourable interview with another pottery; the director he met gave him lunch and even showed him which would be his office. When he got home he told Kitty it was in the bag, and confidently awaited a letter of confirmation. Two days later a stereotype letter of rejection arrived. He couldn't bring himself to tell Kitty. On the Monday morning he rose early, dressed in one of his best suits, and left the house. Kitty asked for the phone number of his new office; he said he couldn't remember it, and she hadn't asked again.

Traffic lights stopped him at Corporation Street. Two Asians wearing white turbans crossed the road. If they were out of work, he mused, there would be a team of social workers trying to find them jobs. Nobody cared about a 45-year-old Englishman unemployed in his own country.

The lights changed to green. He slipped the car into gear and went forward. In the middle of the intersection the engine stopped. He turned the ignition key and the starter motor growled but the cylinders wouldn't fire. He turned the key twice more before checking the fuel gauge. The tank was empty. With the lights changed again, and traffic edging round the stranded car, Dick got out and started to push. Two teenage West Indian youths ran forward to help him.

Know what the trouble is, man?

It's got twin carbs,' said Dick. 'Very delicate alignment.'

'Twin carbs in a 'Minster?' The youth speaking looked wide eyed at the car he was pushing. 'I never heard of that before.'

Dick grinned pleasantly. 'Just goes to show you don't know everything.'

They had got the car to the other side of the road and parked it against the pavement. The youth said, 'I worked in a garage. I'd like to see twin carbs in this car. Maybe I can fix it for you.'

He went to open the bonnet, but Dick put down a firm hand to keep it shut. 'That's quite all right, thank you. I'd better get it towed to the garage where they understand it.'

Dick waited until the youths had got lost in the street crowd before going to look for petrol. He found a garage where the attendant kept some spare cans for emergencies.

The attendant said. 'That'll be fourteen and sixpence, sir.'

'For one gallon of petrol?' Dick only had ten shillings on him and that was for his lunch.

'Ten bob on the can.' said the attendant.

'Of course.' said Dick, 'I was forgetting.' He produced his wallet, looked in it. 'I'm terribly sorry, I've only got ten shillings on me. I was just on my way to the bank.'

'Give us that.' said the attendant, 'but please bring the can back.'

After returning the can Dick had only five shillings and sixpence in his pocket. It was enough to buy a very cheap lunch, but then he'd have nothing. In any case, with only one gallon of petrol he would be immobile again in another thirty miles, less in city traffic. And he was getting very hungry.

Forty minutes later he parked the car outside Crossroads Motel. An idea was forming in his mind that could solve both the immediate pangs of hunger and the long term problem of a job. He entered the reception foyer where Diane was on duty at the desk.

'Is my sister-in-law around?'

'I'll say you're here.' Diane reached for the internal phone.

He said, 'Not to bother. I'm family, remember. Should be able to go in unannounced.'

Dick found Meg in her private sitting-room having lunch with Sandy, Jill, and a dark-haired little girl. 'Oh, sorry to barge in when you're eating. I was just passing. I thought I'd drop by to see how things are going.'

'Why not join us?' Meg got up to get extra cutlery from the sideboard. She told Sandy to get his uncle a chair.

'No, no,' Dick protested, 'I mustn't put you to all this trouble. You'll think all I come round here for is free champagne or something to eat.'

Jill, who remained silent, gave him a look that indicated that was exactly what she thought of her uncle.

Once Dick was seated before his filled plate he turned to the dark haired little girl. 'And who's this, then?'

Meg explained that Stevie Harris was going to live with her as a member of the family for a time, but didn't go into too many details. He beamed at Stevie and told her to call him Uncle Dick.

During the lunch Dick knew he was on top form. He entertained Sandy with war time reminiscences, showed Stevie how to roll a coin up and down on her knuckles, and told Meg, who was always interested in family news, about the letter he and Kitty had received from their daughter Lesley, who was now happily married in Australia. Over coffee, when the three young people had gone, he homed in on the purpose of his visit.

He said, 'How's Kevin McArthur getting on as manager?'

He accepted a cigar from the special silver-plated box Meg offered him and allowed her to light it.

'He's very popular. Why?'

'Just wondered.' He exhaled a cloud of soft blue smoke. 'He's only temporary, isn't he?'

She smiled. 'He's a rolling stone. Every few months, he says, he feels impelled to go walkabout.'

Dick held up the cigar and inspected it. 'You know, this is a very fine cigar. Very fine indeed.'

Meg got to her feet. 'Would you like a liqueur to go with it?'

'Well, a drop of cointreau would be very nice,' he said, adding, 'But really, Meg, you're being too good...too kind...'

As he spoke Meg poured cointreau into a tiny glass. Dick couldn't think of anything else he wanted for the moment.

Meg said, 'Why did you ask about Kevin?'

'Well,' said Dick, flicking ash into an ashtray, 'as you know I'm pretty busy with this pottery job, and believe me it's all go there! But if Kevin isn't going to be a permanent fixture, if there's any time I could be of service to you, just let me know. I think we all agree that business is best kept in the family.'

'I'll have to think about that, Dick. It's good of you to offer.'

The phone rang and Meg answered it. She told the caller that she would be with them in a moment, then turned to Dick: 'Our long-awaited chef has just arrived from Spain. I'll have to go I'm afraid.'

Dick stood up, downing the remains of his cointreau.

'I've got to get back to the pottery anyway. There's no knowing what they'll get up to with the manager out of sight!'

Back in his car Dick remembered he had only five miles of petrol left in the tank. Across the main road was the Crossroads Service Station, its underground tanks carrying thousands of gallons. Later in the day, when it was time to pretend to return from work, he could ask Kitty for a few pounds; he had already planted the idea that in his new job he would be paid monthly instead of weekly. If she refused he would help himself to money from the shop till. But he wanted petrol right now, for otherwise he was trapped in King's Oak. He drove slowly across the road and pulled up at one of the pumps.

'Fill her up, please.'

Sam, the young pump attendant, stuck the petrol nozzle into the filler pipe. 'Oil and water all right?'

Dick said, 'How do I know unless you check?' He saw now no reason why he, as the client, should get his hands dirty.

Sam put in two pints of oil, topped up the radiator, then read the petrol pump dial. 'That'll be two pounds fifteen and sixpence, Mr Jarvis.'

Dick produced his wallet and opened it. 'How stupid of me. I should have gone to the bank first and bought petrol afterwards. I'll drop by tomorrow to pay.'

Sam did not conceal his concern. 'I should get that okayed by Mrs Richardson.'

'Don't be stupid, I'm her brother-in-law.' Dick was genuinely hurt not to be trusted. 'You know I'll be back. Do you think I'm going to run away?'

Sam scratched his chin. 'I did have strict instructions about credit, Mr Jarvis, for anyone.'

'If you feel like that about it,' said Dick angrily, 'siphon the bloody petrol out again! I don't think I even want your petrol in my car.'

Another car pulled up by the pumps. Sam saw that the other driver was waiting. 'All right, Mr Jarvis. I'm sure that'll be in order.'

As Dick was about to get back behind his steering wheel he noticed the other car, a large black limousine, was driven by Victor Amos. He went over to speak to him.

'Hello, Vic.'

Victor Amos looked up. 'How's the new job going?'

'All right. Could I have a word with you?'

'Go ahead.' Vic remained in his car for the word.

Dick nodded to the side of the service station, out of Sam's earshot. 'Over there.'

Vic got out and followed Dick. Dick stopped well clear of Sam.

'If you want to know, things are going damned badly. I didn't get the job at the pottery.'

'You're just kidding people?' Vic couldn't help smiling at the sheer cheek of it.

'We're old mates,' said Dick. 'I need a job desperately. I've been to three employment agencies this morning. They all say I'm too old at forty-five.' He hoped this would get Vic's sympathy. Vic was nearing sixty.

'What sort of job are you after?'

'Something managerial of course. What about your firm?' Vic ran a car-hire business

'My firm is me,' said Vic, pointing at himself. 'You know that.'

'Wouldn't you like to take a back seat, let a younger man do the worrying?'

'Listen, if you're really stuck I could take you on as one of my drivers. You're a presentable-looking fellow. The customers would like you. But you'd have to provide your own uniform.'

'That was, I presume, a joke?'

Before answering Vic helped himself to a cigarette and lit it. Dick noticed that he wasn't offered one. Ever since he was declared redundant by his previous employer people had stopped offering him drinks and cigarettes, in case he could not return the favour. You know the trouble with you, Dick Jarvis? You're vain. Probably too good-looking for a man of your age. There's many a man turned forty would be glad to drive for me.' He turned and started to walk away.

'I'm sorry,' said Dick, catching up with him. 'But try and see it from my point of view.'

Vic stopped. 'Lad, you're one of the millions that's never really made the grade. Try and face up to it. Your wife's got that newsagents shop - why don't you work in with her, try to build up the business into something?'

'That's a good way to end a happy marriage,' Dick said. He knew someone would suggest this eventually, and hated Vic for being the first. Not everyone knew that the shop was solely in Kitty's name, bought by her money, and for Dick to become

actively involved would mean his playing second fiddle to his wife. 'If I can't find anything, I may go into business on my own account.'

Now Vic showed interest. 'Got a nest egg tucked by?'

'Naturally one has capital,' Dick said.

'How much?' Vic was well-known for his Midland bluntness. Why,' said Dick, evading the question, 'anything in mind?'

'I can see room for the expansion of the car-hire business round here,' Vic said. 'All my capital's tied up in the vehicles I've already got. But for a couple of thousand pounds you could buy yourself in as a partner.' He laughed. 'Then you could give orders to other people instead of driving!'

'For a mere two thousand you'd take me into the firm?' Dick spoke as though two thousand pounds was nothing to him.

'Yes. Why not? Of course you'd have to do a bit of mourning for funerals. The clients like to have one of the principals of the firm along to say goodbye to their loved ones. You'd look good in a silk top hat.'

But Dick was hardly listening. He was thinking where he could lay his hands on two thousand pounds. An idea was already forming in his mind.