

Chapter Two

Jill read the letter a second time:

Dear Jilly,

Hi! Great to hear, but you do sound down. Why be a waitress for your mum in grotty King's Oak when you could make tea for us on the magazine? It could be your way into journalism, if that interests you. Sales rise every month.

Going out with a super fellow called Simon. At my request he's growing his hair over his ears - despite ragging at work. I wonder if he cares for me? Well, maybe. We saw "Dr No" last night - super! What's on your way? - "Rin Tin Tin"?

There's floor space here any time you want to live a little.

Love,

Annabelle

PS Incidentally, I do care for Simon. Sorry, I 'm no longer quite the nice young lady you knew at Heathbury High School. Had to tell someone.

PPS Scared out of my wits every month till my cousins turn up, but it's worth it.

Jill put the letter in a drawer, looked at herself in her bedroom mirror and decided she needed more lipstick. Then she put on a thick woolly jacket that buttoned up to her throat and hurried down the stairs. Her mother was coming out of the sitting-room carrying some letters. Jill stopped dead on the stairs.

Meg said, 'Hello, dear. Do you know where Philip is?'

Jill sensed she was blushing furiously. 'I've no idea, mum. Isn't he off duty?'

'Silly of me,' Meg said. 'I just wanted some letters posted. You going out?'

Jill nodded. 'For a breath of air.'

Meg offered her the letters. 'You could post these then. Could you take Stevie with you? She's at a loose end.'

Jill said, 'I wanted to go on my own.'

Meg frowned. 'Anything troubling you?'

Jill wanted to say that she was tired of the village, hated being a waitress, resented her mother fostering Stevie when she already had one daughter, and that up to twenty-four hours ago she had every intention to go to London, with or without her mothers' consent - but that since yesterday evening something had happened that gave her strong reasons to remain at the motel and put up with everything else. She said, 'No, mum, I'm perfectly all right, thank you.'

'I see.' Meg didn't seem convinced but wasn't going

to press point. 'Do you need that woolly on? It's so warm.'

Jill said, 'Mum, I'm old enough to wear what I want to wear.'

'Of course you are, my dear.' Meg turned to go back into sitting room. 'Well, thanks for posting my letters.'

Jill took her bicycle from the cycle shed at the back of the building, posted the letters, then set out on the quiet road towards the little hamlet of Merryfield. The warm summer eve had brought out a number of villagers, and for the first mile passed people taking a quiet stroll. After two miles she had the road to herself. Ahead was the wood where Philip would be waiting.

She stopped as she came up to the thickly-clustered trees tangled undergrowth; she looked up and down the deserted road twice in each direction, before walking her bicycle off the road in among the trees. She pushed the bicycle deep into the wood to a point where it could not be seen by anyone passing on the road. Then she propped it against a fallen rotten trunk.

She called softly, 'Hello?'

Deeper in the wood there was a movement, the cracking of wood. Philip came towards her. He was wearing the same grey flared trousers and grey herringbone jacket as last night, the only clothes he seemed to possess.

She ran forward and buried her head in his shoulder. 'Hi, darling.' Whenever she set eyes on him she wanted to crumble.

He stroked her hair tenderly. 'You look nice.'

She looked up at him. 'You're beautiful. Kiss me.'

He hesitated. 'Jill, we've got to talk.'

'What about?'

'How old are you, Jill?'

'Twenty-two,' she said, remembering what she had told him last night.

He said, 'I asked Sandy. You were eighteen last birthday.'

'That doesn't matter.' She stepped back a pace, started to unbutton her woolly. 'Look what I've put on for you.' She opened the jacket to reveal the low-cut off-the-shoulder blouse.

He said, 'It does matter, Jill. I'm over forty.'

She took his hand and put it on her waist under the jacket. 'I've done something nice for you.'

His hand gently moved up her body to cup her breast. He said, 'Jill, you're so lovely.'

She snuggled into him again. 'Do you like me without

a bra?’

‘You know I do.’ His strong arms held her locked to him. ‘But Jill, we shouldn’t meet again.’

Her mind, filled with a jumble of emotions, blocked out his words. ‘Do what you did last night,’ she whispered into his jacket. The manly smell of the old jacket made her knees tremble.

He said, ‘No, it isn’t right.’

She remained clinging to him. The only thing she wanted in the world was for Philip to touch her. ‘Please, darling. You must. I can’t stand it any longer. I’ve been thinking about it all day.’

His hands stayed where they were, holding her. ‘I’m old enough to be your father.’

‘But you’re not. You are you.’ She realised she was clenching her teeth. ‘Please, please.’

She felt his arm move slowly from her back and a pre-relief of tension started to flood through her.

She said. ‘You must enjoy it, too, tonight. I want you to.’

‘I enjoy just being with you.’

His hand went slowly to her thigh.

She clung to him, gasping. Soon she sighed deeply and wanted to fall asleep where she stood.

‘Surprise, surprise!’

Kitty looked up from the newspapers she was folding. Her brother Andy stood in the shop doorway clutching a small green canvas suitcase. His naval petty officer’s uniform was crumpled after a night of travelling, his long masculine face deeply tanned and his fair hair bleached through years of Gibraltar sunshine. He came forward, filling the shop with his six and a half feet, leaned over the counter and kissed his sister on the cheek.

‘How are you, luv?’

She took his hand. ‘Always better on seeing you, Andy. We got your telegram last night. How long is it this time?’

He grinned, revealing big strong teeth. ‘Trying to get rid of me already? I’ve got a week. This is pre-release leave.’

‘I never realised.’ She looked for her open cigarette packet and lighter. It would be her tenth this morning since rising at 5am to sort the newspapers for delivery. ‘It seems only yesterday when you signed on.’

‘I know,’ he said. ‘But it’s eighteen years! Here, have one of these.’ He opened the little case, brought out a carton of 200 duty-free cigarettes, Kitty’s favourite brand.

She looked at the carton - he always brought her one - and her own stock of thousands of cigarettes. ‘Coals to Newcastle,’ she said. ‘But they’re very welcome.’ She looked into his eyes, blue as when he was a boy. ‘And so are you, Andy.’

Dick, in shirt sleeves, came through from the back room. ‘Well, if it isn’t Andy!’ He pumped Andy’s hand and slapped him on the back. ‘You’re just in time for the breakfast I cooked for you.’

They went into the back room. Dick had laid a perfect breakfast table; their best silver toast rack contained golden brown toast, and a fresh white linen napkin was folded across each side plate.

Dick looked to Kitty for approval. ‘All right, luv?’ It was traditional that when they had visitors Dick demonstrated what a good husband he was. At all other times he remained in bed until two hours after Kitty’s dawn start of the day.

Kitty said, ‘Yes, very nice.’

At Dick’s insistence Kitty and Andy sat at the table while he brought from the kitchen the two plates of bacon, sausages, eggs, and tomatoes that he had cooked. For himself he had one small rasher of streaky bacon and a dessert spoon of the tinned tomatoes.

He said, ‘Will that do you for a homecoming?’

‘Fine,’ said Andy. ‘Is that all you’re eating?’

Dick patted his completely flat stomach. ‘Got to watch the figure at my age. Over forty now, you know. How’s the Navy?’

Andy started to eat. ‘Still afloat.’ He turned to Kitty. ‘How’s Meg?’

Kitty said, ‘I don’t get over there much, but she seems all right.’

Andy sliced a sausage in half. ‘I mean the motel. Is it going alright?’

Dick had started to pour three cups of tea. ‘That’s something we don’t know much about. Meg keeps business very much to herself.’

Andy and Kitty exchanged glances that Dick didn’t see.

Andy said. ‘Soon as I’ve had a couple of hours sleep I’ll get over to see her.’

Dick handed round the tea cups, and sat down to start his own frugal breakfast. ‘I’ve been reading about this build up of Soviet naval power,’ he said. ‘This must be a matter of great concern to you fellows.’ He continued through the rest of the meal propounding how, given the opportunity, he would combat the menace to British seagoing security. When they finished Dick insisted on washing the dishes while Kitty showed Andy up to the guest room.

Andy undid his black regulation necktie. ‘Same old

Dick,' he smiled.

'That's right,' said Kitty. 'Same old Dick.'

In the back room Dick was removing the Cellophane from a packet of Players he had just taken from the shop. 'He looks great,' he told Kitty. 'It'll be nice for you to have him here.'

Kitty said, 'He always pays for his keep.'

Dick looked shocked. 'Did I hint at otherwise?' He lit a cigarette and blew a perfect smoke ring that slowly sailed across the room. 'As a matter of fact, Kit, I've been wanting to talk to you about money. I'm thinking of going into business with Victor Amos.'

'What about your new job?'

'Difficult people to get on with.' He blew another smoke ring. 'I don't think it's going to work somehow.'

'Have you given it a fair trial?'

'You know me, Kit,' he said. 'I'm not a bad judge of character. The managing director is hidebound, doesn't want to strike out and look for new markets. So I think it's time I struck out on my own.'

Kitty felt she knew what was coming next. 'What'll you do for money?'

'We could raise a mortgage on this place,' he said, airily. 'The bank would be willing to put up a couple of thousand against the freehold.'

Kitty ground out the cigarette she was smoking. 'I'll put the kettle on for Brian's morning tea.' Brian, who spent every evening out with his girl friend, didn't wake up until 8am. Kitty went into the kitchen.

Dick called after her, with a little laugh, 'It was only an idea, Kit! It would make me independent, that's all.' With his tone he implied that no true wife could deny her husband's right to be self-employed.

Kitty put on the kettle and went back into the room. 'The answer is no, Dick. I'm sorry.'

Dick said, 'You haven't even heard my plan.'

'And I don't want to. The title deeds of this house and the shop remain in that drawer.' She pointed to the sideboard drawer where they kept all their personal papers. 'They represent my independence.'

'It's the husband who's supposed to provide,' Dick said.

'Then you'd better get on your way to work.'

'It just seems a pity to pass up a wonderful opportunity, Kit.'

The shop bell rang, the day's first customer.

'I'll have to go,' she said, glad of the bell. 'If you're short of a couple of quid. I'll lend you till the end of the month.'

Kitty went into the shop. She knew she wasn't going to cry because her tears had dried up years ago.

Ruth Bailey drew two neat lines under the final figure on the balance sheet. and regarded the result. It was not good. She lifted her desk phone, told Marilyn on reception where she could be found, and left the office. The door to Meg's sitting-room was across the corridor. As Meg's secretary, Ruth did not knock before entering, but in other small ways she treated her employer with deference. Meg was talking to Sandy.

'May I interrupt?'

Meg said, 'We've just finished.'

Sandy got up to go. Ruth sensed that she had walked in on an important mother-and-son discussion.

Ruth said, 'I could come back.'

'No,' said Meg. 'it's all right. Let's hear the worst.' She turned to Sandy. 'You could be helpful and take those cups to the kitchen.'

Sandy picked up the small tray containing two used coffee cups. As he left the room, Ruth presented the balance sheet to Meg.

'I think the problem is Fairlawns,' she said. 'King's Oak may not have enough passing traffic for a hotel *and* a motel.'

Sandy closed the door behind him, giving Meg an opportunity to say what was worrying her. 'He wants to leave school.'

Ruth asked, 'How do you feel about that?'

'I wanted him to go on to Heathbury Grammar School,' Meg explained. 'But I've got to admit, his reports haven't been very good.'

'What does he want to do?'

'He's got an idea he wants to go into journalism,' Meg shrugged. She indicated the balance sheet. 'Anyway, tell me how we can solve this problem.'

For the next half hour Meg encouraged Ruth to explain her ideas on promoting the motel. It was something Ruth appreciated. Since her husband Gerald died she had had a succession of male employers who, when not trying to seduce her, had treated her with various degrees of male patronage. She had discovered that men preferred their secretaries to be seen but not heard.

'We must advertise more', Ruth said, 'and I must make sure we are in every directory that exists.' She knew that many businesses, in and out of the catering trade, overlooked the usefulness of local and national trade guides. In almost all cases entries were free. She added: 'And we need an advertising agency.'

Meg said. 'You don't think we can handle it ourselves?'

Ruth shook her head. 'We can. But an agency would do it more expertly. They've got the experience of knowing which papers and magazines are going to have the best selling power for motels and hotels in

the Midlands.' She went on to explain that using an agency cost the advertiser no more than placing advertisements direct: agencies lived off the 15% discount they received from the journals where they placed advertisements. She concluded, 'An agency could re-design our brochure, even our table menus.'

Meg said. 'That's going to cost more.'

Ruth agreed. Having printing done through an advertising agency could considerably add to the price, compared with the client going direct to a printer. 'But,' she pointed out, 'they'll get a better job done for us, because they'll have typographers and lay out artists. A printer's job may be cheaper but its style is always ten years out of date. Clients don't notice consciously, but they do sub-consciously.'

Meg smiled, obviously pleased with Ruth's enthusiasm. She said, 'You do whatever you think is best, Ruth. Just don't bankrupt me in the first year! Was there anything else?'

Ruth raised a thorny problem that had been troubling her for weeks. 'Have you spoken to Philip Winter?' The resident handyman still had not produced his insurance card and tax form.

'I have', said Meg, 'and he promised to do something.'

Ruth got up. 'I'll speak to him again.' She remembered what a liking she had taken to Philip when he came for his interview. Her feelings were different now. 'Thanks for saying I could get on with the advertising.'

Ruth went down the corridor towards the reception foyer. A deeply suntanned man turned into the corridor and came towards her. He moved to his left as she moved to her right; then she moved to her left as he moved to his right. Ruth dodged back, and so did he. Grinning, the man came forward, gripped Ruth's waist and swung her round so that they could pass.

'I'm Andy Fraser,' he said. 'Who are you?'

Ruth straightened her dress. 'This is part of the motel is private. What do you want, please?'

'The name's Fraser,' the man repeated. 'Meg Richardson's brother. Are you Ruth?'

'Ruth Bailey,' she said. 'You'll find Mrs Richardson in the sitting room.' She indicated the door, turned and hurried away. She could still feel Andy's hands on her waist, and it disturbed her.

Philip was in the dining room mending a sash cord. He had a window out, and as Ruth entered he was threading new cord through the pulley in the window frame. All the tables were set for lunch except the one nearest the window. Philip's tool box was on the bare table top.

Ruth said abruptly, 'Do you have your cards yet?'

'Just a moment.' Philip completed threading the cord

through the pulley, then looked down from the ladder. 'They haven't sent them. Sorry.'

Ruth spoke loud enough for anyone in the adjoining kitchen to hear. 'Why can't I write to your past employers for them?'

Philip came down the ladder. 'I told you, Miss Bailey. I left them in my old digs.'

'Do you realise the that every week we don't put a stamp on your card we are breaking the law?'

He shrugged. 'It's my fault, not yours.'

She knew her temper was on edge. 'Did you ever have a card with stamps on it?'

He turned his back, selected a wide headed nail from the tool box. 'Yes, of course.'

'Have you been in prison?'

'That's a rotten thing to ask a fellow, Miss Bailey.' He picked up his hammer and drove the broad-headed nail through the new cord into the side of the window.

She said, 'Will you please stop hammering while I'm speaking to you?'

He stopped.

'This is all very irregular,' she said, knowing that she sounded like a prim head mistress. 'I'll have to speak to Mrs Richardson about it.'

'You have done already,' he said, 'and I promised I'd do my best. My landlady doesn't answer my letters.'

'When did you last write to her?'

There was a moment's hesitation. 'Yesterday,' he said.

'I don't think you've written at all.' She looked at the unset table. 'Was it necessary to mend this window when the dining room staff need to make up the tables?'

'I'll have it finished well before lunches start, Miss Bailey. I promised to set this table myself.'

'You do that.' She turned angrily and went back to the safety of her office. She hated to admit that the masculinity of both Andy and now Philip had disturbed her. In the office she found Diane idly reading the carbon copy of a letter to the bank manager. A tray of coffee for one stood on her desk.

Ruth snatched up the copy-letter. 'That's confidential!'

'Sorry.' Diane seemed totally unperturbed. 'I'm glad you've come because your morning coffee's getting cold.'

Ruth sat behind her desk, her position of maximum security. 'Diane, you must never, never read other people's letters.' She could have added, 'At least, never get caught,' but decided Diane's intelligence didn't stretch to such sophisticated thinking. Given the opportunity, everyone in guest catering, from manager to night porter, would snoop on their clients'

most personal possessions with the innocent glee of little boys looking up a lady's skirt. Not being caught depended on the snooper's development of a photographic memory so that everything could be put back exactly as the guest had left it.

Diane said, 'I said I'm sorry, Miss Bailey.' She slunk to the door 'Is there anything else?'

'No,' said Ruth. 'That's all.'

With the office to herself, Ruth poured black coffee, slipped a fresh sheet of plain white paper into the big office typewriter mentally blocked out Philip and Diane and the rest of the world and started to type:

Darling!

I wonder how long I can go on?

You changed me. The last years with Gerald made me hard and cynical. You swept all that away. Now I can't have you. It is very cruel.

How I ache for you! The worst is at night, when I realise you are less than half a mile away. That is the worst time.

I can't bear to think of never having you as my companion again. I was so proud to be seen with you - those few places we could dare be seen together.

What irony. If you hadn't married my sister I might never have met you.

Such bliss if I could change places with her. Would you like to share us? Think of it, after a day tending your copious sick you could have two concubines to come home to!

No, I would want you to myself.

Oh God, I feel so useless. The life of a secretary is sterile. I should be looking after you, comforting you when patients die and you don't really know why and have to lie to the relatives. I should be waiting with hot Bovril when you come home at three in the morning after delivering a baby...

She stopped typing. The letter had no shape this morning. She drew the sheet from the typewriter, took her long stationery scissors from the desk drawer, and methodically cut the unfinished letter into dozens of tiny pieces. Later these would be deposited into a lavatory pan and flushed away. She wished she could actually post the letters, for him to read, but that was too dangerous and might upset him. During their all-too-brief affair she had given him a love letter every morning. But her sister was safely in hospital then.

The office door opened slowly. Ruth looked up, angry to be caught cutting up the letter. It was Stevie, pale and frightened.

Ruth softened. 'What is it, Stevie?'

Stevie spoke in one breath. 'I've been sent home by the teacher, there's a man talking to Auntie Meg - and I think my first period's coming on.'

Ruth got up, experiencing a wave of usefulness. She felt tender towards the little girl who was becoming a woman. 'There's nothing to worry about, Stevie. I think I can find just what you need.'

'Thanks.' Stevie looked curiously at the tiny pieces of paper on the desk. 'Were you making confetti?'

Police Constable Robinson stood with his bicycle and watched the group of young people by the Old Coach House. It was a half-timbered building, at least two hundred years old, derelict since living memory, and owned by a recluse living in Merryfield. In the intricate pattern of village life it had become the traditional summer evening meeting point for the older children and young teenagers. P.C. Robinson's regular evening appearance, when he stood for ten minutes and just looked at the youngsters, was done to remind them that crime would be quickly followed by punishment. He had heard about some permissive society developing in the big cities, and had no intention of letting it happen on his beat. With only three more months before retirement he was determined nothing should blemish the village's crime-free record of years' standing.

After exactly ten minutes, timed by his large silver chained watch, Robinson mounted his bicycle and went off towards his immaculately kept police house.

By the Old Coach House, Sandy Richardson stood to attention and held out his hands as though supporting an upright bicycle.

'Well, lad,' Sandy said, imitating P.C. Robinson's deep Yorkshire accent, 'and what have thee been up to, eh?'

One of the thirteen-year-old girls, Beryl, a red-head in a pale green dress, ran up to Sandy and curtsied. 'Oh, sir, I've just seen that wicked Norman Tyson stealing apples from Mr Hawthorn's back garden.'

Sandy deepened his voice. 'And how did you observe this crime, lass?'

Beryl giggled. 'I was in the garden shed with Mr Hawthorn at the time.'

This brought gales of laughter from the young group milling about. It was well-believed that the aged bachelor Mr Hawthorn was a paederast because he always gave a friendly smile to little girls in the village. In the King's Oak sub-world of youth, which enjoyed a culture and folk lore totally separate from the adult world, most of the village adults were labelled indelibly with terrible misdeeds. P.C. Robinson, it was said,

had once beaten a tramp to death and buried the body where no one could find it. Miss Edith Tatum practised witchcraft and the Black Mass when no one was looking. The widow Amy Turtle, who worked in one of the village pubs, had poisoned her husband, Fred, and got away with it. Hugh Mortimer ran an illegal gambling hell for rich Birmingham industrialists in a secret cellar under Fairlawns Hotel. Philip Winter, the newcomer at Crossroads Motel, was the leader of a London gang and organised bank robberies from Meg Richardson's sitting room. None of the youngsters quite believed these stories, yet none would deny them. Elaborating new and terrible twists to the web of myths was a continuing game.

'What are we going to do?' This was Norman Tyson, a tall thin 17-year-old who had already been working two years in the adult world at a timber yard. He kept the company of much younger people, and was regarded as a bit mentally retarded.

'Who are we going to do?' said Beryl, and they all laughed. The girls were always expected to make the sexual inuendos, while the boys had to pose as would-be law breakers.

Sandy went up to Norman, taking the tall youth to one side. 'I got an idea of something we could do to Fairlawns Hotel.'

'Yeah? Such as what?' Norman spoke from the side of his mouth, like a gangster.

'First we've got to get in there'. Sandy was aware the others were now watching them. 'You wouldn't mind a bit of breaking and entering, would you?'

'Nothing scares me,' said Norman. 'You want to pinch something?'

'I want to give them something,' Sandy said. 'I thought of you and me and Rodge.' Rodger Brenton was 15 but so small he could pass for an 11-year-old.

Norman said, 'What do we want him for?'

'He's the skinniest,' said Sandy. 'He could be useful to squeeze in somewhere.'

Norman nodded. 'Call him over.'

While Sandy went to extract Rodge from a game of hopscotch with Beryl and her friend Eunice, Norman stuck his hands in his blue jeans and waited. Having Sandy bring Rodge to him was Norman's way of establishing himself as the boss of the proposed expedition, even though he didn't yet know what it was.

The three boys walked out of hearing of their friends, found a five bar gate they could lean on, and stalks of grass to chew. Sandy outlined his plan.

Rodge asked, 'What if we get caught?'

Norman jabbed Rodge in the ribs, his way of emphasising anything he was about to say. 'You didn't listen! We ain't pinching, we're delivering!'

Rodge said, 'It's still me that's got to go in first.'

'Because you're the smallest!' Norman guffawed. It was generally believed that Rodge's size reflected the size of his father's penis.

Rodge hated references to his smallness and held back the tears. 'All right, count me in.'

Norman drew a packet of ten cigarettes from his trouser pocket, selected a particularly long dog end, lit it and coughed violently. 'We'll do it tonight.'

'They got a man works there all night,' said Rodge. His mother was a cleaner at the hotel and sometimes talked about other members of the staff.

'I've seen him,' Norman said. 'He's old and dodderly. Maybe he sleeps all night.'

'That's a risk we'll have to take,' said Sandy, repeating something he had heard John Steed tell Cathy Gale in *The Avengers* on television. 'We meet by the Old Coach House at midnight.'

'You'll bring the stuff?' Norman spoke as though 'the stuff' might be gellignite.

Sandy nodded. 'Don't forget. Midnight tonight.'

Rodge said. 'I have to go to bed at eleven o'clock. My mum makes me.'

'Then you'll have to get up again,' said Norman, 'and slink out through the keyhole.'

Rodge pulled himself up to his full four feet three inches. 'I'll be there.'