

Chapter Three

Philip Winter sat on the edge of his bed. He had spent the hot day trimming hedges in the motel grounds; now the palms of his hands were calloused and his shoulders ached. He untied his shoes and pushed them off. There was a hole in his left sock, and he remembered that for the first time in twenty years he had no darning gear. He leaned back to rest his shoulders against the red oak wood wall of the shed and took stock of what he had got. It amounted to one pair of shoes, two pairs of socks, two shirts, two pairs of trousers and one herringbone jacket, a comb, a pencil, three weeks untouched wages, and an address in Birmingham. He did not have a name he could use, nor the insurance card and income tax form that Ruth Bailey kept asking for. The carefully saved money would buy him time to do what he had to do, the address committed now to memory, might permanently give him the freedom that he had snatched.

He stood up and peeled off his sweaty shirt. Then he noticed the little slip of paper that someone had inserted under the door. He picked it up and read the message printed in unidentifiable block letters: 'TONIGHT AT NINE O'CLOCK. SAME PLACE. I LOVE YOU DEEPLY'.

He sat back on the bed and tried to get his thinking in order. The first thought was regret that he had ever made the original pass. He had been working alone in the kitchen that day, washing up after the lunches because Meg Richardson was short staffed. Jill came in wearing her waitress's uniform and made a cup of tea for them both.

'Where do you come from?' she asked.

'Here and there,' he said, 'and there and here.'

She laughed. 'What did you do before?'

'That and this,' he said, 'and this and that.'

She poured two cups of tea, and brought two chairs together close by one of the work tables. 'Stop and have a cup of the national beverage. You must be tired standing.'

She did not persist with her questions about him. Once they were seated she talked about herself and her thoughts of going to work in London. He listened attentively, indulgent to the teenage self-obsession. He calculated he was just old enough to be her father, and wished he had had children. Everything about her was young and fresh - the puppy-fat hands, the clear skin of her cheeks and forehead, the little fluffy hairs that sprouted at her hairline.

'Do you like it in King's Oak?' she asked.

'It's a very nice village,' he said politely, knowing she had been born here.

'There are some lovely places to walk on summer evenings.' She looked down into her tea.

Philip hadn't touched a woman for six months. He found his eyes fixed on the calf of Jill's crossed leg. 'Maybe you could show me.'

She got up and quickly poured away the rest of the tea in her cup. 'Walk three miles on the road to Merryfield. There's a wood, on the left. I can be there at eight o'clock tonight.' She hurried out of the kitchen before Philip could say anything.

The rest of the day his mind was fixed on Jill. He suddenly felt young again and no longer isolated by age and deception. He would actually have someone to talk to.

His working day ended at six o'clock. He spent an hour showering and ironing one of his two shirts. At seven o'clock he set out for a three mile walk that he knew would only take him only twenty minutes. When he got to the wood he sat down on a fallen tree and waited, well concealed from the road. Without a watch he had no idea how long he waited.

Jill arrived, pushing her bicycle into a hiding place in the undergrowth. She smiled and took his hand and led him deeper into the wood.

She said, 'I want to show you a special place.'

They came to the far edge of the little wood. A grassy slope went down to a very small brook. 'It's quite comfortable to sit here,' Jill said, and sat down.

Philip sat on the grass beside her. Birds sang in the wood behind him, tiny fish swam in the pools made by the brook, the lazy drone of summer insects came from the tall grass, and warm country smells drifted by.

She said, 'Do you like it here?'

'It's beautiful.' He wanted to add, 'And so are you,' but felt it was too early yet.

To his amazement she said, 'I think you're beautiful.' She lay back on the grass and put her hands behind her head, looking up at his face. He found himself looking at the shape of her breasts, and desperately wanted to touch them. He closed his eyes.

'Don't you like the look of me?' There was a smile in her voice. 'Open your eyes or I might disappear.'

He looked down at her. 'Do you really want to give up all this for London?'

She looked up at the blue sky. 'I hate King's Oak. It's a dump.'

'I suppose you're old enough to leave home.'

She turned her head to look at him again. 'I might stay if you do.'

'You hardly know me. Jill.'

'It doesn't matter.' She smiled. 'Nothing matters.'

She took a deep breath, and her breasts rose under her blouse inviting him to touch.

He lent on one elbow close to her, put his hand under her neck and gently kissed her. Her body immediately contorted in excitement and her arms wrapped round him.

'Oh Philip,' she said between kisses, 'you're lovely, lovely.'

His hands moved over her squirming body. As she clung to him, pressing her mouth to his, his hand savagely pulled open her blouse, then gently slid up under her brassiere to caress her breast.

'Philip, Philip!' Her nails dug into his back through the thickness of his jacket.

Quickly his hand went down her body. Within moments she let out a cry, then sighed and fell back exhausted. She lay still, as though about to go to sleep.

Waves of tenderness welled up in him. 'You're only a child.'

She shook her head slowly and smiled, eyes closed. 'No I'm not. That can't happen to children.'

He lay down beside her. She snuggled into him and almost instantly went to sleep. He held her in his arms and tried to imagine what it was like to have a daughter.

He struck a match and put the flame to the tiny slip of paper. Just before it burnt his fingers he let it drop to the floor. He got out the shed's dustpan and brush and swept up the fragment of ashes

The shape of Fairlawns Hotel loomed high in the night sky. Its clientele was largely elderly, and by midnight the games of whist and billiards were long over, the bar deserted, and the guests were snoring bronchitically, sets of false teeth de-coking in bedside glasses of Steradent.

Sandy, Norman and Rodge stood in the huge ornamental back garden, close to the croquet lawn, looking in awe at the huge building. A light went out in an upstairs bedroom window. Now the only light remaining was in one small downstairs window.

'That's where he's supposed to be all night,' said Rodge.

Sandy said, 'Let's see where Rodge can squeeze in. Come on.'

Sandy walked forward, carrying a white sack. He paused. 'Well, what's holding you back?'

'Just finishing my cigarette,' said Norman, and ground it out on the grass. He followed Sandy. Rodge brought up the rear.

The back of the building presented a series of windows of all sizes, and three doors. Rodge looked relieved. 'There's no bars anywhere. You don't need me. I'll be off.' He turned to go. Norman grabbed his arm.

'You ain't going nowhere, buster!'

'You only wanted me 'cos I'm' - Rodge hesitated on the word 'slim.'

Norman guffawed. 'You're talking like a bloody girl! Slim!'

Sandy came up to them. 'Why don't you two belt up? We've got to do this quietly.' He turned to Norman. 'And you're supposed to be leading.'

'If I let him go he'll talk.' Norman increased his grip on Rodge's arm. 'He's got to be in on it with us.'

'Honest, I won't ever tell.' Rodge held back the tears. Norman's grip was hurting his upper arm.

'Are you going to stay with us?' Norman asked.

'If you let go - yes, all right.'

Norman released his grip. 'Let's see if any of these windows open.'

Rodge nursed his arm. 'Why windows when there's doors?'

Without acknowledging the wisdom of that, Norman went up to a small rear door and tried to turn the handle. It turned easily. He pushed the door open. 'You see,' he beamed, 'no trouble at all. Who's got the torch?'

Sandy pulled a small flashlight from his pocket. Norman took it and pointed it down a flagstoned corridor. A forest of electricity meters sprouted on one of the walls. He went further down the corridor.

Sandy said, 'Try right.'

'Why?'

'I don't know. Try left, then.'

Norman turned to the right. The corridor ended with the door to the hotel's rambling kitchens. Norman panned the torch over | spotless work tables, a rack of steel knives, their blades wavy from countless sharpenings, huge ovens and mixing machines.

'There's a good bit of stuff to nick here,' he said, impressed.

'We aren't nicking,' said Sandy. 'We've got to find the sugar bowls. They'll be on shelves somewhere.'

Norman advanced into the kitchen complex. Doorways without doors led from one section to another, each section equipped with expensive-

looking machinery and equipment.

'Over there!' Rodge pointed to shelves caught in the overspill of the torch's beam.

Neatly placed in rows on a shelf were forty silver bowls containing various amounts of fine granulated sugar.

'Right,' said Norman. 'Let's get cracking. Open the sack'

'What are we going to do with the sugar that's in the bowls?' Rodge asked. .

'Dump it,' said Norman.

'But where?'

'Sandy, did you bring another sack with you?' Norman asked, knowing that Sandy hadn't done so. 'Honest, you should have thought of that, Sandy.'

'Well I didn't.' Sandy looked around the kitchen, his eyes seeing better now. 'Look, that thing.' He pointed to a huge hotel saucepan with a lid.

Rodge lifted the lid, looked inside. 'It's empty.'

'So let's get working,' said Norman. 'I'll hold the torch. Rodge empties, you fill.'

Rodge took two bowls at a time and emptied their sugar into the saucepan. Sandy opened the white sack he had secreted from the kitchen at Crossroads Motel and started filling the sugar bowls with salt.

In his room at the back of Fairlawns Hotel, the night porter Trumper, woke up from his doze. He was sitting in his one armchair, feet up on the single bed. He rubbed his mucus-filled eyes. The television set was still on, the screen now blank. He reached for the glass of beer at his side and finished its contents. Then he belched and looked at the empty beer bottle. His head ached slightly, something he could put right with a cup of tea.

He got up unsteadily and turned off the television set. He had bought it from a junk-shop in Heathbury three years ago, and paid only £5 because it was old and picked up only BBC 1. There were now some second-hand sets in the junk shops that picked up both channels, but they cost £25 or more. Trumper had never managed to save that amount of money in his fifty years of working life. His weekly wage was mainly spent on liquor and cigarettes, his 'little compensations' as he called them. He scratched and yawned and urinated into the corner wash-hand basin, then made his way down one of the hotel's labyrinth of downstairs corridors towards the kitchen. He did not put on any lights because he knew the way blindfold. As he approached the kitchens he heard urgent whispers and saw the roaming light of a torch. He stopped, his heart palpitating. Concentrating his partially defective hearing, he detected there were

three voices, one a teenage youth, the other two children. He crept forward silently. A waft of summer night air touched his cheek: the door to the garden was standing wide open. That worried him. He didn't mind what the intruders stole, but Mr Mortimer had instructed him always to lock the doors by 11pm every night, which he had never bothered to do since his first week in the job.

As he stood still and listened he heard the teenager say something inaudible, then guffaw at his own joke. Now he spoke loud enough for Trumper to hear: 'Your mum could make a fortune nicking stuff from here, Rodge...One of these silver bowls under her pinny every day when she goes home...'

One of the children said, 'Keep quiet,' and Trumper heard no more. But he had heard enough to solve two of his problems - how to explain that unlocked door, and how to get the £25 he so wanted.

'Either you let me in or I'm going to scream.'

Jill had waited two hours in the wood. At eleven o'clock, in the twilight of mid-Summer's Day, she cycled back to King's Oak. She threw her bicycle into the motel's staff cycle shed and went straight to Philip's garden-shed room and knocked on the door.

Philip quietly opened the door. She went in and stood in the middle of the floor to face him. She wanted to stamp on the wooden floor. 'Why didn't you meet me?'

He said, 'Sit down, Jill.'

She remained standing. 'I wanted to see you.' Tears were gliding down her cheeks, her voice breaking. 'Have I done something to I annoy you?'

I 'We mustn't go on with this, Jill.'

! 'Why?' His words made her want to collapse, to fall on the floor before him. 'I know you don't love me but I love you!'

'Perhaps I do love you,' he said gently. 'That's why it's got to end.'

That doesn't make sense.' Her body quivered with controlled I weeping. 'Let me do nice things to you, like you do to me. Then you'll see how much you need me.'

'I need you very much, but that isn't fair to you.'

Her restraint broke and she ran forward and put her arms round him, her face against the rough herringbone jacket. She sobbed with anger. He caressed her, and smoothed her hair.

'Let's sit down,' he said.

He guided her to the edge of the bed so that they could sit together. 'Do you realise,' he said, a smile in his voice, 'if you were just two years and a bit younger

I could go to prison for what I've done to you.'

She looked up at him. 'Kiss me.'

The smell of her young body filled his nostrils. 'No, Jill. Not any I I more.' He tried to ease himself away from her.

'Where are you going?'

'I'm going to open that door, and you're going to your room.'

'No.' She gripped his clothes. 'Why don't you like me any more?'

I like you too much, but I'm old enough to be your father.'

'Oh, shut up!' She suddenly let go of him, and turned her back.

He didn't move. 'You really loved your father, didn't you?'

She said nothing, just sat staring into a darkened corner.

'That's why you love me, Jill.'

She blew her nose and wiped her tears but remained looking towards the darkened corner. 'I hate amateur psychologists.'

He touched her shoulder. 'Will you go to your room now please?'

'Have you had lots of women?' She kept her back to him.

'I'm a grown man, what you'd call middle-aged.'

'Have you been with prostitutes?'

He laughed quietly. 'Any man who says he hasn't is a liar.'

Now she turned back to face him, looking falsely cheerful.

'Tell me the things they do and I'll do them to you.'

'No.' He got up to open the door. 'You must go to your room, Jill.'

She said, 'I'm not moving until you say why you hate me.'

'I don't hate you.' He opened the door. 'Good night, Jill.'

She stayed sitting on the bed. 'Are you expecting some one else? Which is it- Diane or Marilyn?'

'There's no one else.'

'Ruth Bailey?'

He laughed. 'No. I don't think she likes me.'

She looked round the little shed room. 'This is the first time we've been indoors together alone - like this. Will you please close that door?'

'When you've gone.'

'I'm not going.' She turned, brought her legs up onto the bed, and lay back. 'Over here, Philip,' she whispered. 'Over here.'

Slowly he closed the door.

Sandy, Norman, and Rodge ran all the way from Fairlawns Hotel towards the village.

Rodge was panting badly. 'Do you think he saw us?'

'I don't know.' Norman stopped running, his knees quivering. 'Maybe we ought to cut out altogether.'

Sandy asked, 'What are you talking about?'

'The three of us - leave King's Oak.' Norman fished in his pocket for his cigarettes. The packet was empty.

'You're talking wet,' Rodge gasped. 'We live here. Who'd look after us?'

'Fend for ourselves, go on the road.' Norman had found half a cigarette in his pocket. With shaking hands, he tried to light it. 'It's alright for you two kids, you'll only get a caning. Me, they'll send me to Borstal.'

'No one's caught us yet,' said Sandy. 'He never saw any of us, I'm sure of that.'

Having changed all the sugar for salt, they had crept out of the kitchen, back along the corridors, and into the hotel's back garden. As they were tip-toeing away, Trumper had called at them from the corridor. The three boys ran for their lives.

'It's funny why he didn't chase us,' Rodge said, his breath back now.

'Too old,' said Norman. 'You get like that when you're old. I won't ever get old. I'll die young.'

'I'm going home.' said Sandy, and walked off. The other two remained talking. Norman dragging the last puff of smoke from his half cigarette.

Sandy still carried the now empty white salt sack. That was evidence and he wanted to get rid of it. He circled the main motel building, made his way quietly to the area at the rear, never seen by the guests. Here were the utility outhouses, some of the staff quarters, and the rubbish bins. He moved very quietly because the motel also had a night porter. As he approached the line of rubbish bins he heard a door open. He slunk against a wall. There were footsteps, and then in the star-light he saw Jill's fair hair as she ran across his line of vision, making her way to the main building.

Eric Cowley, the handsome cleft-chinned manager of Fairlawns Hotel, thrust his hands into the pockets of his dressing gown and looked at the damaged back door. Trumper played the light from a big torch onto the broken woodwork.

'They must have used a jemmy, sir,' said Trumper, keeping his voice down. He didn't want to disturb sleeping guests. 'I thought I should wake you up, rather than calling in the police straight away,

'You did right. Did they take anything?'

'Haven't looked yet, sir. We'd better go in the kitchens and see.'

'Why the kitchens?'

Trumper hesitated. 'Where else could they have gone, sir, coming in this way?'

'Anywhere in the hotel, once they got through this door.' Eric was not impressed with the security of a door that could be smashed open without the night porter hearing. 'Anyway, let's start in the kitchens.'

They went inside and Eric switched on the lights. With all lights blazing, the well-equipped deserted kitchens had the eerie look of a vast laboratory.

What could they take in here?' Eric asked. He had been woken from a deep first-sleep and knew his mind wasn't working properly yet.

'There's a lot of valuable stuff here, sir'

'Yes, but kids. What would they want in here?'

Trumper stared at the open cash box lying on the floor. 'That's what they wanted, sir.' It was the chef's black metal cash box; the cash was used for sundries needed quickly from the local shop, or to provide tips for delivery people. The lid had been prised off; the sections inside were empty except for a few scattered coppers.

Eric said, 'Where was it kept?'

Trumper looked at a cupboard door, also prised open. 'I suppose in there, sir, but it wouldn't be my business to know where money was kept.'

'Then how did these kids know?'

For a moment Trumper was silent and avoided the manager's eyes. 'Don't know, sir...'

'Trumper, if you've got something on your mind it always flashes like a Neon light. Do you know who these kids were?'

'Well,' said Trumper, licking his lips, 'I heard one of them get called "Rodge". There's Mrs Brenton, she's got a boy called Rodger. I heard her speak about him.'

Eric's first inclination was to forget the whole thing and go back to bed. Mrs Brenton was a nice woman, a hard worker, perhaps he could have a word with her tomorrow. On the other hand he knew Trumper would never keep his mouth shut. Once full of beer, he would abuse Mrs Brenton for having a delinquent son. So, if Mrs Brenton could not be saved embarrassment anyway, what other factors were there? According to Trumper there were three boys, one a teenager. If it became known in the village that Fairlawns Hotel could be raided with impunity, others

might be encouraged to try their luck.

'I'll have a word with P.C. Robinson in the morning,' said Eric. He picked up the smashed cash box and put it back in the cupboard. 'Will you be able to explain why you didn't hear that back door being forced open?'

'Yes, sir,' said Trumper, ready for this question. 'I was in the main lounge fixing that faulty light plug.'

Eric hadn't heard about the light plug, but it was possible no one would bother him with such a detail. 'All right,' he said, 'I'm going back to bed.'

'You think it necessary to get the police, sir?' Trumper picked up the scattered coins and dutifully put them into the cash box.

'I don't know,' said Eric. 'I suppose we've got to. And we'll have to get people in to repair the damage. Good night.'

'Good night, sir.'

Eric went back slowly to his room at the top of the hotel. Trumper looked at the smashed cash box and the broken cupboard door and thought about the police coming the next day to ask questions. He was suddenly frightened and had an overwhelming desire to put the money back. But it was too late now.