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A Greater Evil

Natasha Cooper

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Extract

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Chapter 1

The clay was dead between his fingers. Cold and sticky as always, but uncooperative too. It smelled of decay. He wasn't a fool: he knew it was his mind and not the stuff itself that was the problem. Even so, he felt as though it was fighting him, resisting, withholding the response he'd learned to trust. Nothing worked. Each movement of his hands made it worse and the familiar delicate modelling tools felt as heavy as sledgehammers between his clumsy fingers. What had been a promising start was now a mess.

If only he could empty his mind of the voices and the fears. Then he could focus and maybe the clay would move between his hands again, helping him reveal the idea he'd had for it. Never since his discovery of the talent he'd been given had it failed him like this. What if he'd lost it for ever, the power that had come out of nowhere fourteen years ago?

'Take your hands away before you ruin it,' he said aloud, shocking some other, less conscious, part of his brain. His voice, hoarse and a bit cracked, echoed around the big studio, bouncing off the exposed steel beams and the hard concrete floor, easily overcoming the Stones' punchy, wailing music from the CD player in the corner.

In the gap between the end of one song and the beginning of the next, he heard the whirring of the potter's wheel upstairs.

Boards creaked just above his head, and there was the sound of exuberant female singing. Marisa Heering was having a good day. All over the big building, potters, painters, silversmiths and weavers were carrying on as usual: productive; successful; safe.

Sam reached for the damp cloths that kept the half-made head workable and flung them over the hated lump. Rubbing his hands together above the bucket, he felt thin cylinders of clay form against his skin and watched them fall away, like a peculiarly unpleasant species of dark-orange worm. He manipulated his own head from side to side, trying to shrug the pain out of his neck and shoulders. What could it be this time? Not coffee again: his brain was already juddering with caffeine. But there had to be an excuse of some kind to knock off work.

The CD had a long time to go before it would need changing. Each track of the Stones' *Forty Licks* album mocked him with its angry confidence, but he couldn't silence it without admitting failure. Which would make it worse.

Maybe the cold could give him a reason to move away. He'd barely noticed it until he'd made himself stop hacking at the head. Now he could feel iciness across the skin of his face, like a dangerously angled razor. The old-fashioned stove in the corner could probably do with more fuel. He shuffled across the room, moving from concrete to boards and catching his foot in the change of level as he always did. He managed not to fall over the tattered Persian rug he'd once loved for its coral and lapis colours but now ignored except when it tripped him. He pulled open the small steel door of the stove.

Shovelling in smokeless briquettes was something he could still do. And the extra warmth was good. He let his knees buckle and squatted down so the heat from the tiled walls of the stove stroked his face. At least today there hadn't been a model to witness his incompetence.

'Face it, Sam,' he said, moving his head this way and that to give both sides an equal share of the heat. Turning the other cheek. He

shuddered and tried to pull the real thoughts away from all the self-defensive games his mind played.

Maybe if he'd had only one fear he could have coped, but with his past and the baby and the woman in prison, all fighting for space in his mind, it was too much.

'Are you mad,' he muttered in a voice he now heard only in nightmares, 'talking to yourself all the time, you dreadful child?'

Even that was enough to force him upright and back to work. The damp cloths looked unspeakable, stained and loathsome. Like something off a slum washing line. He pulled them away, taking care not to catch sight of himself in the mirror. Instead, he stared at the lump that was supposed to become the pinnacle of his career, his entry for the Prix Narcisse, the most desirable sculpture prize in Europe. The ideas he'd had for it had gone. He couldn't see them any longer, still less feel them in the way he'd have to if the clay was to live between his fingers again. Would it ever come back, the feeling? Or the skill?

The woman's latest letter crackled in his pocket as he moved. Why didn't he just burn them as they came, without letting their words get between him and the life he'd found?

Because you're weak, he told himself. You should be able to fight thoughts of them and the baby and stop panicking.

He watched the stubby capable hands in front of him as though they belonged to someone else and saw them form fists that crashed down on the clay.

For a second he stared in shock, then exhilaration took him. He deliberately chose to raise both fists above his head this time and gloried in the way they smashed down on the lump. The edges of his hands hurt, but even that helped. His vision blurred. The music he'd chosen with such care this morning faded until he could hear nothing.

When he came to, the CD had finished. He saw he'd reduced the half-made head to a meaningless heap of mashed orange clay. Staring at the wreckage, feeling the comforting ache in his hands,

he felt so much better he shouted out his triumph to the empty studio and heard Marisa Heering pause in her singing upstairs. That would teach her to sound so cheerful.

Chapter 2

The aggression in the atmosphere eased as soon as they stopped trying to reach agreement. Trish Maguire felt her whole face relax into a softness that told her how tense she'd been. Such was the lottery of the law no one would know for ages which of the parties here had lost rather than saved millions by refusing to cooperate. She hoped it wouldn't prove to be her client, Leviathan Insurance plc.

Hearing the chatter of seventeen sets of briefcase locks clicking was like being let out of prison. She could stop concentrating now and watch the others go on their way while she put her notes in order. Moments later she caught the scent of someone's aftershave, all musk and limes, and looked round to see one of the toughest men moving past her.

It was an incongruous smell for such a bruiser, she thought, but better than the stale tobacco of the old days. When she'd started out on her career as a barrister eighteen years ago, at least half the people at a meeting like this would have been smokers, and the whole room would have been fogged and disgusting. Exotic scents were a definite improvement.

This one's owner had already reached the far end of the room, and he didn't look back, even to say goodbye to the last person still sitting at the big glossy table. She was Cecilia Mayford, the pregnant loss adjuster, who was also working for Leviathan. She and

Trish had already agreed to let the others leave first, then have a private post-mortem.

Their case concerned the great building known as the London Arrow. Only two years old, the Arrow had already become a City landmark, loved by half the inhabitants and loathed by the rest. What most of them did not know was that within weeks of its ceremonial opening, cracks had appeared all over the structure. The horrified owners had wasted no time in making a claim against their insurance policy.

Leviathan, facing a bill of millions to repair the building and shore it up, had turned to their favourite loss adjusters in the hope that they could find a reason not to pay. When a whole range of geological tests had shown that the ground itself hadn't shifted in any unexpected way, they'd got it. The insurance policy covered subsidence but not poor design or shoddy construction.

The trouble was no one had been able to find fault with the design, materials or construction methods either. The architect's revolutionary and breathtaking plans had been made practical by the consulting engineers, Forbes & Franks International, who had tested them with all the latest computer-modelling techniques against every possible calamity, from savagely increased wind speeds to both drought and rising groundwater. Since the cracking had begun, every part of the structure and all the materials used by the builders and their subcontractors had been checked and rechecked against the specifications. With no one else to take the blame, the building's owners had started legal proceedings against Leviathan to force them to pay.

Still determined to resist, they had briefed Trish to represent them. Her first study of the papers had told her this was the kind of case that could go on for years, involving vast costs for everyone, and possibly never coming to a satisfactory conclusion. Today she'd proposed an unusual settlement, with all the interested parties and their own insurers sharing the costs of saving the Arrow with Leviathan and so getting the whole business over in

months rather than years. Her proposal had just been vigorously rejected.

She watched the pinstriped men lining up to get out of the door and thought of the fake rage so many of them had used to try to get their own way throughout the afternoon. A few looked round to nod a perfunctory farewell to the two women before they made it out of the room. Only Guy Bait, representing the engineers, bothered to come and shake Trish's hand and say how much he appreciated her efforts to broker a deal. His aftershave had a simpler smell, barely more than faintly astringent soap might leave on clean skin.

'Thank you, Guy.' She stood up and was surprised to find herself the taller by about two inches. 'We'll meet again.'

'I'll look forward to it,' he said.

He'd barely opened his mouth throughout the afternoon, except when asked a direct question. Only now did it look as though a bit more oomph from him might have helped her cause. And his breathy, gentle voice might have taken some of the heat out of the others' fury. He gave her a sweet smile, before moving on to Cecilia and murmuring similar grateful words.

She nodded but didn't speak and avoided the offered handshake by rubbing her temples as though they ached. Her face, pallid with exhaustion and anxiety, had taken on a withdrawn expression that was new to Trish. But then her only pregnancy had ended in a miscarriage at a much earlier stage, so she didn't know precisely what Cecilia would be feeling now.

When Guy had gone after the rest and the door had banged behind him, Cecilia let her head flop forwards and blew out a gusty sigh.

'At last! I couldn't have taken much more, Trish. Thanks for what you tried to do.'

'I'm sorry it didn't work. And I'm sorry it took so long. You must be worn out.'

Cecilia rubbed her eyes, then put both hands behind her

immaculate black jacket and pushed at her aching spine. Trish watched the bump in fascination as it swelled forwards. How could you lug something that big around and sit through acrimonious meetings like the one they'd just endured and still show such courtesy and patience?

Trish had always admired her, but today's performance had added a kind of awed respect she rarely felt for anyone. They hadn't yet become friends – and probably couldn't until the case was over – but she hoped one day they'd be able to meet and talk about smaller, more important, things than this case with its multi-million-pound implications.

'How much longer?' she asked.

'Technically four more weeks,' Cecilia said, pinching the bridge of her nose. She was squinting too. The headache must be getting worse. 'But I'm so vast I can't believe it'll be that long. I'm sorry, you know.'

'For what?'

'I'd planned it all so carefully.' She took her fingers away from her face and looked at Trish. 'I thought we'd manage to get a settlement today, giving me time to clear my desk and hand over my other cases to colleagues well before Christmas, have the baby, then be back from maternity leave in time to deal with any fallout from the Arrow in the summer. Now here I am abandoning you with everything still unresolved.'

'Going for a settlement was probably a bit optimistic. There's so much at stake.'

'Even so, I hate failing like this.'

'You haven't failed. You've done wonders already,' Trish said, wanting to make her look less miserable. 'Your colleagues are good too. We'll manage to keep going while you're off having the baby. And you should be back from maternity leave long before we get to court. Now, you look to me as though you should be at home in bed. Shall I ask them to call you a cab?'

'I'd better walk.' A spasm, perhaps driven by pain, twisted

Cecilia's broad face. 'They say it helps, so I try. On days when I really can't face the flog up to Islington, I cheat and hop across the bridge to Sam's studio so he can drive me back when he's done for the day.'

'You know I couldn't believe it,' Trish said, distracted, 'when you told me that you're not only married to my favourite sculptor but also the daughter of the judge I most admire. I was up before her only last month.'

'I know. She told me. She approves of you too,' Cecilia said, but her eyes changed, as though someone had come between her and the light.

'What's the matter?'

'Nothing.' She shivered. 'Except I hate coincidences like this.'

'Do you? Why? I like the whole six degrees of separation thing, finding links wherever I look.' Trish couldn't prevent a laugh bubbling up.

'What?' Cecilia said, with an unlikely note of panic in her voice. 'What's so funny?'

'Only the words we were all using today,' Trish said, surprised into an explanation she knew would sound heavy-handed. 'Practically all of them had at least two meanings: we wanted a settlement for a building that's subject to settlement; we discussed a listed building that's listing badly; someone wanted to get cracking with the discussion about the cracks. Links everywhere, you see. I love it.'

Cecilia's frightened expression eased a little, but she didn't smile. 'I don't mind that sort. It's the personal ones I hate, where everyone you meet turns out to be friends with friends of yours, or even with old acquaintances you thought you'd never see again. They tell you stories they've heard about you and you realize everything you've ever done or said is stuck somewhere in someone's memory. Like computer data you can never get rid of, however often you hit "delete".'

She had managed to get herself upright and balanced at last.

The movement must have freed something in her, for her voice had more of its usual bounce when she added: 'Talking of coincidence: have you always practised commercial law? Something I heard made me wonder.'

'No,' Trish said, picking up Cecilia's briefcase as well as her own and following her out of the room. 'I used to do family cases but I gave up when the relentless misery got to me. But we shouldn't hang about chatting. You need to be at home. I'll phone you on Monday.'

Making her way across Blackfriars Bridge towards her flat twenty minutes later, Trish wondered whether she'd been irresponsible in letting Cecilia trudge off alone. For such a heavily pregnant woman to fight her way through the dark and cold of a December evening couldn't be sensible. But she must know her limitations, and she was an intelligent adult. No one had any right to tell her what to do.

Still uncomfortable, Trish paused halfway over the bridge, to be transfixed by her favourite view made even better by the frosty darkness. The yellow lights along the river seemed to hang in the middle of blurred halos, yet their reflections in the black water of the Thames were as sharp as ever, disturbed only by the wake of a boat chugging its way upstream. The stars were hidden by the glare of artificial lights, but the glittering city was so spectacular in both directions she couldn't regret them. To the east, Norman Foster's Gherkin stood like a brilliant sentinel, balanced by the Arrow to the north, looking as delicate as it was dazzling.

How could it be moving? What fault had there been in the design or manufacture of steel, glass and concrete that no one had yet identified?

Eventually the cold made Trish's ears ache and got her moving again. She thought of Cecilia, struggling northwards to Islington, and envied her the baby she was about to have. Not that Trish regretted anything about the way her own infertile life had taken

her. With her young half-brother, she and her partner, George, had become a family. Their set-up might be eccentric but it worked, and it made her happy.

Years ago they'd devised the arrangement by which George kept his antique-filled, pastel-coloured house in Fulham and she lived in her echoing, brick-walled loft in the much edgier borough of Southwark. Each had keys to the other's place, and they wandered in and out at will.

Revelling in a security that would once have seemed wildly beyond her grasp, Trish let herself into the flat and tripped over a large, dirty trainer. As she regained her balance and stared at the offending shoe, she considered the few aspects of life with her half-brother she could have done without. Then she thought of the slight, vulnerable, silky-haired child who had found his way to the flat after his mother's death, only five years ago.

For his sake she couldn't regret his transformation into a noisy, confident thirteen-year-old, who seemed to have an inexhaustible appetite and a band of friends even bigger and louder than he was himself. Still, she was not prepared to have smelly trainers strewn around her flat.

'Daaaaavid!' she called, loud enough to reach through the beat of music that thudded through his bedroom walls. There was no response. She called again, even more loudly, without moving. The music was slightly muted, as though he'd turned the CD player down a pip or two. His tousled head peered round the edge of the doorway. Even the texture of his hair had changed into something rough and unbiddable.

'I thought you'd be later,' he grunted. 'I'll put the headphones on.'

'Great. But there's this too.' She pointed down at the trainer as if it was a dead animal brought in by someone's cat.

A wonderful smile transformed David's whole face for a second. He looked amused and tolerant and guilty and affectionate all at once. Letting his expression fade into the now familiar vacancy, he

ambled out of his room. His jeans were so loose around his narrow hips they were in danger of falling down completely. The sagging T-shirt he'd put on after school had once been white but was now a muddy pink, having been washed with a variety of sports socks at much too high a temperature. His astonishingly big feet were bare and none too clean, the toes widely spaced and looking very flat against the polished wooden floor. Trish wondered where today's socks were, and indeed the other trainer.

He bent to scoop up his shoe and she caught a whiff of acrid sweat from his T-shirt. Was it time to comment or not? She'd discussed the problem with the mothers of his two best friends and learned it was a cherished mark of growing-up to have sweat that smelled. All the mothers were treading as carefully as Trish around the burgeoning masculinity of these boys, who'd been adorable, confiding children so recently and were now turning into galumphing aliens with caverns of scary vulnerability well hidden behind the mess and bluster.

'What?' said David, allowing the final consonant to dribble away somewhere unnoticeable. At least he hadn't yet had his ear pierced as some of his friends had done. 'What're you looking at?'

'Just feeling amazed at how you seem to grow every day. Are you hungry?'

'I'm always hungry, but I'm not starving,' he said, stuffing his free hand down the front of his jeans. ' 'Cos I had a couple of toasted sandwiches when I got back.'

'David, not here! You can do whatever you like in the privacy of your bedroom, but . . .'

He looked surprised, but obediently removed his hand and used it to give the back of his head a good scratch. Trish reminded herself how much she loved him, how soon he would grow out of this particularly trying stage of development, blew him a kiss that made him pretend to gag, and went up to her own room at the top of the spiral staircase.

There she indulged herself with scents of lavender and beeswax

furniture polish, as well as her own expensive soap and shower gel. The poor law student she'd once been, who'd scraped together the rent for a bedsitter in Deptford, found her clothes in charity shops and subsisted on the cheapest of bargain food, seemed like someone from another world.

The luxurious sheets were crisp and white and there were fresh Christmas roses in a glass bowl on the chest of drawers beside Sam Foundling's Head of a Horse. She'd always loved it for its tenderness and the way the bent head curled around the neck, as though the horse was stroking its own cheek. She hoped it was a true expression of the man himself. From what she'd seen, Cecilia needed tenderness.

Trish dropped her clothes on the bed and gave herself a long shower, filling the bathroom with fragrant steam and forgetting everything except the temporary bliss of hot water. She vaguely heard the phone ring, but did nothing about it.

When she descended to the rougher world on the floor below, David bellowed from his room that Caro had phoned and wanted Trish to ring back to talk about Christmas. She smiled at the thought of her best friend, now promoted to Chief Inspector and embarking on a tough new job with the Major Incident Teams of the Metropolitan Police. Grabbing the phone, she punched in Caro's number.

'Hi. Thanks for getting back to me so soon,' Caro said. 'How are you? David thought all was well. In fact he said you were in world-beating form.'

'Your godson brings out the virago in me these days; I suspect that's what he meant. I'm fine. What about you two?'

'Not bad at all. But I'm feeling more than a bit swizzed because we've decided duty has to take us to Jess's brother for Christmas. So we're off to Scotland for three stressed days, instead of loafing round to Southwark to be with all of you. I'm sorry, Trish. We really liked it last year.'

'So did we. What a pity. But the glow of duty done might see

you through the New Year glooms so it's not all bad. Have you got time for a lunch between now and then, or are you frantic?'

'Not yet. They're letting me into the new job lightly, and it's driving me mad. I never thought I'd start pining for a murder.'

Trish had to laugh at Caro's mock-tragic tones.

'I know I won't get anything except the most boring domestics for the first year or so, but even that would be better than ploughing through reports by the Murder Review Group and learning the Murder Investigation Manual by heart.'

'Poor you. But you shouldn't have too long to wait. Christmas is always crunch time for unhappy couples; there's bound to be a juicy killing in south London soon.'

'You're right, unfortunately.' Caro's voice was deeper now, and slower. 'I don't really want anyone murdered, and—'

'You don't have to tell me that,' Trish said. There were few police officers of either sex who could match Caro's instinctive compassion for the victims of any kind of violence. 'I'd better go and cook something to feed the monster. Love to Jess.'

'Sure. And ours to George. I'll phone you at work next week when we've got our diaries and fix a time for lunch.'

'Great. Bye now.'

On Monday morning, after a restorative weekend with George and David, Trish was at her desk in chambers. When she'd first decided she wanted to be a barrister, she'd found the private language as foreign as Sanskrit. Now it was second nature and she didn't even think of the oddity of naming both the building where she worked and the association of other self-employed individuals who shared it as 'chambers'.

Today she was struggling to understand some of the more complex engineering principles involved in the construction of the Arrow. There were times when she felt as though the preparation of each new case was like working for a degree in a wholly unfamiliar discipline. And when other members of chambers were in

aggressive or riotous moods, concentration could be particularly difficult. Luckily the atmosphere was calm today, with all the others in court or hard at it on their own case papers.

Trish focused on her computer screen, which showed one of the working drawings for what she always thought of as the Arrow's skeleton. Because the site covered part of one of the old plague pits, where victims of the Great Pestilence of 1665 were buried, the architects hadn't been able to use ordinary foundations. The ground was too fragile and the archaeology of the place too important. Instead, they'd designed a great central core to be driven through a specially chosen part of the mass grave, down to the solid ground beneath. On to this core were hung the components of the rest of the building, suspended on steel cables. Trish sometimes thought its elevations looked more like a child's drawing of a Christmas tree than an arrow.

Her phone rang and she lifted the receiver to hear Steve, the head clerk, saying Sam Foundling was in the waiting room and wanted a private word with her.

'Send him in,' she said at once, wondering what could have happened to Cecilia.

She was on her feet by the time he came in, a short stocky man with a brooding, powerful face marked by heavy black brows and restless eyes of an extraordinarily pale blue. He was carrying a big brown envelope under one arm.

'Is she okay?'

'Who?' he said, frowning.

'Cecilia. I've been worrying about her ever since—'

'She's fine. Full of beans.'

'Great.' Trish breathed more easily as she pulled the visitor's chair nearer her desk. 'Then have a seat and tell me what I can do for you.'

She couldn't understand why he was staring at her with a mixture of expectation and something that looked like truculent misery.

'Don't you recognize me?'

'Of course.' She smiled. 'Even if I hadn't come to the private view at Guildhall last year, I'd know you from all those photographs beside the reviews of your exhibitions. But I'm amazed you clocked me. There must have been hundreds of your admirers there.'

'I didn't know you were there,' he said, even more puzzled. 'I thought you'd know . . . Maybe I should have said: I changed my name as soon as I could, but I'm Sam, Samuel Johnson.'

Trish's mental retrieval system, powering through her brain at speed, turned up only one Samuel Johnson, creator of the dictionary, hero of Boswell's masterpiece.

'You saved my life,' he said, his voice heavy with disbelief. 'You were the first adult I'd ever trusted, and you saved my life. Seventeen years ago. Have you forgotten?'

As Trish stared at him, memories of the child at the centre of the first case she'd handled on her own oozed back. Twelve years old but the size of someone much younger, with a sullenness she'd recognized as defensive even then, he'd had burns and bruises all over him.

'It never occurred to me it was you,' she said, treading carefully because she knew she trod on fragile stuff. 'One of the artists I most admire, whose career I've followed ever since I first saw the Head of a Horse at your degree show. I had no idea.'

He lowered his head, hiding his expression, giving her time to get her rushing thoughts under control.

'I don't know why I was sure you'd remember,' he muttered. 'But I've always felt there was this connection between us. When things got really bad, I sort of conjured you up in my mind and talked to you. Sometimes it felt as if you were answering. That's what kept me going.'

Trish couldn't have interrupted even if she'd wanted to. But soon she'd have to make him understand how a case that fills your whole life while it's happening has to be downloaded at the end to free up the mental space you need for the next.

'You never touched me, or even came too close like everyone else did,' he said, obviously well back in the past. 'You kept your distance, and you told me: "You can trust me, Samuel. I am not like them. I will fight for you. And I will never fight you. I *will* make you safe." And you did. It's all come from that moment. Everything I've got.'

Did I say anything like that? she asked herself. If I did, I was wrong. There was no way I could have guaranteed your safety. Even with the scars and bruises, your testimony and your social worker's reports, the case could easily have gone the other way. You were known as an appalling troublemaker; violent too.

Even when the judge's words had set him free from the foster parents he'd claimed had tormented him for years, Trish hadn't been able to feel triumph; only an indescribable weakness that had made her want to lie on the floor of the court until it passed.

'What happened?' she asked now, thinking of the huge obstacles the boy must have cleared to make himself what he was. 'How did you become a sculptor?'

Memories began to speed up even more, chasing each other through her mind, and she was almost back in the Royal Courts of Justice, feeling the sickness in the pit of her stomach. Even then she'd known only part of it came from horror at what had been done to him. Most was triggered by her own fear. Was she up to the job? Had she chosen the wrong career? What would happen to this boy if she failed him? What would happen to her? She'd stood up in front of a judge who'd glared at her throughout her stammering, over-worked, over-practised arguments, while she fumbled with her papers, dropped her pen, and never dared look at the child in case the sight of him removed the last rags of her competence.

'It was the art teacher at the next school I went to,' he said, pulling her back into the present. There was a distant look in his eye, as though his mind was taken up with working out how she could have failed him so.

The depth of his disillusion was a measure of the trust he'd once had in her, and that was worrying. To have had so much effect on someone else's life was a huge responsibility.

'I was angry and I hated everyone – except you – and I messed around in every class, winding the teachers up, bullying, breaking things, bunking off, stealing. One day, Mr Dixon made me wait after the others had gone. I thought it was for another punishment and I was all ready to take it, then get my own back in other ways. Like I always did. But he just gave me a lump of clay and said he had work to do in the staffroom and he'd come back in half an hour. Then he left me.'

Sam was looking less shocked, and his colour was better. Maybe he'd be able to forgive her for the lapse that had clearly rocked him to his shaky foundations.

'I don't really remember anything except the moment when the clay began to do what I wanted. And the way he came back when he said he would, and stood away from me like you'd done, and said: "I thought so. You could be very good."'

'That must have been an amazing moment,' Trish said, watching his face lose its truculence as the story developed.

'He showed me I was worth listening to. I trusted him. He was the second person. If it hadn't been for you I wouldn't have dared. You . . .'

Trish waited again. Almost the first thing she'd learned from her child clients in the old days had been that if she rushed into speech, to comfort them or ask questions, she'd risk closing them down for good. But he didn't add anything. She hesitated to turn this emotionally charged encounter into an ordinary business meeting, but someone had to move things on.

'How can I help you now?' she said when the silence had lasted too long.

He licked his lips and shrugged. His shoulders were enormous, and his hands very strong. They were dirty, she thought, until she realized the marks were bruises.

After a moment he reached for the envelope he'd brought and took out a stained, creased sheet of lined paper, which he unfolded and laid flat on the desk in front of Trish.

The handwriting was clumsy, ill-educated. She looked at the address: HM Prison, Holloway.

Sam drew in a breath so deep she could actually see his chest expand, even through the thick, dark-blue wool of his Guernsey sweater.

'She says she's my mother. The real one, the one who left me on the steps of the London Hospital in a box twenty-nine years ago.'