

Strange Affair

Peter Robinson

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Was she being followed? It was hard to tell at that time of night on the motorway. There was plenty of traffic, lorries for the most part, and people driving home from the pub just a little too carefully, red BMWs coasting up the fast lane, doing a hundred or more, businessmen in a hurry to get home from late meetings. She was beyond Newport Pagnell now, and the muggy night air blurred the red tail lights of the cars ahead and the oncoming headlights across the road. She began to feel nervous as she checked her rear-view mirror and saw that the car was still behind her.

She pulled over to the nearside lane and slowed down. The car, a dark Mondeo, overtook her. It was too dark to glimpse faces, but she thought there was just one person in the front and another in the back. It didn't have a taxi light on top, so she guessed it was probably a private hire car and stopped worrying. Some rich git being ferried to a nightclub in Leeds, most likely. She overtook the Mondeo a little further up the motorway and didn't give it a second glance. The late-night radio was playing Ol' Blue Eyes singing 'Summer Wind'. Her kind of music, no matter how old fashioned people told her it was. Talent and good music never went out of style as far as she was concerned.

When she got to Watford Gap services, she realized she felt tired and hungry, and she still had a long way to

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go, so she decided to stop for a short break. She didn't even notice the Mondeo pull in two cars behind her. A few seedy-looking people hung around the entrance; a couple of kids who didn't look old enough to drive stood smoking and playing the machines, giving her the eye as she walked past, staring at her breasts.

She went first to the ladies', then to the cafe, where she bought a ham and tomato sandwich and sat alone to eat, washing it down with a Diet Coke. At the table opposite, a man with a long face and dandruff on the collar of his dark suit jacket ogled her over the top of his glasses, pretending to read his newspaper and eat a sausage roll.

Was he just a common-or-garden variety perv, or was there something more sinister in his interest, she wondered. In the end, she decided he was just a perv. Sometimes it seemed as if the world was full of them, that she could hardly walk down the street or go for a drink on her own without some sad pillock who thought he was God's gift eyeing her up, like the kids hanging around the entrance, or coming over and laying a line of chat on her. Still, she told herself, what else could you expect at this time of night in a motorway service station? A couple of other men came in and went to the counter for coffee to go, but they didn't give her a second glance.

She finished half the sandwich, dumped the rest and got her travel mug filled with coffee. When she walked back to her car she made sure that there were people around - a family with two young kids up way past their bedtime, noisy and hyperactive - and that no one was following her.

The tank was only a quarter full, so she filled it up at the petrol station, using her credit card right there, at the

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pump. The perv from the cafe pulled up at the pump opposite and stared at her as he put the nozzle in the tank. She ignored him. She could see the night manager in his office, watching through the window, and that made her feel more secure.

Tank full, she turned down the slip road and eased in between two articulated lorries. It was hot in the car, so she opened both windows and enjoyed the play of breeze they created. It helped keep her awake, along with the hot black coffee. The clock on the dashboard read 12.35 a.m. Only about two or three hours to go, then she would be safe.

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Penny Cartwright was singing Richard Thompson's 'Strange Affair' when Banks walked into the Dog and Gun, her low, husky voice milking the song's stark melancholy for all it was worth. Banks stood by the door, transfixed. *Penny Cartwright*. He hadn't seen her in over ten years, though he had thought of her often, even seen her name in *Mojo* and *Uncut* from time to time. The years had been kind. Her figure still looked good in blue jeans and a tight white T-shirt tucked in at the waist. The long raven's-wing hair he remembered looked just as glossy as ever in the stage lights, and the few threads of grey here and there made her look even more attractive. She seemed a little more gaunt than before, a little more sad around the eyes, perhaps, but it suited her, and Banks liked the contrast between her pale skin and dark hair.

When the song ended, Banks took advantage of the applause to walk over to the bar, order a pint and light a cigarette. He wasn't happy with himself for having started smoking again after six months or more on the

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wagon, but there it was. He tried to avoid smoking in the flat, and he would stop again as soon as he'd got himself back together. For the moment, it was a crutch, an old friend come back to visit during a time of need.

There wasn't a seat left in the entire lounge. Banks could feel the sweat prickling on his temples and at the back of his neck. He leaned against the bar and let Penny's voice transport him as she launched into 'Blackwater Side'. She had two accompanists, one on guitar and the other on stand-up bass, and they wove a dense tapestry of sound against which her lyric lines soared.

The next round of applause marked the end of the set, and Penny walked through the crowd, which parted like the Red Sea for her, smiling and nodding hello as she went, and stood next to Banks at the bar. She lit a cigarette, inhaled, made a circle of her mouth and blew out a smoke ring towards the optics.

'That was an excellent set,' Banks said.

'Thanks.' She didn't turn to face him. 'Gin and tonic, please, Kath,' she said to the barmaid. 'Make it a large one.'

Banks could tell by her clipped tone that she thought he was just another fan, maybe even a weirdo or a stalker, and she'd move away as soon as she got her drink. 'You don't remember me, do you?' he asked.

She sighed and turned to look at him, ready to deliver the final put-down. Then he saw recognition slowly dawn on her. She seemed flustered, embarrassed and unsure what to say. 'Oh . . . Yes. It's Detective Chief Inspector Burke, isn't it?' she managed finally. 'Or have you been promoted?'

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'Afraid not,' he said. 'And it's Banks, but Alan will do. It's been a long time.'

'Yes.' Penny got her gin and tonic and raised it to Banks, who clinked it gently with his pint glass.

'Slainte.'

'Slainte,' said Banks. 'I didn't know you were back in Helmhthorpe.'

'Well, nobody put on a major advertising campaign.'

Banks looked around the dim lounge. 'I don't know. You seem to have a devoted following.'

'Word of mouth, mostly. Anyway, yes, I'm back in the old cottage. What brought you here?'

'I heard the music as I was passing,' Banks said. 'Recognized your voice. What have you been up to lately?'

A hint of mischief came into her eyes. 'Now that would be a very long story indeed, and I'm not sure it would be any of your business.'

'Maybe you could tell me over dinner some evening?'

Penny faced him and frowned, her brows knit together, searching him with those sharp blue eyes, and before she spoke, she gave a little shake of her head. 'I can't possibly do that,' she whispered.

'Why not? It's only a dinner invitation.'

She was backing away from him as she spoke. 'I just can't, that's all. How can you even ask me?'

'Look, if you're worried about being seen with a married man, that ended a couple of years back. I'm divorced now.'

Penny looked at him as if he'd missed the point by a hundred miles, shook her head and melted back into the crowd. Banks felt perplexed. He couldn't interpret the signals, decode the look of absolute horror he'd seen on her face at the idea of dinner with him. He wasn't that

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repulsive. A simple dinner invitation. What the hell was wrong with her?

Banks gulped down the rest of his pint and headed for the door as Penny took the stage again, and he caught her eyes briefly across the crowded room. Her expression was puzzled and confused. She had clearly been unsettled by his request. Well, he thought, as he turned his back and left, face burning, at least she didn't still look so horrified.

The night was dark, the sky moonless but filled with stars, and Helms Thorpe High Street was deserted, street lights smudgy in the haze. Banks heard Penny start up again back inside the Dog and Gun. Another Richard Thompson song: 'Never Again'. The haunting melody and desolate lyrics drifted after him across the street, fading slowly as he walked up the cobbled snicket past the old bookshop, through the graveyard and on to the footpath that would take him home, or to what passed for home these days.

The air smelled of manure and warm hay. To his right was a drystone wall beside the graveyard, and to his left a slope, terraced with lynchets, led down step by step to Gratly Beck, which he could hear roaring below him. The narrow path was unlit, but Banks knew every inch by heart. The worst that could happen was that he might step into a pile of sheep shit. Close by he could hear the high-pitched whining of winged insects.

As he walked, he continued to think about Penny Cartwright's strange reaction to his dinner invitation. She always had been an odd one, he remembered, always a bit sharp with her tongue and too ready with the sarcasm. But this had been different, not sarcasm, not sharp, but shock, repulsion. Was it because of their age

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difference? He was in his early fifties, after all, and Penny was at least ten years younger. But even that didn't explain the intensity of her reaction. She could have just smiled and said she was washing her hair. Banks liked to think he would have got the message.

The path ended at a double-barrelled stile about halfway up Grately Hill. Banks slipped through sideways and walked past the new houses to the cluster of old cottages over the bridge. Since his own house was still at the mercy of the builders, he had been renting a flat in one of the holiday properties on the lane to the left.

The locals had been good to him, as it turned out, and he'd got a fairly spacious one-bedroom flat, upper floor, with private entrance, for a very decent rent. The irony was, he realized, that it used to be the Steadman house, long ago converted into holiday flats, and it was during the Steadman case that he had first met Penny Cartwright.

Banks's living-room window had a magnificent view over the dale, north past Helmthorpe, folded in the valley bottom, up to the rich green fields, dotted with sheep, and the sere, pale grass of the higher pastures, then the bare limestone outcrop of Crow Scar and the wild moors beyond. But his bedroom window looked out to the west over a small disused Sandemanian graveyard and its tiny chapel. Some of the tombstones, so old that you could scarcely read the names any more, leaned against the wall of the house.

The Sandemanian sect, Banks had read somewhere, had been founded in the eighteenth century, separating itself from the Scottish Presbyterian Church. Its members took holy communion, embraced communal property ownership, practised vegetarianism and engaged in 'love

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feasts', which Banks thought made them sound rather like eighteenth-century hippies.

Banks was a little pissed, he realized as he fiddled with his key in the downstairs lock. The Dog and Gun hadn't been his first port of call that evening. He'd eaten dinner alone in the Hare and Hounds, then had a couple of pints in the Bridge. Still, what the hell, he was on holiday for another week, and he wasn't driving. Maybe he'd even have a glass of wine or two. He was still off the whisky, especially Laphroaig. Its distinctive taste was the only thing he could remember about the night his life nearly ended, and even at a distance the smell made him feel sick.

Could the drinking have been what put Penny off, he wondered? Had she thought he was drunk when he asked her to dinner? But he doubted it. He didn't slur his words or wobble when he walked. There was nothing in his manner that suggested he'd had too much. No, it had to be something else.

He finally opened the door, walked up the stairs and unlocked the inside door, then switched on the hall light. The place felt hot and stuffy, so he went into the living room and opened the window. It didn't help much. After he had poured himself a healthy glass of Australian Shiraz, he walked over to the telephone. A red light was flashing, indicating messages on the answerphone.

As it turned out, there was only one message, and a surprising one at that: his brother Roy. Banks wasn't even aware that Roy knew his telephone number, and he was also certain that the card and flowers he had received from Roy in hospital had come, in fact, from his mother.

'Alan . . . shit . . . you're not there and I don't have

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your mobile number. If you've got one, that is. You never were much of a one for technology, I remember. Anyway, look, this is important. Believe it or not, you're the only one who can help me now. There's something . . . I can't really talk about this to your answerphone. It could be a matter of life and death.' He laughed harshly. 'Maybe even mine. Anyway, I'll try again later, but can you ring me back as soon as possible? I really need to talk to you. Urgently. Please.' Banks heard a buzzing noise in the background. 'Someone's at the door. I'll have to go now. Please call. I'll give you my mobile number, too.' Roy left his phone numbers, and that was that.

Puzzled, Banks listened to the message again. He was going to listen a third time, but he realized there was no point. He hated it when people in movies kept playing the same message over and over again and always seemed to get the tape in exactly the right spot every time. Instead, he replaced the receiver and took a sip of wine. He'd heard all he needed. Roy sounded worried, and more than a little scared. The call was timed by his answerphone at 9.29 p.m., about an hour and a half ago, when Banks had been drinking in the Bridge.

Roy's phone rang several times before an answering machine picked up: Roy's voice in a curt, no-nonsense invitation to leave a message. Banks did so, said he'd try again later, and hung up. He tried the mobile number but got no response there, either. There was nothing else he could do right now. Maybe Roy would ring back later, as he had said he would.

Often, Banks would spend an hour or so perched on the window seat in his bedroom looking down on the graveyard, especially on moonlit nights. He didn't know what he was looking for – a ghost, perhaps – but the

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utter stillness of the tombstones and the wind souging through the long grass seemed to give him some sort of feeling of tranquillity. Not tonight: no moon, no breeze.

The baby downstairs started crying, the way she did every night around this time. Banks turned on the TV. There wasn't much to choose from: films, a chat show or news. He picked *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*, which had started half an hour ago. That didn't matter; he'd seen it many times before, and he knew the plot by heart. But he couldn't concentrate. As he watched Richard Burton's edgy, intense performance and tried to pick up the threads, he found his mind wandering back to Roy's phone call, felt himself waiting for the phone to ring, *willing* it.

There was nothing he could do about it right now, but the urgency and fear in Roy's voice disturbed him. He would try again in the morning, in case Roy had simply gone out for the night, but if he couldn't get in touch then, he would head for London himself and find out just what the hell was going on.

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Why did people have to be so bloody inconsiderate as to find bodies so early on a Saturday morning? wondered Detective Inspector Annie Cabbot. Especially when Banks was on holiday and she was on call. It wasn't only that she was losing her weekend – and detective inspectors don't get paid overtime – but that those first crucial hours of an investigation were made all the more difficult by people being, for the large part, unavailable, making information harder to ferret out. And this was a particularly beautiful Saturday morning; offices would be empty, services reduced as everyone loaded a picnic

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basket in the car along with the kids and headed for the nearest stretch of grass or sand.

She pulled to a halt behind the blue Peugeot 106 on a quiet stretch of country road halfway between Eastvale and the A1. It had been just after half-past seven when the station desk sergeant rang and woke her from an uneasy dream she forgot, and after a quick shower and a cup of instant coffee, she was on the road.

The morning was still and hazy, with the drone of insects in the air. It was going to be just the kind of day for a picnic by the river, dragonflies and the scent of wild garlic, perhaps a bottle of Chablis cooling in the water, maybe her sketchpad and a few sticks of charcoal. After a few nibbles of Wensleydale cheese – the type with cranberries was her favourite – and a couple of glasses of wine, it would be time for a nap on the riverbank, maybe a pleasant dream. Enough of that, she thought, walking over to the car; life had other plans for her today.

Annie could see that the car's left wing had made contact with the drystone wall, so much so that the wing had buckled and scratched and the impact had brought down a section of the wall. There were no traces of skid marks, no tyre tracks at all on the dry tarmac surface.

There was already activity around the Peugeot. The road had been closed to all non-police traffic, and the immediate area around the car had been taped off. That would cause a few problems when the tourists started to dribble in, Annie thought, but it couldn't be helped; the integrity of the scene had to be preserved. Peter Darby had finished photographing the body and the car and had busied himself videotaping the area. Detective Sergeant Jim Hatchley and DC Winsome Jackman, who both lived closer to the scene, were already there when

Annie arrived, Hatchley standing by the roadside and Winsome sitting half in and half out of the unmarked police car.

'What have we got?' Annie asked Hatchley, who, as usual, looked as if he'd been dragged through a hedge backwards. The little piece of tissue paper he had stuck to a shaving cut on his chin didn't help much.

'A young woman dead behind the wheel of her car,' said Hatchley.

'I can see that for myself,' snapped Annie, glancing towards the open driver's side window.

'Bit prickly this morning, aren't we, ma'am,' said Hatchley. 'What's up? Get out of the wrong side of bed?'

Annie ignored him. She was used to Hatchley's taunts, which had only grown more frequent since she had been made inspector and he remained a sergeant. 'Cause of death?' she asked.

'Don't know yet. Nothing apparent. No obvious marks, no bruising. And officially she's not even dead yet. Not until the doc says she is.'

Annie refrained from pointing out that she knew that perfectly well. 'But you've examined her?' she pressed on.

'I had a quick look, that's all. Didn't touch anything. Winsome checked for a pulse and found none. We're still waiting for Doc Burns.'

'So she could have died of a heart attack, for all we know?'

'I suppose so,' said Hatchley. 'But like I said, she's very young. It smells a bit fishy to me.'

'Any idea who she is?'

'There's no handbag, no driving licence, nowt. At least not as you can see looking through the windows.'

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'I checked the number plate on the computer, Guv,' said Winsome, walking over from her car. 'The car's registered to a Jennifer Clewes. Lives in London. Kennington. Twenty-seven years old.'

'We don't know for certain it's her yet,' Annie said, 'so find out all you can.'

'Right, Guv.' Winsome paused.

'Yes?'

'Wasn't there another one?'

'Another what?' asked Annie.

'Another murder. Like this one. Young woman found dead near a motorway. The M1 not the A1, but even so . . .'

'Yes,' said Annie. 'I remember reading about it in the papers. I can't remember the details. Look into it, will you?'

'Yes, Guv.' Winsome walked back to her car.

Annie looked at Hatchley again. 'Has Detective Superintendent Gristhorpe been informed?'

'Yes, ma'am. Says to keep him up to date.'

That made sense, Annie thought. No point having the super come running down here if the woman had pulled over into the lay-by and died of a heart attack, brain aneurysm, or any of the other random failures of the flesh that cause sudden death in otherwise healthy young people. 'Who was first officer on the scene?'

'PC Farrier over there.'

Hatchley pointed to a uniformed police constable leaning against a patrol car. Pete Farrier. Annie knew him; he worked out of Western Area Headquarters, the same as she did. Had done for years, according to all accounts, and was a reliable, sensible bobby. Annie

walked over to him. 'What happened, Pete?' she asked. 'Who called it in?'

'Couple over there, ma'am.' Farrier pointed to a man and a woman some yards away from the scene. They were sitting on the grass by the side of the road, and the man had his arm around the woman, whose head was buried in his chest.

Annie thanked Farrier and walked back to her car, took her latex gloves from the murder kit in the boot and slipped them on. Then she walked over to the Peugeot. She needed to have a closer look at the scene, gather some first impressions before Dr Burns arrived and started his examination. Already a number of flies had settled on the woman's pale face. Annie shooed them away. They buzzed around her head, waiting for the chance to get back.

The woman sat in the driver's seat, slumped slightly forward and listing to the left; her right hand grasped the steering wheel, and her left held the gearstick. Her seat belt was fastened firmly in place, holding her up, and both front windows were open. The key was still in the ignition, Annie noticed, and a travel mug sat in its holder.

The victim wasn't a big woman, but her breasts were quite large, and the seat belt ran between them, separating them and causing them to appear even more prominent. She looked to be mid- to late twenties, which matched Jennifer Clewes's age, and she was very attractive. Her skin was pale, and probably had been even before her death, her long hair was dark red - dyed, Annie guessed - and she was wearing a pale blue cotton blouse and black denim jeans. There were no apparent marks on her body, as Hatchley had noted, and no sign

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of blood. Her eyes were open, a dull vacant green. Annie had seen that look before, felt that stillness.

Hatchley was right, though; there was something very fishy about the whole set-up, fishy enough at least to warrant a thorough preliminary investigation before deciding upon the scale of the inquiry. As Annie examined the scene, she made mental notes of what she observed and thought for later use.

When Annie had finished, she walked over to the couple who had found the body. They were very young, she noticed as she got closer. The man was ashen and the woman he was holding still had her face buried in his shoulder, though she didn't appear to be heaving with sobs. The man looked up and Annie squatted beside them.

'I'm Detective Inspector Cabbot from Western Area Headquarters,' she said. 'I understand you found the car?'

The woman turned her face away from the protection of the man's shoulder and looked at Annie. She had been crying, that was clear enough, but now she just seemed shocked and hurt.

'Can you tell me what happened?' Annie asked the man.

'We already told the policeman in the uniform. He was the first to get here.'

'I know,' said Annie, 'and I'm sorry to make you go through it again, but it'll help if you tell me.'

'There's nothing to tell, really, is there, love?' he said to the woman, who shook her head.

'First off, why don't you tell me your names?'

'This is Sam, Samantha,' he said, 'and I'm Adrian, Adrian Sinclair.'