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Written by Isabel Wolff

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ISABEL WOLFF

The Very Picture of You

HARPER

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For my parents in-law, Eva and John

Are we to paint what is on the face, what's inside the
face, or what's behind it?

Pablo Picasso

PROLOGUE

Richmond, 23 July 1986

‘Ella . . .? *El-la?*’ My mother’s voice floats up the stairs as I sit hunched over my sketchpad, my hand moving rapidly across the cartridge paper. ‘Where *are* you?’ Gripping the pencil I make the nose a little more defined then shade in the eyebrows. ‘Could you *answer* me?’ Now for the hair. Fringe? Swept back? I can’t remember. ‘Gabri-*el-la?*’ And I know I can’t ask. ‘Are you in your room, darling?’ As I hear my mother’s light, ascending tread I stroke a soft fringe across the forehead, smudge it to add thickness, then swiftly darken the jaw. As I appraise the drawing I tell myself that it’s a good likeness. At least I *think* it is. How can I know? His face is now so indistinct that perhaps I only ever saw it in a dream. I close my eyes, and it *isn’t* a dream. I can see him. It’s a bright day and I’m walking along and I can feel the warmth rising from the pavement and the sun on my face, and his big, dry-feeling hand enclosing mine.

I can hear the slap of my sandals and the click-clack of my mother's heels and I can see her white skirt with its sprigs of red flowers.

He's smiling down at me. 'Ready, Ella?' As his fingers tighten around mine I feel a rush of happiness. 'Here we go. One, two, *three* . . .' My tummy turns over as I'm lifted. 'Wheeeeeeee . . . !' they both sing as I sail through the air. 'One, two, three – and *up* she goes! Wheeeeeeeee . . . !' I hear them laugh as I land.

'More!' I stamp. 'More! *More!*'

'Okay. Let's do a *big* one.' He grips my hand again. 'Ready, sweetie?'

'I rea-dee!'

'Right then. One, two, three and . . . *u-u-u-u-u-p!*'

My head goes back and the blue dome of the sky swings above me, like a bell. But as I fall back to earth, I feel his fingers slip away and when I turn and look for him, he's gone . . .

'*There* you are,' Mum is saying from my bedroom doorway. As I glance up at her I quickly slide my hand over the sketch. 'Would you go and play with Chloë? She's in the Wendy house.'

'I'm . . . doing something.'

'Please, Ella.'

'I'm too *old* for the Wendy house – I'm eleven.'

'I know darling, but it would help me if you could entertain your little sister for a while, and she loves you to play with her . . .' As my mother tucks a strand of white-blond hair behind one ear I think how pale and fragile-looking she is, like porcelain. 'And I'd rather you were outside on such a warm day.' I will her to go back downstairs; instead, to my alarm, she is walking towards

me, her eyes on the pad. I quickly flip the page over to a fresh sheet. 'So you're drawing?' My mother's voice is, as usual, soft and low. 'Can I see?' She holds out her hand.

'No . . . not now.' I wish I'd torn out the sketch before she came in.

'You *never* show me your pictures. Let me have a look, Ella.' She reaches for the pad.

'It's . . . private, Mum – *don't* . . .'

But she is already turning over the spiral-bound sheets. 'What a *lovely* foxglove,' she murmurs. 'And these ivy leaves are perfect – so glossy; and that's an *excellent* one of the church. The stained glass must have been tricky but you've done it brilliantly.' My mother shakes her head in wonderment then gives me a smile; but as she turns to the next page her face clouds.

Through the open window I can hear a plane, its distant roar like the tearing of paper.

'It's a study,' I explain. 'For a portrait.' My pulse is racing.

'Well . . .'

 Mum nods. 'It's . . . very good.' Her hand trembles as she closes the book. 'I had no idea that you could draw so well.' She puts it back on the table. 'You really . . . capture things,' she adds quietly. A muscle at the corner of her mouth flexes but then she smiles again. 'So . . .' She claps her hands. '*I'll* play with Chloë if you're busy, then we'll all watch the royal wedding. I've put the TV on so that we don't miss the start. You could draw Fergie's dress.'

I shrug. 'Maybe . . .'

'We'll have a sandwich lunch while we watch. Is cheese and ham okay?' I nod. 'Actually, *could* make coronation

chicken – that would be *very* suitable, wouldn't it!' she adds with sudden gaiety. 'I'll call you when it starts.' She walks towards the door.

I take a deep breath. 'So have I captured *him*?' My mother seems not to have heard me. 'Does it look like him?' I try again. She stiffens visibly. The sound of the plane has dissolved now into silence. 'Does my drawing look like my *dad*?'

I hear her inhale, then her slim shoulders sag and I suddenly see how expressive a person's back can be. 'Yes, it does,' she answers softly.

'Oh. Well . . .' I say as she turns to face me. 'That's good. Especially as I don't really remember him any more. And I don't even have a photo of him, do I?' I can hear sparrows squabbling in the flower beds. 'Are there any photos, Mum?'

'No,' she says evenly.

'But . . .' My heart is racing. 'Why *not*?'

'Because . . . there just . . . aren't. I'm sorry, Ella. I know it's not easy. But . . .' She shrugs, as if she's as frustrated by it as I am. 'I'm afraid that's just . . . how it *is*.' She pauses for a moment, as if to satisfy herself that the conversation has ended. 'Now, would you like tomato in your sandwich?'

'But you must have *some* photos of him?'

'Ella . . .' My mother's voice remains low, but then she rarely raises it. 'I've already told you – I don't. I'm sorry, darling. Now I really *do* have to—'

'What about when you got married?' I imagine a white leather album with my parents smiling in every photo, my father darkly handsome in grey, my mother's veil floating around her china-doll face.

She blinks, slowly. ‘I *did* have some photos, yes – but I don’t have them any more.’

‘But there must be others. I only need *one*.’ I pick up my heart-shaped rubber and flex it between my thumb and forefinger. ‘I’d like to put his photo on the sideboard. There’s that empty silver frame I could use.’

Her large blue eyes widen. ‘But . . . that simply wouldn’t *do*.’

‘Oh. Then I’d buy a frame of my own: I’ve got some pocket money. Or I could make one, or you could give me one for my birthday.’

‘It’s not the *frame*, Ella.’ My mother seems helpless suddenly. ‘I meant that I wouldn’t *want* to have his photo on the sideboard – or anywhere else, for that matter.’

My heart is thudding. ‘Why *not*?’

‘Because . . .’ She throws up her hands. ‘He’s not part of our *lives*, Ella, as you very well know – and he hasn’t been for a long time, so it would be confusing, especially for Chloë – he wasn’t *her* father; and it wouldn’t be very nice for Roy. And Roy’s been so good to you,’ she hurries on. ‘*He’s* been a father to you, hasn’t he – a wonderful father.’

‘Yes – but he isn’t my *real* one.’ My face has gone hot. ‘I’ve *got* a “real” father, Mum, and his name is John I don’t know where he is, or why I don’t see him and I don’t know why you never ever *talk* about him.’ Her lips have become a thin line, but I’m not going to stop. ‘I haven’t seen him since I was . . . I don’t even know that. Was I three?’

My mother folds her slim arms and her gold bangle gently clinks against her watch. ‘You were almost five,’ she answers softly. ‘But you know, Ella, I’d say that the

person who *does* the fathering *is* the father, and Roy does everything that any father *could* do, whereas . . . John . . . well . . .’ She lets the sentence drift.

‘But I’d still like a photo of him. I could keep it here, in my room, so that no one else would have to see it – it would just be for me. Good,’ I add quickly. ‘So that’s settled then.’

‘Ella . . . I’ve already told you, I don’t *have* any photos of him.’

‘Why . . . *not*?’

She heaves a painful sigh. ‘They got . . . lost . . .’ She glances out of the window. ‘. . . when we moved down here.’ She returns her gaze to me. ‘Not everything came with us.’

I stare at her. ‘But those photos *should* have come. It’s mean,’ I add angrily. ‘It’s *mean* that you didn’t keep just one of them for me!’ I am on my feet now, one hand on my chair to steady myself against the clamour in my ribcage. ‘And why don’t you *talk* about him? You never, *ever* talk about him!’

My mother’s pale cheeks are suddenly pink – as if I’d brushed a swirl of rose madder on to each one. ‘It’s . . . too . . . *difficult*, Ella.’

‘*Why*?’ I try to swallow, but there’s a knife in my throat. ‘All you ever say is that he’s out of our lives and that it’s better that way, so I don’t know what *happened* . . .’ Tears of frustration sting my eyes. ‘Or why he left us . . .’ My mother’s features have blurred. ‘Or if I’ll ever *see* him again.’ A tear spills on to my cheek. ‘So that’s why – *that’s* why I—’ In a flash I’m on the floor, reaching under the bed, and dragging out my box. It has *Ravel* printed on it and Mum’s best boots came in

it. I get to my feet and place it on the bed. My mother looks at it, then, with an anxious glance at me she sits down next to it and lifts off the lid . . .

The first drawing is a recent one, in pen and ink with white pastel on his nose, hair and cheekbones. I was pleased with it because I'd only just learned how to highlight properly. Then she takes out three pencil sketches of him that I'd done in the spring, in which, with careful cross-hatching, I'd managed to get depth and expressiveness into the eyes. Beneath that are ten or twelve older drawings in which the proportions are all wrong – his mouth too small or his brow too wide or the curve of the ear set too high. Then come five sketches in which there is no hint of any contouring, his face as flat and round as a plate. Mum lifts out several felt-tip images of my dad standing with her and me in front of a red-brick house with a flight of black steps up to the dark green front door. Then come some bright poster-colour paintings in each of which he's driving a big blue car. Now Mum lifts out a collage of him with pipe cleaners for limbs, mauve felt for his shirt and trousers and tufts of brown woollen hair that are crusted with glue. In the final few pictures Dad is barely more than a stick man. On these I have written, underneath, *dad* but on one of them the first 'd' is the wrong way round so that it says *bad*.

'So many,' my mother murmurs. She returns the pictures to the box, then she reaches for my hand and I sit down next to her. I hear her swallow. 'I should have told you,' she says quietly. 'But I didn't know how . . .'

'But . . . why didn't you? Tell me what?'

'Because . . . it was . . . so awful.' Her chin dimples

with distress. ‘I was hoping to be able to leave it until you were older . . . but today . . . you’ve forced the issue.’ She presses her fingertips to her lips, blinks a few times then exhales with a sad, sighing sound. ‘All right,’ she whispers. Her hands drop to her lap and she takes a deep breath; and now, as the ‘Wedding March’ thunders out to us from Westminster Abbey she talks to me, at last, about my father. And, as she tells me what he did, I feel my world suddenly lurch, as though something big and heavy has just shunted into it . . .

We stay there for a while and I ask her some questions, which she answers. Then I ask her the same questions all over again. Then we go downstairs and I fetch Chloë in from the garden and we all sit in front of the TV and exclaim over Sarah Ferguson’s billowing silk dress with its seventeen-foot, bee-embroidered train. And the next day I take my box down to the kitchen and lift out the pictures. Then I thrust them all deep into the bin.

ONE

‘Sorry about this,’ the radio reporter, Clare, said to me early this evening as she fiddled with her small audio recorder. She tucked a hank of Titian red hair behind one ear. ‘I just need to check that the machine’s recorded everything . . . there seems to be a gremlin . . .’

‘Don’t worry . . .’ I stole an anxious glance at the clock. I’d need to leave soon.

‘I really appreciate your time.’ Clare lifted out the tiny batteries with perfectly manicured fingers. I glanced at my stained ones. ‘But with radio you need to record quite a lot.’

‘Of course.’ How old was she? I’d been unsure to start with, as she was very made up. Thirty-five I now decided – my age. ‘I’m glad to be included,’ I added as she slotted the batteries back in and snapped the machine shut.

‘Well, I’d already heard of you, and then I read that piece about you in *The Times* last month . . .’ I felt my stomach clench. ‘And I thought you’d be perfect for

my programme – if I can just get this damn thing to *work . . .*’ Even through the foundation I could see Clare’s cheeks flush as she stabbed at the buttons. *And when did you first realise that you were going to be a painter?* ‘Phew . . .’ She clapped her hand to her chest. ‘It’s still there.’ *I knew I wanted to be a painter from eight or nine . . .* She smiled. ‘I was worried that I’d erased it.’ *I simply drew and painted all the time . . .* Now, as she pressed ‘fast forward’, my voice became a Minnie Mouse squeak then slowed again to normal. *Painting’s always been, in a way, my . . . solace.* ‘Great,’ she said as I scratched a blob of dried Prussian blue off my paint-stiffened apron. ‘We can carry on.’ She glanced at her watch. ‘Can you spare another twenty minutes?’

My heart sank. She’d already been here for an hour and a half – most of which had been spent in idle chatter or in sorting out her tape recorder. But being in a Radio 4 documentary might lead to another commission, so I quelled my frustration. ‘That’s fine.’

She picked up her microphone then glanced around the studio. ‘This must be a nice place to work.’

‘It is . . . That’s why I bought the house, because of this big attic. Plus the light’s perfect – it faces north-east.’

‘And you have a glorious view!’ Clare laughed. Through the two large dormer windows loomed the massive rust-coloured rotunda of Fulham’s Imperial Gas Works. ‘Actually, I like industrial architecture,’ she added quickly, as if worried that she might have offended me.

‘So do I – I think gas containers have a kind of grandeur; and on the other side I’ve got the old Lots Road Power Station. So, no, it’s not exactly green and

pleasant, but I like the area and there are lots of artists and designers around here, so I feel at home.'

'It's a bit of a no-man's land, though,' Clare observed. 'You have to trail all the way down the King's Road to get here.'

'True . . . but Fulham Broadway's not far. In any case, I usually cycle everywhere.'

'That's brave of you. Anyway . . .' She riffled through the sheaf of notes on the low glass table. 'Where were we?' I slid the pot of hyacinths aside to give her more room. 'We started with your background,' she said. 'The Saturdays you spent as a teenager in the National Gallery copying old masters, the foundation course you did at the Slade; we talked about the painters you most admire – Rembrandt, Velázquez and Lucian Freud . . . I *adore* Lucian Freud.' She gave a little shiver of appreciation. 'So lovely and . . . *fleshy*.'

'Very fleshy,' I agreed.

'Then we got to your big break with the BP Portrait Award four years ago—'

'I didn't win it,' I interrupted. 'I was a runner-up. But they used my painting on the poster for the competition, which led to several new commissions, which meant that I could give up teaching and start painting full time. So yes, that was a big step forward.'

'And now the Duchess of Cornwall has put you right on the map!'

'I . . . guess she has. I was thrilled when the National Portrait Gallery asked me to paint her.'

'And that's brought you some nice exposure.' I flinched. 'So have you had many famous sitters?'

I shook my head. 'Most are "ordinary" people who

simply like the idea of having themselves, or someone they love, painted; the rest are either in public life in one way or another, or have had a distinguished career which the portrait is intended to commemorate.'

'So we're talking about the great and the good then.'

I shrugged. 'You could call them that – professors and politicians, captains of industry, singers, conductors . . . a few actors.'

Clare nodded at a small unframed painting hanging by the door. 'I love that one of David Walliams – the way his face looms out of the darkness.'

'That's not the finished portrait,' I explained. 'He has that, of course. This is just the model I did to make sure that the close-up composition was going to work.'

'It reminds me of Caravaggio,' she mused. I wished she'd get *on* with it. 'He looks a bit like Young Bacchus . . .'

'I'm sorry, Clare,' I interjected. 'But can we . . .?' I nodded at the tape recorder.

'Oh – I keep chatting, don't I! Let's crack on.' She lifted her headphones on to her coppery bob then held the microphone towards me. 'So . . .' She started the machine. 'Why do you paint portraits, Ella, rather than, say, landscapes?'

'Well . . . landscape painting's very solitary,' I replied. 'It's just you and the view. But with portraits you're with another human being and that's what's always fascinated me.' Clare nodded and smiled for me to expand. 'I feel excited when I look at a person for the very first time. When they sit in front of me I drink in everything I can about them. I study the colour and shape of their eyes, the line of their nose, the shade and texture of the skin,

the outline of the mouth. I'm also registering how they *are*, physically.'

'You mean their body language?'

'Yes. I'm looking at the way they tilt their head, and the way they smile; whether they look me in the eye, or keep glancing away; I'm looking at the way they fold their arms or cross their legs, or if they don't sit on the chair properly but perch forward on it or slouch down into it – because all that will tell me what I need to know about that person to be able to paint them truthfully.'

'But—' a motorbike was roaring down the street. Clare waited for the noise to fade. 'What does "truthfully" mean – that the portrait looks like the person?'

'It ought to look like them.' I rubbed a smear of chrome green off the palm of my hand. 'But a good portrait should also reveal aspects of the sitter's character. It should capture both an outer and an *inner* likeness.'

'You mean body and soul?'

'Yes . . . It should show the person, body and soul.'

Clare glanced at her notes again. 'Do you work from photographs?'

'No. I need to have the living person in front of me. I want to be able to look at them from every angle and to see the relationship between each part of their face. Above all, I need to see the way the light bounces off their features, because that's what will give me the form and the proportions. Painting is all about seeing the light. So I work only from life, and I ask for six two-hour sittings.'

Clare's green eyes widened. 'That's a big commitment – for you both.'

‘It is. But then a portrait is a significant undertaking, in which the painter and sitter are working together – there’s a complicity.’

She held the microphone a little closer. ‘And do your sitters open up to you?’ I didn’t reply. ‘I mean, there you are, on your own with them, for hours at a time. Do they confide in you?’

‘Well . . .’ I didn’t like to say that my sitters confide the most extraordinary things. ‘They do sometimes talk about their marriages or their relationships,’ I answered carefully. ‘They’ll even tell me about their tragedies, and their regrets. But I regard what happens during the sittings as not just confidential, but almost sacrosanct.’

‘It’s a bit like a confessional then?’ Clare suggested teasingly.

‘In a way it *is*. A portrait sitting is a very special space. It has an . . . intimacy: painting another human being *is* an act of intimacy.’

‘So . . . have you ever fallen in love with any of your sitters?’

I smiled. ‘Well, I did once fall in love with a dachshund that someone wanted in the picture, but I’ve never fallen for a human sitter, no.’ I didn’t add that as most of my male subjects were married they were, in any case, off-limits. I thought of the mess that Chloë had got herself into . . .

‘Is there any kind of person you particularly enjoy painting?’ Clare asked.

I was silent for a moment while I considered the question. ‘I suppose I’m drawn to people who are a little bit dark – who haven’t had happy-ever-after sort of lives. I like painting people who I feel are . . . complex.’

‘Why do you think that is?’

‘I . . . find it more interesting – to see that fight going on in the face between the conflicting parts of someone’s personality.’ I glanced at the clock. It was half past six. I *had* to go. ‘But . . . do you have enough material now?’

Clare nodded. ‘Yes, plenty.’ She lifted off her headphones, then smoothed down her hair. ‘But could I have a quick look at your work?’

‘Sure.’ I suppressed a sigh. ‘I’ll get my portfolio.’

As I fetched the heavy black folder from the other side of the studio, Clare walked over to my big studio easel and studied the canvas standing on it. ‘Who’s this?’

‘That’s my mother.’ I heaved the portfolio on to the table then came and stood next to her. ‘She popped by this morning so I did a bit more. It’s for her sixtieth birthday later this year.’

‘She’s beautiful.’

I looked at my mother’s round blue eyes with their large, exposed lids beneath perfectly arching eyebrows, at her sculpted cheekbones and her aquiline nose, and at her left hand resting elegantly against her breastbone. Her skin was lined, but time had otherwise been kind. ‘It’s almost finished.’

Clare cocked her head to one side. ‘She has . . . poise.’

‘She was a ballet dancer.’

‘Ah.’ She nodded thoughtfully. ‘I remember now, it said so in that article about you.’ She looked at me. ‘And was she successful?’

‘Yes – she was with the English National Ballet, then with the Northern Ballet Theatre in Manchester – this was in the seventies. That’s her, actually, on the wall, over there . . .’

Clare followed my gaze to a framed poster of a ballerina in a full-length white tutu and bridal veil. 'Giselle,' Clare murmured. 'How lovely . . . It's such a touching story, isn't it – innocence betrayed . . .'

'It was my mother's favourite role – that was in '79. Sadly, she had to retire just a few months later.'

'Why?' Clare asked. 'Because of having children?'

'No – I was nearly five by then. It was because she was injured.'

'In rehearsal?'

I shook my head. 'At home. She fell, breaking her ankle.'

Clare's brow pleated in sympathy. 'How terrible.' She looked at the portrait again, as if seeking signs of that disappointment in my mother's face.

'It was hard . . .' I had a sudden memory of my mother sitting at the kitchen table in our old flat, her head in her hands. She used to stay like that for a long time.

'What did she do then?' I heard Clare ask.

'She decided that we'd move to London; once she'd recovered enough she began a new career as a ballet mistress.' Clare looked at me enquiringly. 'It's something that older or injured dancers often do. They work with a company, refreshing the choreography or rehearsing particular roles: my mother did this with the Festival Ballet for some years, then with Ballet Rambert.'

'Does she still do that?'

'No – she's more or less retired. She teaches one day a week at the English National Ballet school, otherwise she mostly does charity work; in fact she's organised a big gala auction tonight for Save the Children, which is why I'm pushed for time as I have to be there but in here—'

I went over to the table and opened the folder – ‘are the photos of all my portraits. There are about fifty.’

‘So it’s your Facebook,’ Clare said with a smile. She sat on the sofa again and began to browse the images. ‘*Fisherman . . .*’ she murmured. ‘That one’s on your website, isn’t it? *Ursula Sleeping . . . Emma, Polly’s Face . . .*’ Clare gave me a puzzled look. ‘Why did you call this one *Polly’s Face* – given that it’s a portrait?’

‘Oh, because Polly’s my best friend – we’ve known each other since we were six; she’s a hand and foot model and was jokingly complaining that no one ever showed any interest in her face, so I said I’d paint it.’

‘Ah . . .’

I pointed to the next image. ‘That’s Baroness Hale – the first woman Law Lord; this is Sir Philip Watts, a former Chairman of Shell.’

Clare turned the page again. ‘And there’s the Duchess of Cornwall. She looks rather humorous.’

‘She is, and that’s the quality I most wanted people to see.’

‘And did the Prince like it?’

I gave a shrug. ‘He seemed to. He said nice things about it when he came to the unveiling at the National Portrait Gallery last month.’

Clare turned to the next photo. ‘And who’s this girl with the cropped hair?’

‘That’s my sister, Chloë. She works for an ethical PR agency called PRoud, so they handle anything to do with fair trade, green technology, organic food and farming – that kind of thing.’

Clare nodded thoughtfully. ‘She’s very like your mother.’

‘She is – she has her fair complexion and ballerina

physique.’ Whereas I am dark and sturdy, I reflected balefully – more Paula Rego than Degas.

Clare peered at the painting. ‘But she looks so . . . *sad* – distressed, almost.’

I hesitated. ‘She was breaking up with someone – it was a difficult time; but she’s fine now,’ I went on firmly. Even if her new boyfriend’s vile, I didn’t add.

My phone was ringing. I answered it.

‘Where *are* you?’ Mum demanded softly. ‘It’s ten to seven – nearly everyone’s here.’

‘Oh, sorry, but I’m not quite finished.’ I glanced at Clare, who was still flicking through the portfolio.

‘You said you’d come *early*.’

‘I know – I’ll be there in twenty minutes, promise.’ I hung up. I looked at Clare. ‘I’m afraid I have to go now . . .’ I went to my work table and dipped some dirty brushes in the jar of turps.

‘Of course . . .’ she said, without looking up. ‘That’s the singer Cecilia Bartoli.’ She turned to the final image. ‘And who’s this friendly looking man with the bow tie?’

I pulled the brushes through a sheet of newspaper to squeeze out the paint. ‘That’s my father.’

‘Your father?’

‘Yes.’ I did my best to ignore the surprise in her voice. ‘Roy Graham. He’s an orthopaedic surgeon – semi-retired.’ I went to the sink, aware of Clare’s curious gaze on my back.

‘But in *The Times*—’

‘He plays a lot of golf . . .’ I rubbed washing-up liquid into the bristles. ‘At the Royal Mid-Surrey – it’s not far from where they live, in Richmond.’

‘In *The Times* it said that—’

‘He also plays bridge.’ I turned on the tap. ‘I’ve never played, but people say it’s fun once you get into it.’ I rinsed and dried the brushes, then laid them on my work table, ready for the next day. ‘Right . . .’ I looked at Clare, willing her to leave.

She put the tape recorder and notes into her bag then stood up. ‘I hope you don’t mind my asking you this,’ she said. ‘But as it was in the newspaper, I assume you talk about it.’

My fingers trembled as I screwed the top back on a tube of titanium white. ‘Talk about what?’

‘Well . . . the article said that you were adopted when you were eight . . .’ Heat spilled into my face. ‘And that your name was changed—’

‘I don’t know where they got that.’ I untied my apron. ‘Now I really *must*—’

‘It said that your real father left when you were five.’

By now my heart was battering against my ribcage. ‘My real father is Roy Graham,’ I said quietly. ‘And that’s all there is to it.’ I hung my apron on its hook. ‘But thank you for coming.’ I opened the studio door. ‘If you could let yourself out . . .’

Clare gave me a puzzled smile. ‘Of course.’

As soon as she’d gone, I furiously rubbed at my paint-stained fingers with a turps-soaked rag then quickly washed my face and tidied my hair. I put on some black trousers and my green velvet coat and was about to go and unlock my bike when I remembered that the front light was broken. I groaned. I’d have to get the bus, or a cab – whichever turned up first. At least Chelsea Old Town Hall wasn’t far.