lovereading.co.uk

A Cursed Inheritance

Kate Ellis

Published by Piatkus Books

Extract is copyright of the Author

Chapter One

On the fifth day of April in the year of Our Lord 1605 we set sail for the New World from the port of Tradmouth aboard the Nicholas. *I took this for a good omen for in the old faith Saint Nicholas was the patron of sailors. And in Devon, unlike in London, we still favour the old ways.*

We are numbered sixty-five – mostly men but some women and children – and in our company we have persons of all ranks: gentlemen, artisans and labourers. Captain Barton hath authority over all until the sealed orders in his care are opened. Then we will know the names of the Council that is to rule over us when we reach our journey's end.

There were many sick in the first days of our voyage, yet I myself did not succumb. By unprosperous winds we were kept five days in the sight of England. Then we suffered great storms, but by the skilfulness of the Captain we suffered no great loss or danger. By the Lord's grace we have now reached land. It is a place called Virginia in honour of the old Queen.

We entered into the bay of Chesupioc directly without let or hindrance and when we landed we found fair meadows and goodly tall trees with such fresh waters running through the woods I was almost ravished at the first sight thereof.

I went ahead with one Joshua Morton, a large, red-faced gentleman from Dorset who travels with his brother, Isaac. This Joshua's wife – a most comely woman, small and dainty and a full score years younger than her husband – feared what we would find once ashore. Her brother-in-law, a foolish man, had been telling her tales of savages and fierce wild creatures, taking pleasure in seeing her fear and placing his fat arm around her waist. I did my best to reassure her that I am at her service.

Set down by Master Edmund Selbiwood, Gentleman, on the Nicholas *this first day of June 1605.*

Emma Oldchester knelt on the hard wooden floor and took the tiny figure between her thumb and index finger. When she had placed it carefully in the drawing room she brushed back her long fair hair with her left hand and stared at the scene she had created.

She had painted the house carefully, just as she painted all her doll's houses. But this one was different. Special. She had tried to get every detail right, making alterations as the memories crept back. The wallpaper, the fabric of the curtains, the exact position of each item of furniture. The blood spattered on the walls.

She recalled some details about the house – the huge oak door and the dark green walls in the kitchen – quite clearly. But the important things were vague like a half-remembered dream. There were times when she wished she remembered more. And yet perhaps it was better that she didn't.

She looked down at one of the dolls lying on the table, the one dressed in a tiny cloak of black felt, the one with no face or gender. She stared at it with unblinking eyes for a few seconds before throwing it down.

When she stood up she placed her heel on the small figure and ground it into the floor, twisting until the thing broke with a satisfying snap.

*

'So where are we off to, Wes?'

'Report of a body in the river?'

DCI Gerry Heffernan sighed. 'Life got too much for some poor bugger, I suppose.'

'The call said it looks suspicious.'

With Heffernan slumped in the passenger seat beside him, DI Wesley Peterson drove the unmarked police car out of Tradmouth and turned on to a narrow lane fringed with high, budding hedgerows. He had taken down the directions carefully as usual – half a mile before Knot Creek on the Tradmouth side of the river. Unlike his boss, he liked to be ordered and organised.

When they reached their destination – a small car park next to a footpath leading down to the river – he saw that Dr Colin Bowman's new Range Rover and the police photographer's battered Fiat were there already, parked next to a brace of patrol cars. The show had begun.

The path skirted round the edge of a field and they trudged towards the water's edge, watched by staring ewes and their small woolly lambs. Eventually, they arrived at the river where overalled figures were working industriously beneath the overhanging trees. The area had been taped off – a crime scene.

Following the bright flash of the police photographer's camera, they located Colin Bowman, the pathologist. He was squatting by a human body which lay, waterlogged and still, on the ribbon of sparse grass next to the water. When Colin spotted them he straightened himself up and peeled off his latex gloves.

'Good to see you both. They fished him out of the river an hour ago. Come over and have a look,' he said, greeting them with a genial smile. Always the perfect host. The man would be a pleasure to work with if it weren't for the fact that every time they met him, they had to share his company with some rotting corpse or other.

'So what have we got?' Heffernan asked, staring down at the corpse with distaste.

The dead man was tallish, not old, not young. Sodden jeans and sweatshirt clung to his dead flesh and his longish dark hair was matted with river weed. The wide, sightless eyes and the open mouth gave him an expression of astonishment.

'Healthy male. Mid thirties or thereabouts.' Colin squatted down again. 'He's not been dead long enough to float to the surface under his own steam, as it were. His clothes had been caught by the branches of an overhanging tree. See that tear in the sweatshirt? There's a matching wound in the flesh underneath. I think our friend here was stabbed. Probably with a fairly narrow blade but I'll be able to tell you more . . .'

'When you've done the postmortem. Thanks, Colin. Don't suppose there's a chance that it could have been an accident? He might have fallen on a spike or . . .'

Colin smiled. 'You know the score, Gerry. I won't know for certain until I've had a closer look. You'll just have to be patient.'

Heffernan pulled a face. Patience had never been his strong point.

Wesley turned to a young uniformed constable, the sort people have in mind when they complain that policemen are getting younger – this one looked all of fifteen. 'Who found him?'

'An artist, sir.' The constable's winter-pale cheeks turned red. 'He was painting when he spotted the body in the river and he dialled 999 on his mobile, sir. He's over there.' He pointed to a man who was deep in conversation with a uniformed officer.

Heffernan grunted something incomprehensible and turned away. But Wesley gave the young man what he judged to be a sympathetic smile. The lad seemed keen. No harm in a bit of encouragement.

'Thank you, Constable . . .'

'Dearden, sir.' He blushed again. He had heard of Inspector Peterson, the only black CID officer in the local

force, but this was the first time their paths had ever crossed.

Gerry Heffernan was making a beeline for the man Dearden had pointed out; a stocky man in his early sixties with long grey hair tied back in a ponytail. He wore a paint-stained, Breton smock which marked him out as an artist as much as a uniform labels a police officer. Wesley followed his boss. The old police adage that the person who finds a body usually becomes the prime suspect hardly seemed to apply in this case. But more surprising things had happened.

Heffernan stayed silent while Wesley asked the necessary questions but, as expected, the answers weren't much help. The artist had been setting up his easel when he noticed what he thought was a bundle of old clothes caught up in overhanging branches. On closer inspection he realised it was a dead body so he rang the police on his mobile phone like a good citizen. The artist's hands were shaking. He looked as though he needed a drink.

Wesley concluded that he had probably been in the wrong place at the wrong time so, after thanking him for his cooperation and noting his home address, he told him he could go. Heffernan, however, was frowning at the unfortunate man as though he suspected him of all manner of heinous crimes from the Great Train Robbery to the Jack the Ripper murders. But he said nothing so it seemed that he agreed with Wesley's verdict.

When the artist had gathered up his possessions with clumsy haste and scurried back to his car, Wesley and Heffernan were left on the river bank, staring at the grey, flowing water as the undertakers zipped the body into a bag and placed it on a stretcher. It had probably been a pointless exercise to tape off this section of the bank: the crime had most likely been committed elsewhere and the body carried there by the river's treacherous currents.

'Have they found any ID?' Wesley asked hopefully.

The chief inspector shook his head. 'In an ideal world,

Wes, he'd have his name and address tattooed on his backside. But . . .'

Wesley smiled and turned away. In his world things were never that easy.

Mrs Geraldine Jeffries sat in her room on the first floor of Potwoolstan Hall, staring at the large patent leather handbag that lay open on the bedspread. She'd checked its contents three times and she'd searched her drawers and wardrobe. She wasn't as young as she used to be and sometimes she forgot where she'd put things – but two hundred and fifty pounds in twenty-pound notes and the diamond ring her late husband had given her for their silver wedding anniversary . . . Geraldine Jeffries had always kept her hand firmly on her valuables.

They had been there first thing that morning – she had checked – so they'd been taken while she was down at breakfast. There were no locks on the doors at Potwoolstan Hall, something Mrs Jeffries had complained to Mr Elsham about on her arrival. He had assured her that, rather than being an oversight, it was a symbol of openness and trust. And this was the result.

She stood up, her thin scarlet-painted lips pressed together in a determined line. She didn't care what Elsham said or what excuses he gave – she was going to insist that the police were called.

And if he refused, she'd call them herself. All the Beings had been obliged to give in their mobile phones on arrival at the Hall, but Mrs Jeffries would walk to the nearest village to make the call if necessary, in spite of her arthritis.

She had been robbed.

Pam Peterson slammed the phone down. Wesley was working late again because some inconsiderate corpse had found its way into the River Trad. She lifted the howling baby out of her cot, seething with resentment. She needed Wesley there, just to take over for a couple of hours, to

relieve the pressure. He was fond of telling her that she was lucky to have her mother near by, but she was always quick to point out that Della was usually more of a hindrance than a help.

The doorbell rang just as she was making her way downstairs, carrying baby Amelia over her shoulder, and when she reached the hall she held on to Amelia's small, soft body with one hand while she opened the front door with the other.

'Wes not about?' Neil Watson stood on the doorstep with a bashful grin on his face.

'He's at work.' She hesitated. 'He's just called to say he'll be late home . . . again. Come in.'

As Neil brushed past her, she felt there was something different about him, but she wasn't sure what it was. Then it came to her. Ever since they'd met at university, Neil had invariably worn ancient jeans, usually stained with the mud of some archaeological dig or other. But today the jeans were spotless and so were the white trainers and black T-shirt. Neil had cleaned up his act. Pam wondered fleetingly if it was for her benefit but then pushed the thought out of her mind.

'Shame. I was hoping to see him before I went.' Neil and Wesley had studied archaeology together at Exeter University. They had shared a flat and in those half-forgotten, distant days Pam had abandoned Neil, the dreamer, for Wesley, the practical, quiet spoken one.

Pam led the way into a living room littered with toys and baby equipment; the detritus of early childhood. As she put Amelia into her baby chair, she held her stomach in, conscious that she hadn't yet lost the weight she had gained during her pregnancy. Wesley assured her that he didn't mind. But sometimes she suspected that he was too busy to notice. Or maybe he just didn't care.

'So where are you going?'

Neil sat down, his eyes aglow with excitement. 'I'm off to the States,' he announced. 'There's an excavation at a

place called Annetown in Virginia. Some of the first settlers landed there.'

'The Pilgrim Fathers?'

'No . . . before their time . . . around 1605.'

Pam smiled. Neil might be vague about most things but history was an exception. 'How long will you be out there?'

'Only three weeks initially. Depends on the powers that be. It's a sort of exchange: one of their archaeologists is coming over here to see how we do things. I volunteered to take part because there's a Devon connection. It was too good an opportunity to miss really and . . .' He hesitated. 'How's, er . . .' He pointed in the baby's direction. It was typical of Neil to have forgotten her name.

'Amelia. She's fine. You were going to say something? And . . .?'

Neil studied his hands. The nails still bore traces of soil, an occupational hazard. After a few moments he looked up. 'I went up to Somerset to see my grandmother last weekend.' There was a pause and Pam wondered what was coming next. 'She's really ill. Cancer.'

'Oh I'm sorry,' Pam said automatically. 'Should you be going to the States when . . .?'

'She wants me to go. She's asked me to do something for her while I'm over there.'

'What?'

Neil hesitated. 'She's asked me to contact someone.'

Pam sensed that Neil wasn't altogether comfortable about his mysterious mission and this made her curious. But before she could question him further, Amelia decided they'd talked long enough and began to howl. Neil looked awkward; babies were uncharted territory for him. He mumbled something about having to go and took his leave, bending to kiss Pam on the cheek.

She stood up and flung her arms around him. 'Take care,' she whispered in his ear, ignoring Amelia's urgent cries.

He broke away gently. 'I'll email you. Tell you how I

get on. Gives Wes my regards,' he said before walking out to his car.

Pam stood at the front door with Amelia grizzling in her arms and watched him drive off, staring at his old yellow Mini until it disappeared out of sight round the corner. And experiencing an unexpected feeling of loss.

There was a hushed air of expectancy in the CID office when Wesley and Heffernan returned. Word had got around on the ever-efficient office grapevine that the body in the river was a murder victim. But until Colin Bowman had given his definitive verdict there wasn't much they could do. Apart from discovering the dead man's identity and tracking down his next of kin.

Wesley was wandering back to his desk when a voice behind him made him jump.

'Sir.' Wesley swung round and saw DC Steve Carstairs leaning on a desk with a sheet of paper in his hand. He was wearing his black leather jacket as usual: Wesley had concluded long ago that he probably slept in it. 'There's been a report of a theft at a place near Derenham; calls itself a healing centre. Money and jewellery taken from a woman's room. It sounds similar to those others. You know, the Dukesbridge health spa and that arts place outside Neston. And that cookery place in Morbay. I reckon there's a pattern.'

Wesley looked at him, surprised. It wasn't often Steve used his imagination.

'Well, if you're free you'd better get round there. Let me have a report when you get back. And get a list of residents and staff, will you? See if there's anyone staying there who was at the other places.'

'It's Potwoolstan Hall,' Steve said significantly with what Wesley thought might have been a wink.

Wesley looked blank. The name meant nothing to him.

But Detective Sergeant Rachel Tracey, who had overheard the conversation, took pity on him. Wesley was from

London after all. He could hardly be expected to be familiar with every major crime that had been committed in his adopted county over the past twenty years – even one that had passed into local folklore so that the very name of the Hall was synonymous with evil and death.

She ran her fingers through her hair before she spoke, a subconscious action. 'It's a big old house near the river halfway between here and Neston. About twenty years ago the housekeeper there shot the family she worked for then she shot herself.'

Wesley frowned. 'That rings a bell.'

Rachel leaned forward. 'Every so often there's a newspaper article or a TV programme about it. The usual rubbish. Was it part of some satanic ritual because the woman who killed them had nailed dead crows to the doors? Was she a member of a local coven? That sort of thing.'

'So it passed into local mythology?' Wesley knew the public appetite for horror stories as well as the next man.

Rachel smiled. 'You could say that.'

'So what's this about a healing centre?'

'The Hall was turned into a healing and therapy centre a few years ago. Very New Age,' she added with a slight sneer: Rachel Tracey, a farmer's daughter, was a down-to-earth young woman who had no time for anything she considered to be silly or pretentious. 'It stood empty for years after the murders, which is understandable, I suppose. Who'd want to live in a place where six people were killed like that?'

'Who indeed?' said Wesley, starting to edge away. Interesting though this gruesome slice of local history was, he had present-day misdemeanours to deal with. The corpse in the river had to be his priority before the trail, if any existed, went cold on them.

'You could still see the bloodstains years after it happened,' Steve said with relish. 'I had some mates who broke in when it was empty and they . . .'

Wesley turned away. The last thing he needed was to hear tales of Steve's misspent youth. Steve caused him enough trouble as it was. 'Well, you'd better go round there and see what's been stolen. They might show you the bloodstains while you're at it.' He grinned. 'But if they charge you for the privilege, don't claim it on expenses, will you?'

Rachel took a deep breath. 'I'll go with him. I could do with getting out of the office.'

Steve scowled, suspecting a conspiracy; that Rachel was really being sent to keep an eye on him. He made for the door, trying not to let his disappointment show. The theft would be a boring routine matter and if he was stuck with Rachel that ruled out a visit to the pub on the way back. But at least he'd get a good look at Potwoolstan Hall.

When Steve and Rachel had gone, Wesley made for Heffernan's office. The DCI would want to be told about this new distraction, so that he could complain about it if nothing else. Wesley poked his head round the door.

'Just thought you'd like to know, Steve's on his way to investigate a report of a theft.'

Heffernan shuffled his paperwork. 'Can't someone from Uniform deal with it?'

'It sounds as if it might fit the pattern of those others. Same MO – money and jewellery stolen from a guest's room. This latest one's at a place called Potwoolstan Hall. Steve mentioned the famous murders.'

Heffernan raised his eyebrows. 'Did he now?' He sat back and there was a long silence as he stared into space. Finally he spoke. 'I was sent over there as a raw young constable to patrol the grounds not long after I joined the force. Not something you forget in a hurry.'

'Rachel said the housekeeper shot the family she worked for then shot herself.'

'That's the sanitised version. It was a bloodbath. She blasted the elder daughter's fiancé with a shotgun in the hall – almost blew his head clean off: blood and brains every-

where. Then she shot the son, the daughter and the parents before killing herself in the kitchen.'

'What made her do it?'

Heffernan shook his head. 'There'd been some sort of row but I can't remember the details.'

'Rachel said the Hall's a healing centre now.'

'So I heard. It was empty for years so they probably bought it at a knockdown price.' He sighed. 'So what exactly has been stolen?'

'Money and jewellery. That's all I know. No doubt Steve'll find out the details.'

'I wouldn't bet on it,' Heffernan mumbled under his breath.

The sound of the doorbell made Emma Oldchester jump. She wasn't expecting visitors. She put the final touch of brown paint on the tiny staircase before wiping her stained hands on her apron and making her way downstairs.

She often wished they had a glass front door instead of the solid wood one Barry had chosen so she could see who was calling. She had asked Barry to fit a spy hole but he had never got round to it. She hesitated, her hand on the latch. Surely it wouldn't be him. He wouldn't visit without warning. Cautiously, she slipped the security chain on and opened the door a few inches.

'Hello, Emmy, my pet. Aren't you going to let me in?'

Relieved, she took the chain off and flung the door wide open. 'Sorry, dad, I thought . . . I thought you might have been him.' She stood on tiptoe to kiss the newcomer, a big, weather-beaten, man with a shock of grey hair and a beard that tickled her face.

'Has he been in touch again?'

'Not for a couple of days. I expected . . .'

'I told him I didn't know anything. Perhaps he's given up.'

Emma began to chew at her nails.

'Look, Em, you don't have to speak to him if you don't

want to. Tell him to get lost. Let sleeping dogs lie, that's what I say.'

Emma made her way into the small, neat lounge and the big man followed.

'Maybe I won't. Barry says I shouldn't. Maybe I'll just tell him I don't want to see him if he phones again.'

There was an awkward silence. Joe Harper stared at his daughter. She looked so fragile, so vulnerable. Just as she'd always looked.

'How are your houses going?'

Emma forced a smile. 'It was a good idea of Barry's, the website. I've got four new orders through it: one from Wales, two from London and one came in yesterday from a lady in Tradmouth. She wants a traditional Devon cottage for her daughter's birthday.'

Joe smiled. 'You're doing well, maid. I'm proud of you.' He reached out a large hand and brushed a strand of fair hair off her thin, pale face. 'Doll's houses have always been your thing, haven't they?' Joe's face clouded, as if some sudden unhappy memory had sprung into his mind.

Emma took his hand in hers and squeezed it. She wouldn't mention what she was planning. The last thing she wanted to do was to worry him.

Colin Bowman was due to conduct the postmortem on the unidentified body from the river the following morning, but until then they had to be content with idle speculation. According to Gerry Heffernan, who was an experienced sailor and knew about these things, the body probably went in further up the river towards Neston. Now all they had to do was to find out exactly where.

Heffernan had checked with the harbour master and the coastguard just in case anything untoward had been reported by any of the river's many sailors. But there was no word of anything out of the ordinary. The victim might have been murdered on a boat and the body thrown overboard. Or else he might have been thrown into the river after an attack on

dry land. Either way, Wesley's workload was due to expand at an alarming rate. He hoped Pam would understand. But somehow he feared that she wouldn't.

The perfunctory search of the dead man's pockets on the river bank had yielded no clue to his identity and Wesley suspected that the killer had stripped the corpse of belongings to make identification – and his life – more difficult. The next step was a trawl through the missing persons reports. DC Trish Walton made a start.

Gerry Heffernan emerged from his office and announced that it was lunchtime. Wesley's morning walk by the river had given him an appetite and somehow, by unspoken agreement, he and Heffernan found themselves in the Fisherman's Arms on the receiving end of two pints of best bitter and two large hotpots which steamed temptingly in oversized bowls. Wesley tucked into his enthusiastically. Since Amelia's arrival in the world, hearty meals were in short supply at home and he and Pam existed on ready meals and takeaways. But then, as Pam normally worked full time as a primary school teacher, things hadn't been much better before Amelia's birth. Only in the school holidays had the Petersons ever experienced anything resembling domestic harmony.

Wesley gazed at the roaring open fire as he finished his pint. The low-beamed cosiness of the Fisherman's Arms with its worn red leather seats, its well-polished horse brasses and its motherly landlady, the widow of a police sergeant, who always provided a warm welcome for members of the local constabulary, was a perfect antidote to a morning spent stuyding a cold corpse on a chilly river bank. But, like a pleasant dream, it couldn't last for ever. They had promised Colin that they'd call in at the mortuary that afternoon. It wasn't something they were looking forward to but, on the other hand, Colin did serve a very decent cup of tea.

Tradmouth Hospital was a short walk away so when they had finished their meal they walked quickly down the

narrow streets to keep their rendezvous with death.

'Wonder how Steve and Rachel are getting on at Potwoolstan Hall,' said Wesley, raising his voice to make himself heard over the screaming sea gulls.

'Rachel's been quiet recently. It is something to do with that Australian boyfriend of hers?'

Wesley hesitated for a moment. 'That was over ages ago.'

Heffernan looked at him, curious. 'You seem to know all about it.'

Wesley felt his face burning.

'Is it true she's moving out of the farm?'

'So she says.' He knew all about Rachel's intention to find a flat of her own in the town, away from the farm where she had lived all her life with her parents and three brothers. She had told him about her proposed bid for freedom in great detail. But somehow he didn't feel like discussing it.

When they reached the hospital they followed the signs to the mortuary. Once they had passed through the plastic swing doors a faint odour of decay masked by a heavy dose of air freshener hit their nostrils. Wesley felt slightly nauseous. It was the same every time.

Heffernan, however, charged ahead along the polished corridors towards Colin's office where they were greeted like long-lost friends and provided with Earl Grey tea and biscuits made on the Prince of Wales's own estates from organic ingredients. Nothing but the best would do for Colin Bowman.

Colin always liked to chat – probably, Wesley thought, because his own patients were hardly in a position to be talkative – and he asked about Pam and the children before moving on to the subject of the forthcoming wedding of Wesley's sister, Maritia, and her move to Devon where she had applied to work as a locum GP. It was only when the subject of Maritia's plans had been exhausted and Colin had made extensive enquiries about the progress of Gerry's two

children at universities up north, that he led the way to the stark white room where the body of the man from the river lay in a refrigerated drawer, awaiting Colin's undivided attention the following morning. They viewed the body briefly before Colin pointed out a set of plastic bags containing the man's clothes.

'Nothing very exciting, I'm afraid, gentlemen. Nothing you can't buy in any high street in the land. Ralph Lauren sweatshirt, Levi jeans, Nike trainers, Marks and Spencer's underwear. No bespoke suit made by a little tailor in Savile Row with a detailed list of all his customers, I'm sorry to say.'

'Pity,' said Wesley. A spot of individuality would have been too much to hope for in these days of globalisation.

'But I did find this in the back pocket of his jeans.' Colin produced a small bag containing what looked like a scrap of paper. He passed it to Wesley, who stared at the thing and handed it to Heffernan.

There was a small, satisfied smile on Colin's lips, as though he had a secret he was longing to tell. 'I know what it is, of course,' he said.

'Well, don't keep us in suspense.' Heffernan passed the bag back to Wesley.

'It's a book of matches. I recognised it at once because I was there on Saturday for the local pathologists' annual dinner: very jolly affair. I picked one up myself.' He delved into his pocket and produced a glossy book of matches with a familiar name printed on the front.

'The Tradmouth Castle Hotel,' said Wesley, handing the bag to Heffernan. 'He might have called in there for a drink.'

'Don't be such a pessimist, Wes. At least it gives us somewhere to start until we hear from missing persons.'

As they took their leave of Colin Bowman, Wesley glanced at the drawer containing the mystery man and shivered. He would be there when the man's body was cut open the next day. And there was no way he could avoid it.

*

DC Steve Carstairs drove too fast along the narrow, high-hedged country lanes. Rachel Tracey sat beside him, gripping her seat. Steve suspected that she was there to make sure he didn't miss anything vital or cause offence to the natives – and he seethed with resentment. He was quite capable of dealing with a simple theft on his own.

Rachel hadn't said a word since they set off and it was Steve who broke the silence.

'Still going out with that Dave? The Aussie?'

'No.'

'But I thought that's why you were looking for a flat.'

'Well, you thought wrong. Dave's gone back to Australia. You can transmit it on the office grapevine if you like. In fact, I wish you would. I'm sick of all the questions and innuendoes.' She folded her arms. That was all she had to say.

But Steve wouldn't let the subject drop. 'We were all hoping for wedding bells.'

'You've just missed the entrance.'

Steve slammed on the brakes and they were both flung forward. Rachel put her head in her hands as he backed the car rapidly back to a large gateway and a prominent sign bearing the words 'Potwoolstan Hall Therapy and Healing Centre' beneath a logo; a stylised version of a naked female figure reaching for what looked like a beach ball. Or perhaps it was the moon. It was a difficult entrance to miss, Rachel thought. But somehow Steve had managed it.

He sped up the winding drive, ignoring Rachel's suggestion that he slow down. If he was showing off, he'd picked the wrong woman, she thought as she tightened her grip on her seat.

'Well, this is it,' said Steve as the car came to a halt with a satisfying crunch of gravel beneath the tyres. 'Scene of the massacre. You'd think they'd have changed the name, wouldn't you?'

Rachel said nothing as she climbed out of the passenger seat. She wanted to get this over with. The front door stood wide open so she walked in. The Hall looked old from the

outside; mellow Beer stone with mullioned windows and boastful decorative gables. The height of chic in the sixteenth century.

From what she'd heard over the years, Rachel half imagined the interior to look like the set of a horror film; all black and blood-red with fraying tapestries and cobwebs. But the reality came as a disappointment. The large, square hall had a newly decorated, slightly institutional look. The floor was pale wood and the smooth walls were painted a calming light green. Instead of dark ancestral portraits, a selection of modern watercolours hung on the walls, the kind usually found in local amateur art exhibitions.

Rachel stood for a few moments looking around, wondering what it had looked like when the Harford family had lived – and died – there. Probably nothing like this.

Ahead of them was a magnificent oak staircase, deeply carved and black with age; the one feature of the entrance hall that hadn't fallen victim to modernisation. A tall man was walking slowly down to greet them. His hair was frosted at the temples and he wore a short, spotless white jacket of the kind favoured by dentists. He had a wide mouth and his eyes, focused on Rachel, were a pale, piercing blue. Rachel instinctively smoothed her hair and straightened her back as the man approached with an outstretched hand.

'Welcome,' the man said, taking Rachel's hand in both of his and holding it for a few seconds. He turned to Steve but the handshake he received was considerably briefer.

'Mr and Mrs Jackson, I presume. Welcome to Potwoolstan Hall,' the man continued, his voice silky smooth.

Steve made a noise which sounded like a snort and Rachel shot him a hostile look.

Rachel produced her warrant card. 'I'm Detective Sergeant Tracey and this is Detective Constable Carstairs, Tradmouth CID. I believed someone here reported a theft, Mr . . . er . . .'

The man took a step back and Rachel noticed a flash of alarm in the bright blue eyes. 'I'm so sorry. I was expecting new guests. Elsham. Jeremy Elsham. I'm the facilitator.'

Steve thrust his hands into the pocket of his leather jacket. 'Does that mean you're in charge?'

Elsham gave a patronising half-smile. 'I suppose I am. But here we prefer the concept of my being a facilitator rather than a dictator. The Beings take responsibility for their own healing and . . .'

'Beings?' Rachel sounded puzzled.

'I suppose some less enlightened establishments might call them patients. Those who come to us for healing. We like to refer to them as Beings – each one unique and individual.'

Rachel pressed her lips together disapprovingly. She was a woman who preferred to call a guest a guest and an owner an owner. 'So what exactly has been stolen?'

Jeremy Elsham looked uneasy. 'Mrs Jeffries, one of our Beings, claims that somebody has taken two hundred and fifty pounds and a valuable diamond ring from her handbag. She left it in her room during breakfast.'

'We'll need to speak to Mrs Jeffries. And if we could have a list of all your guests. And your staff too, of course.'

'Oh, I'm sure nobody here . . . Perhaps the thief came in from outside. We don't lock doors here and . . .'

He fell silent when a woman appeared, fashionably thin and wearing a crisp white uniform. She was a platinum blonde with the manufactured beauty of one familiar with the cosmetic surgeon's knife. Steve stared at her chest admiringly, and Rachel gave him a sharp nudge with her elbow.

'This is my wife, Pandora. Darling, these people are police officers. They want to see Mrs Jeffries.'

Rachel tried not to show her surprise. Pandora appeared to be much younger than her husband. She wondered if

there was a first wife somewhere discarded in favour of this newer and racier model. But when she looked more closely at Pandora's neck, she realised that first impressions might have deceived her: the neck belonged to a woman who wouldn't see forty again.

Pandora consulted the clipboard she was carrying. 'Mrs Jeffries is in meditation at the moment. But the session finishes in five minutes. Then she's booked in for another regression.' Pandora's collagen-enhanced lips turned upwards in a cross between a smile and a snarl.

Steve edged closer to Pandora. 'What's this regression?'

It was Jeremy Elsham who answered. 'We regress our Beings to their childhood, and sometimes beyond that to their former lives. It helps them to resolve issues of their inner being and . . .'

'Perhaps we could have a word with you in your office until she's free,' Rachel interrupted. She wasn't going to be sidetracked by what she considered to be hocus-pocus.

Elsham glanced at his wife and led them into a spacious room off the main hall. The words 'Strictly Private' were printed in gothic letters on the door. Perhaps a small hint that behind every facilitator lurks a dictator, Rachel thought as she recalled a phrase from a book about a farm she'd been forced to read at school: 'All animals are equal but some are more equal than others.' Being a farmer's daughter she'd found this concept quite interesting.

Elsham's huge office was furnished with an expensive simplicity which would have done a top executive proud. There was a thick beige carpet on the floor and the soft leather seats were modern in design. At one end of the room, a black leather sofa and two armchairs were grouped around a sleek beech-wood coffee table. Elsham hadn't stinted himself: but then, having sneaked a surreptitious glance at the price list on the desk, Rachel concluded that he probably didn't need to. Potwoolstan Hall was no charitable institution.

The only thing that looked out of place in the room was

a gloomy painting hanging on the wall behind the desk. Two young men in Jacobean costume – doublets and wide ruffs – stiffly posed against a dark background with faint lettering and a coat of arms barely visible between them. It was obviously as ancient as the Hall itself but it didn't seem to fit in with the image Elsham wanted to project.

Elsham sat behind the desk, leaning back, relaxed, as if to demonstrate that a visit from the police didn't bother him in the least. He answered their questions clearly and succinctly, the perfect witness. But Rachel somehow couldn't rid herself of the suspicion that it was all an elaborate act, a performance.

The first Elsham had heard of the theft was when an agitated Mrs Geraldine Jeffries burst into his office just after breakfast to report that her money and a valuable ring were missing from her room. The staff had undertaken a discreet search but nothing had been found. The other Beings hadn't been questioned of course: he was hoping it wouldn't be necessary. People came to Potwoolstan Hall to find spiritual peace and healing and the last thing they needed was to be interrogated by the police. When Rachel said they might have no choice in the matter, Elsham didn't look happy.

Geraldine Jeffries's arrival was announced by the clanking of heavy gold jewellery. Mrs Jeffries, a lady of a certain age, had dyed her hair jet black and her tanned flesh – the product of too many holidays on the Côte d'Azur with follow-up sessions in her local sunbed parlour – was the texture of leather. With her large, even teeth and her long nose, she reminded Rachel of a crocodile.

And like a crocodile she snapped, first at Elsham for allowing such a thing to happen in his establishment in the first place and then at the two police officers for not having arrived as soon as she called to haul the thief off to the cells. Rachel made soothing noises and suggested that they examine the scene of the crime, mentioning that the police had been investigating a spate of similar thefts in the area.

Mrs Jeffries, satisfied that someone was willing to do something constructive at last, led the way.

As they walked up the stairs, Rachel found herself wondering where exactly the massacre of the Harford family had taken place. Then she put the thought out of her mind. It was ghoulish. On a par with people who visit the scenes of major accidents. She felt mildly ashamed of herself.

Mrs Jeffries's room – a large and well-furnished chamber worthy of any five-star hotel – yielded no clues. The thief, if there was one, hadn't conducted a disorganised search – he or she had merely dipped into an unattended handbag and extracted the valuables, as though he or she had known exactly where to find them.

The money and ring – containing a hefty diamond, valued at six thousand pounds for insurance purposes – had apparently disappeared during breakfast when the Beings had been in the dining room munching their morning muesli. Only three had been absent: a Mrs Carmody, who was confined to a wheelchair as a result of a road accident; a Mr Dodgson, the Being in the next room to Mrs Jeffries who had missed breakfast because of a stomachache; and a Ms Jones, a young woman who claimed to have overslept.

As Mrs Carmody's room was on the ground floor and her spinal injuries made it impossible for her to walk even a few feet, and certainly not up two flights of stairs, Rachel considered that she could probably be ruled out, although she might have witnessed something. She would speak to her along with Mr Dodgson and Ms Jones. And she would see any staff who had been on the premises as well, in spite of Elsham's assurances that they were all entirely trustworthy and their whereabouts accounted for.

Pandora brought Dodgson to the office first. He sat down on the edge of his seat, twisting the gold ring on his left little finger round and round. He was in his forties with thick brown hair that showed no sign of grey and a deep, well-modulated voice that any Shakespearean actor would

be proud to own. Somehow Rachel suspected he would have been more comfortable in a suit than in the snowy white T-shirt and expensively faded jeans he wore. And she was certain she'd seen him before but couldn't think where it was.

Dodgson's account of events fitted exactly with Elsham's but, although the hand that signed the statement was steady and the voice clear and confident, his failure to make eye contact made Rachel suspect that he was hiding something.

But if Dodgson was nervous he hid it very well. Almost like a professional. Perhaps he was an actor, Rachel thought. Perhaps that's why his face seemed familiar.

She caught Steve's eye. 'I'm sure I've seen him before somewhere.'

Before Steve could reply, there was a knock on the office door. Pandora opened it and stepped aside to let in the next lucky contestant.

'Ms Jones?' Rachel asked as the girl strode confidently into the office. Her scraped-back ponytail accentuated the sharpness of her features and Rachel's first thought was that she had been too heavy on the make-up.

But the girl's wide eyes were focused on Steve Carstairs, whose mouth had fallen open.

'What are you doing here?' he asked.

'I could ask you the same thing,' she replied boldly.

Rachel, watching Steve's face, reckoned that he looked terrified.

When Emma Oldchester heard her husband's key in the front door, she rushed out of the spare bedroom where she worked on her doll's houses and hurtled down the stairs to meet him.

She waited for the door to open, holding her breath. She could feel her hands shaking and she clenched them by her sides.

Barry Oldchester stepped into the hall and when he saw his wife waiting at the bottom of the stairs he smiled.

'Hello, love,' he said as he put his bag of tools down on the floor where it landed with a metallic clatter. 'I finished early. The woman in Stokeworthy only needed a tap washer replacing. I'm out later though; central heating on the blink just outside Whitely; woman won't be in till after four.' He leaned forward and gave Emma a kiss on the cheek. 'Any chance of a cup of tea?'

Without a word Emma turned and made for the kitchen.

'You OK, love?' Barry followed her, concerned. He sensed something wasn't right. A stocky five feet eight inches tall with a shock of sandy hair, Barry was a well-meaning, if unimaginative man. He had met Emma when he had serviced her parents' central heating boiler and had been entranced by her long blond hair, her pale blue eyes, her pretty heart-shaped face and her quiet vulnerability. She had an air of untouched innocence which at first had excited and aroused him. But later, when he had discovered the deep damage beneath her placid mask, he had begun to treat her almost as an invalid. More a sickly child than a wife.

'Of course I'm OK,' she said unconvincingly. She filled the kettle and felt her hands trembling.

Barry put a protective arm around her shoulder. 'How did you get on at that craft fair in Neston?'

Emma shook her head. 'I had a headache this morning. It went after a while so I just worked on one of the houses. I had another Internet order from someone in Birmingham. And there's another fair on Thursday.'

'Good.' Barry was only too aware that Emma's houses made them a good profit. And they needed every penny they could get. He was keen to start a family, sooner rather than later. He was fifteen years Emma's senior and his mum said they should get a move on.

But he was reluctant to put pressure on Emma. He had never forgotten the words her father, Joe Harper, had said to him on their wedding day. They were etched on his mind, always there. Like a barrier between them. 'Look after her. She's seen things in her life that nobody should

have to see so just be patient with her.' Barry hadn't understood then and Joe had made no effort to explain. But later, Emma's late mother, Linda, thought he should know the truth. Sometimes he wished she'd never told him.

The kettle had boiled and Barry took over, putting the teabags in the pot and pouring the boiling water over them.

'My dad came round today. Just for a cup of tea.'

Barry glanced at her nervously. 'Oh yes?'

Emma took a deep breath. It was best to get it over with. 'I want to go on one of those healing courses they run at Potwoolstan Hall.'

Barry looked alarmed. 'Why? Why there?'

'You know why.' She looked at her husband and saw the fear in his eyes.

'It might make things worse, raking it all up again. It's a load of nonsense what they do at that place. And have you seen how much it costs?'

Emma said nothing.

'I don't want you to go. And I don't want you to see that man.' He grabbed her wrist and held it tight, looking into her frightened eyes. Then he released his grip and began to stroke her cheek. 'He'd only upset you. Has he rung today?'

'No.'

A smile played on Barry's lips. 'I didn't think he would.'

Emma looked at him. There was something in the way he'd spoken that worried her. 'Why?'

But Barry Oldchester poured the tea in silence as Emma stared out of the window.