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Go Not Gently

Written by Cath Staincliffe

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Go Not Gently

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CHAPTER ONE

'I'm concerned about her,' she was saying, 'she's so . . .' the patina of lines on her face creased into a frown as she groped for the word she wanted, 'distant. She's losing interest.' Her voice rose in agitation. 'It's not like Lily.'

Agnes Donlan was beautiful. And very old. Clean, airy white hair framed her face. Not the sort of colour you could get out of a bottle. White teeth too, very even, probably not her own.

'How long has she been there?' I pulled my notebook closer to jot things down.

'Eight weeks. She had the bad fall at the beginning of October and she was in the week before Christmas. It was all such a rush. She'd made up her mind. I was against it. Once you leave your own home, your independence . . .' She left the sentence hanging, its implication clear.

'So her decline could well be due to the move?'

Agnes fiddled with the jet brooch on her coat. 'Oh, I don't know. If that was it, then, well,' she spread her hands, palms up, 'I'd just have to accept it, but . . .'

She couldn't bring herself to say it aloud.

'Listen, Miss Donlan.' I leant back and made eye contact. Her eyes were a deep blue, almost navy, like her coat. 'If I'm to help I need to know exactly what's worrying you. What you'd like me to do.'

'It sounds so melodramatic,' she protested.

I smiled. 'Everything between us is completely confidential. If I think the case is ridiculous, a waste of my time and your money, I'll say so.'

'Good. It's so hard to know.' She took a breath and straightened up in the chair. 'Very well. I'm concerned,' she spoke slowly, choosing her words with care, 'that Lily's health is being affected, that something in that place is making her ill.' Her composure wobbled as she voiced her fears, and tears glistened in her eyes. She blinked them away. 'It sounds far-fetched, doesn't it?'

'No. You may be right. We'd need to find out about conditions there, try to discover whether there's anything practical that can be done to improve her care. Sort out whether it's the upset of moving that's unsettled her or something else. Has Mrs Palmer got a social worker?'

Agnes nodded. 'There was someone helped with the move, I think. The doctor sent them.'

'Well, perhaps you can talk to them first.'

'Oh, I don't feel I can, you see. I did talk to Mrs Knight, she's the matron. She said we just had to accept it, she said Lily was starting with Alzheimer's or something similar.'

'But you're not sure?'

'It's been so sudden. Everything I've read or heard suggests it comes on gradually. I can't just leave it like this. I feel I owe it to Lily to do something.'

I nodded. Considered what she'd said. Perhaps this visit to me was her way of refusing to face reality. Her reluctance to accept her friend's rapid decline. Without further investigation it was hard to make a judgement.

I suggested to Agnes that we arrange a visit to Homelea once I'd done a little research to establish whether Lily's symptoms were par for the course. The initial visit would be free of charge and afterwards I would advise her whether to retain my services or not.

She agreed and thanked me, relief relaxing her shoulders as she sat back in the chair.

'All right,' I said, 'I'll need to write down all the facts we've got.'

Twenty minutes later I followed Agnes up the stairs to the ground floor. I rent office space in the cellar of the Dobsons' family home, round the corner from my own house. When I first set up business, I went knocking on neighbours' doors to find a room; the Dobsons were happy to take me in and it's worked out well. It's basic accommodation, to say the least, but I pay a peppercorn rent for it, which is all my irregular income runs to.

She got a plastic rain hood from her bag. I opened the door. She tilted her head at the steady drizzle. 'They forecast rain.' She tied the hood under her chin. 'Thank you.' She pulled on her gloves.

'Bye-bye,' I replied. 'I'll be in touch later in the week and we can arrange that visit.'

I watched while she made her way down the path and along the street, her pace slow but assured. When she reached the corner she turned a little stiffly and raised her hand in farewell. I waved back and went in.

Down in the cellar I put the kettle on and recapped on the notes I'd made. Lily Palmer had been in Homelea Private Residential Nursing Home for two months. In that time, to quote her friend Agnes, 'The life had gone out of her'. She'd lost weight, interest and seemed disoriented. She'd complained of headaches and palpitations. Sometimes she was drowsy and unresponsive, at others agitated, restless. She was often confused and forgetful.

When Agnes expressed her concern to Mrs Knight, the matron, she was invited in for a chat with Mrs

Valley-Brown, the manager. Mrs Valley-Brown and her husband ran Homelea.

Matron took care of nursing those residents who needed it. Mrs Valley-Brown told Agnes that Lily had Alzheimer's and that the doctor had prescribed a tranquilliser to help calm her down. If she responded well to the medication her behaviour would settle down, she'd be less distressed. They also had sleeping pills they could administer when needed as Lily had begun to suffer from insomnia, restlessness and occasional night incontinence. Lily was welcome to stay at Homelea as long as her behaviour didn't adversely affect the other residents.

The kettle clicked off and I made myself a coffee, took it over to my desk. There'd been something a little strange at that point in the interview. I'd asked Agnes what would happen if Lily got much worse. Her hand flew to the jet brooch on her coat and she'd squeezed it tight. Otherwise, she completely ignored my question. A pause and then she began talking about Lily's marriage. Something in my question had frightened Agnes. Fear of the death that might follow or the thought of increasing frailty? Whatever it was, I hadn't got an answer.

I skimmed the rest of my notes. Lily had married, had a son and daughter. The girl had died in childhood but Charles lived down in Devon, visited twice a year, wrote monthly. He'd helped sort out the move to Homelea. Lily's husband, George, had gone missing in action in the Far East in 1944. Once Charles left home Lily had worked as a secretary and book-keeper for a small firm. Since retirement she'd been fit and active. She'd fallen twice at home, fractured her wrist the first time and dislocated her shoulder the second. The move to Homelea had been at her own instigation. Apart from the shoulder and a certain nervousness about

falling, Lily had been fit as a fiddle when she left her own house for Homelea. There had been no sign of mental frailty then.

Eight weeks.

I tilted my chair back dangerously and made a survey of my office while I let the information trickle round my brain. The blind over the basement window was broken. Roller blinds are about as reliable as flip-top bins. The year planner that I'd put up the previous January in the hope it'd help me plan my time was still blank apart from school holidays. My sort of work doesn't get planned. It's all response and reaction. Go here, do this, try that, meet so-and-so.

The rest of the room was dusty but reasonably neat, shabby carpet, painted filing cabinet, a set of three dining chairs. A stack of reference books on a shelf, phone and answerphone, a pretty ceramic plate wall clock the only personal touch.

I tidied up the desk, switched the answerphone on and prepared to leave. I was at the Dobsons' front door when I heard my office phone. I clattered down the stairs, flung myself at the desk and yanked the answerphone connection out of the socket, interrupting my recorded voice in mid-greeting. Pressing the off button never does any good; it's one of those slow response – maybe I'll do it this time maybe I won't – models.

'Hello. Sal Kilkenny Investigations, Sal Kilkenny speaking.'

'Oh.' Confusion at the other end of the line. 'Erm, I just thought . . .' Laugh. Young, male, nervous. Either the answerphone, or the fact that I was a woman, had thrown him. Most people think Sal's a man. My Yellow Pages ad is carefully worded. It says female detectives available but doesn't imply it's a one-woman show. No point in advertising for abusive calls and attracting all the headcases.

More nervous laughter.

'How can I help?' Not 'Can I?' but 'How can I?' Make the client confident you can do the job.

'Well, it's my wife. Do you . . . look, I've never . . . I haven't any idea what you charge or even if . . .'

Wish he'd spit it out. 'I can offer an initial appointment, no obligation. You can discuss the matter with us, find out the sort of services we can offer and take it from there. Or I can offer free advice now if you want to talk about it over the phone.'

'I see. Erm . . . well. Oh, shit, sorry.' He hung up. Caught in the act, I'd guess.

I plugged in the answerphone again, hoping it wouldn't take revenge at sudden disconnection by playing up and taking half-messages again, refusing to playback or to play the announcement, confusing people with uncomfortable silences and sequences of beeps. I sometimes spent hours searching for fragments of communication, whizzing the tape back and forth. I suppose the answerphone matched the window blind really. Crap. And not a true reflection of the quality of work I could offer.

Positive thinking.

After all, two clients in one day can't be bad, even if one did ring off.

CHAPTER TWO

The drizzle looked set to run for days, the sky was dense and sullen. I did my best to ignore it as I walked up to school to collect Maddie and Tom.

'We had wet play again,' Maddie complained. 'I hate wet play.'

'But you play inside, don't you? Games and things?'

'No we don't,' she said scornfully. 'We do drawing or read a book.' On a par with waiting for a bus by the sound of it.

'Hold this.' She thrust her lunch box, book bag and PE things at me.

Maddie was always the pits after school.

I turned to Tom, who was wrestling with his coat, and sorted him out.

'We did puppets.' He held up a navy sock with felt eyes and ears glued on to it. The ears were triangular. There were no other distinguishing features.

'Is it a cat?'

'No,' he grinned, 'it's a sock monster.' Of course.

'Come on,' Maddie yelled, 'I'm getting soaking here.'

We were all soaked by the time we got back. I hung clothes on radiators to steam and provided warm drinks and crumpets. I left the kids with theirs in front of the telly while I went to chop vegetables: carrots,

onions, turnips, beans. We've a big kitchen – the whole house is big, a Victorian semi, red-brick and stained glass. But originally there'd been a dining room and a scullery-size kitchen. The owner of the house had knocked the two together. In the centre there's a huge oval table, soft light wood. Ray made it. His pride and joy. I seem to spend half my life at that table. Sun streams in the kitchen most of the day in the summer. In mid-February it doesn't. I drew the blinds and turned on the lamps and lights.

A gentle snore from under the table told me Digger the dog was still alive. I returned to my chopping and sifted through people I could usefully talk to about Lily Palmer before I went to see Homelea for myself. I came up with two. I set some of the vegetables to simmer and tried the phone.

Rachel, the social worker who was a friend of a friend, was away on a training day. I dialled the other number.

Moira answered the phone with the same brusque voice that had alienated so many potential patients. Those who'd stuck it out beyond first impressions discovered a dedicated GP with a genuine concern for their wellbeing. She'd a healthy mistrust of drug companies and unnecessary medical intervention. She often referred people to alternative therapies, sent them off to the homeopathic clinic in Manchester or to try acupuncture. She was not popular with the medical establishment. Her surgery was always full to bursting. She never bothered with appointments, her method of actually listening to people and giving them space to talk put paid to any notion of time management. We didn't mind waiting. It was worth it.

'Sal,' she barked, 'how are you? Well?'

'I'd like a chat. I need to do a bit of research for a case I'm working on. When are you free?'

'I'm on call tonight, that do you?'

'Fine. It shouldn't take that long.'

'Half-eight?'

'Yes.'

I knew that could mean any time from half-eight till half-eleven. Moira always intended to be on time and made precise arrangements, never acknowledging that the demands of her practice frequently played havoc with her social plans.

'Need any books? What's the general area?'

'Geriatrics, Alzheimer's, that sort of thing.'

'OK.'

'Oh, and drugs, stuff about side effects.'

'Hah!' she snorted. 'Give me a few weeks. Later.'

'Later' was Moira's version of goodbye.

I fried onion, cumin and ginger, chilli, coriander and turmeric. While the spices sizzled I set the table. I added the veg and a tin of tomatoes to the pan and stirred the lot. Left it to cook.

Ray got in just as I was draining the rice. Digger emerged from under the table and went apeshit for a few minutes. Ray joined in. Prancing about and grabbing folds of the dog's loose coat and wriggling it about, letting the animal lap at his moustache with his broad pink tongue. Greeting ritual over, Digger slunk back under the table.

'It's ready,' I said. 'Tell the kids.'

Teatime was relatively peaceful, an inkling of what might emerge as the kids matured. But at five and four respectively, Maddie and Tom were still barely civilised at the table. All too often food became an area for defiance. I'd long since given up trying to get Maddie to eat a balanced diet. As long as she treated what was on the plate as something to eat rather than modelling clay, ammunition or paint I was happy.

Ray takes the same tack with Tom. We're both single

parents and we have to agree on ground rules for the kids to avoid their playing us off against each other. Ray and I share the house and the childcare but never a bed. Some people seem to find it hard to believe; I don't know whether it's the shared childcare or the asexual relationship that gives them the most trouble. It's the latter as far as Ray's mother is concerned. She thinks we're lying about it.

By eight o'clock the children were asleep, the pots washed and the kitchen clear. I sat in the old over-stuffed armchair by the bay window, feet up on a chair, and browsed through the evening paper. 'Council Freezes Repairs', 'Triple Wedding at Hacienda', 'School Will Sell Land', 'Man Held in Shooting'. My head nodded as I settled in. I jerked awake to the sound of the doorbell. Quarter to nine. Not bad.

Moira's tall, spindly frame filled the doorway. She came in hugging her doctor's case and a Tesco carrier bag, and followed me through into the kitchen.

'God, it's years,' she boomed, looking round.

'Still the same,' I said. 'Besides, you're always too busy and I've sort of lost the habit of inviting people round to eat.'

'Should do it again,' she admonished. 'Social eating relieves stress.'

'Depends who you do it with,' I thought of the children, 'and who's cooking. What about Christmas dinner? That's pretty stressful if you're the one with the turkey.'

'Family don't count.' She grinned, took off her jacket and scarf and draped them over one of the chairs. Pulled out another one and sat down. 'Well?'

I explained to Moira the basic facts about Lily Palmer's decline. Her fall, the dislocated shoulder, her

move to Homelea and the change in her behaviour, the confusion, the loss of sparkle. How could I establish whether she was being treated competently?

'Difficult. Find out what medication she's on, the drugs and the dosage. People give bucketloads sometimes. Any of the things you mention could be side effects. See the GP. Ask for a diagnosis. What she first presented with, chronology of symptoms. Alzheimer's, pre-dementia.' She puffed her cheeks out with air then slowly released it. 'Whole other ball game. There can be confusion after trauma – the fall, the move. Should have regained equilibrium by now. Two months?'

'Yes.' I picked a satsuma from the bowl. 'Two since she moved, four since the fall.'

'Don't do anything drastic,' Moira continued, 'no sudden stop on medication. Who's treating her? Own GP?'

'I don't know. Her friend said there was a matron at the home who ran the nursing side.'

'She wouldn't prescribe. But once she'd got something from the doctor she could reorder easily enough. Some people go on for years on drugs they should only have had for a couple of weeks.'

'What about the dosages, if—'

Before I could finish, Moira's bleeper sounded. She switched it off and went to use the phone in the hall.

'Woman in labour.' She scooped up her jacket and case. 'Every time I cover for Dr Wardle one of his mothers gets going. Have a look at these,' she pushed the Tesco carrier across the table, 'couple of years old. Most of it's still relevant. Must go. Later. Ring me.'

I saw her out, watching as she folded herself into the little Fiat she drove.

Two of the books were on geriatric medicine, one of those covered mental health in particular. The other, Medicines, was a family guide. It listed common drugs

and what they were used for, and each entry included all of the side effects that could occur. Enough to put anybody off rushing out to buy all those over-the-counter drugs advertised on the telly.

I made a cup of tea and joined Ray in the lounge. He was sprawled on the sofa watching the news. Toys were still scattered about, and plates with remains of crumpets.

'Home visit?' he asked.

'No, picking her brains. I've got a new case needing a bit of medical background. You know you've still got paint in your hair.'

'Where?' He ran his hands over his dark springy curls.

'There, at the front.'

He stood up and peered in the mirror. 'I told them not to start the painting yet. It'll only need doing again, there's that much dust flying around.' He smoothed his moustache. 'But they're in such a hurry. Bonuses for bringing it in by the end of March.' In between making his own wooden furniture to order Ray took on sub-contract work with a couple of builders.

He bared his teeth, turned his profile this way and that.

'Ray!'

'What?'

'Preening.'

'Just checking.'

'What? That there's no paint on your teeth. You're just vain.'

'No. Careful with my appearance. It's in my blood, style, all Italians have it. You English have no idea.'

'Yeah, yeah, yeah.'

He turned back to the mirror to smooth his hair again. Bit pointless. Then whistled the dog. Digger came bounding in, Ray did something playful to his ears and the two of them went off for walkies.

I put Moira's books on one side then swept toys into one corner of the room where I couldn't actually see them from the sofa. I removed crumpets and crockery. There was nothing worth watching on television so I watched nothing for half an hour. My yawning reached chronic proportions.

In bed I guzzled a couple of chapters of my library book. When the print began to blur I switched out the lamp and hugged the duvet to me.

I could hear the dog down the street yapping. On and on. I felt my shoulders tense with irritation. Noise pollution. Why couldn't they just let the creature in or remove its vocal cords? I'd time it tonight. Begin to gather hard facts so I could challenge the neighbours. See how long it kept me awake. It was too much effort to lift my head up to read the clock. I fell asleep.

CHAPTER THREE

I rang Rachel, my social work contact, at ten a.m. She was busy for the rest of the day: visits, case conference, court reports, the lot. After further prodding and a promise to foot the bill I persuaded her to meet me for lunch the following day. Her office is in Longsight, mine in Withington. We agreed on a friendly Greek restaurant in Fallowfield, midway between us.

I stuck some washing in the machine, then sat in the kitchen and browsed through the books that Moira had left. It became clear that dementia wouldn't have resulted from either Lily's fall or from leaving her home. But both the books listed two types of dementia, Alzheimer's and something called acute confusional disorder. The latter could result from physical illness, like a severe infection or as a reaction to drugs. So it could be treated and would stop, unlike actual senile dementia.

Agnes had described Lily's decline as rapid, the books said Alzheimer's developed slowly over several months. But Mrs Valley-Brown had told Agnes that Lily had Alzheimer's disease, the commonest form of dementia. Presumably the GP knew how to tell the two states apart and for some reason they'd discounted acute confusion. I understood Agnes' disquiet: at first glance the facts didn't appear to add up.

I opened my notepad and listed the questions we

needed answers to. The more I thought about it the more likely it seemed that there'd been a misdiagnosis. That an untreated illness or an adverse reaction to medication had led to Lily Palmer becoming troubled, confused, unlike her usual self. If we could establish the cause and treat it then Lily would get better and Agnes would have her old friend back. It wasn't right: Agnes had been anxious enough to come to a private investigator when the Homelea staff dismissed her concerns. They should have been on to it straight away.

I switched the washing to the tumble dryer in the cellar, then made a quick foray to the shops on my bicycle. Withington is a real mix of taste and tack. Discount shops selling brightly coloured, semi-disposable goods made in China and the Philippines nestle cheek by jowl with more upmarket outlets: delicatessens, health-food shop, designer clothes boutiques.

I bought pasta, cheese and milk from the small supermarket, then negotiated my way to the greengrocer's. The pavements were narrow and crowded with shoppers. I wheeled my bike along the gutter to avoid colliding with anyone.

I was tempted by gleaming displays of avocados, imported beef tomatoes, limes and grapes, by bright bunches of hothouse herbs, but I resisted. Our budget rarely ran to the exotic end of the stall. If it was in season or on offer we ate it. Cabbage, carrots, turnips, onions. Fruit was the exception as the mainstay of the battle against tooth decay: 'No you can't, have some fruit.'

It had actually stopped raining but the cold, grey fug lingered as though the drizzle had been freeze-framed. Back home I had cheese on toast, pulled on another sweater and gathered things up to take round to the office.

The crocuses that dotted gardens along the way had taken a battering from the recent gales. The purple and

yellow flowers lay sprawled and broken. I'd never bothered with crocuses, they were just too feeble for the season. I stuck to polyanthus and primroses, snowdrops and winter pansies – lovely gaudy colours for murky winter days.

I picked up my business mail from the table in the hall and went down to the cellar. The answerphone light blinked three times and paused. I hung my coat on the back of the door and made ready to take notes. The first message was from Wondawindow Systems, from Michelle, no less, who would call again later to discuss with me the new range of low-maintenance, high-quality, fully guaranteed, top-security, bonus-offer uPVC double-glazed windows currently available. I glanced at the narrow basement window with its broken blind. Shrugged.

The second caller had rung off without leaving a message. The third was the man who'd rung me the previous afternoon. I recognised the nervous laugh.

'Hello . . .' laugh. 'Yeah, it's about something I want you to investigate. Can you ring me at work?' He reeled off the number. 'And, erm . . .' laugh, 'if I'm out on a job then leave a message for me and I'll ring you when I get back. Right.' Pause. 'Thanks.'

Well, I'd have done so gladly but he hadn't left his name. I did try the number on the off chance it was a direct line. A woman answered. 'Hello, Swift Deliveries.'

I explained that I wanted to get in touch with one of the younger men whose name I'd forgotten. She couldn't help.

'We've fifteen drivers, love. All over the region. I need a name.'

I gave up. With luck, he'd try again.

My mail consisted of bumf from the bank trying to get me to take out a loan and a letter from the

accountants asking for my detailed income and expenditure so they could prepare my year-end accounts.

I spent the rest of the afternoon preparing my accounts. It would have been easier if I'd entered things on a more regular basis but I shoved all my invoices and receipts into a box file marked 'Finance' and left it till the dreaded letter arrived. It wasn't even all that complicated. The thought of doing it was always worse than the reality.

By the time I'd finished I reckoned I'd have to pay about £500 tax in a couple of instalments over the next year. I couldn't believe that I could earn so little and still have to pay tax. I certainly didn't have a spare £500 sloshing round in the bank. Oh, well. It wasn't due yet and maybe by the time that bill came in I'd have found a nice little earner.

The phone interrupted my musing.

'Hello, is that Miss Kilkenny?'

'Yes. Miss Donlan?'

'That's right. I was wondering how you were getting along.' She spoke tentatively, she didn't want to bother me but she was worrying herself sick.

'Fine. I've been doing a bit of background reading and talking to people. I didn't want to visit Mrs Palmer until I'd a little more information. But we could fix that up now.'

'Yes.'

'How about Friday?'

'Oh.' A note of disappointment.

Did she want to go tomorrow? I was meeting Rachel for lunch but that left gaps either end of the day. And I couldn't see it mattered which order I did things in. 'Unless you want to go tomorrow.'

'I'd like that.'

'Does it matter when? Are there visiting times?'

'Oh no. We can visit whenever we like. I wouldn't

want you to get the wrong impression. It's quite a nice place really, comfortable.'

'How about half-past ten? I could come and pick you up.'

'I'll get the bus.'

'I think it'll look better if we arrive together. If it's no trouble.'

'Of course, yes.'

I checked her address and arranged to pick her up a little before ten thirty the following morning.

No sooner had I put the phone down than it rang again.

'Hello. This is Michelle from Wondawindow Systems. We have some very attractive special offers on at the moment. I'd like to arrange a convenient time for our rep to call on you, at your own convenience, without any obligation, to discuss options with you.' Her voice was brisk, cheery and full of laboured reassurance.

'No thanks.' I got it in quickly, but she hardly drew breath.

'The Wondawindows System not only improves security and reduces maintenance but can dramatically cut heating costs and increase the value of your property.'

'No.'

'Have you thought about window improvements?'

'No. I—'

'There'd be no obligation.'

'I'm not interested.' I put the phone down before she had a chance to carry on. The things some people do for a living.

Ray was working on a conversion job (old houses to new sheltered flats). He was doing all the woodwork:

floors, window and door frames, built-in cupboards. Several weeks' work. It would supplement the money he made on the furniture he created in our cellar. One consequence was he'd be better off for a while, another was that I had to take on more of the domestic jobs. He'd do the same if I got very busy. To date we'd never both been inundated at the same time.

I got Maddie and Tom from school and walked them back. I bunged potatoes in to bake, whizzed up coleslaw in the processor and grated cheese.

While the spuds cooked I sorted the clean clothes and put them in the kids' drawers, left Ray's pile on his bed, put mine away. I joined the children, who were watching a bizarre cartoon. I was completely baffled, unable to follow the plot or even tell what type of creatures the characters were meant to be.

'Why's she doing that?' I asked.

'Shush,' Maddie complained.

'She's saving him,' Tom explained.

'Shush.' Maddie rounded on Tom.

'Who's the blue one?' I said.

'Mummy,' Maddie said sharply, 'go away. You're ruining it.'

I went.

Agnes lived in a small red-brick terrace in Ladybarn. The house had colourful stained-glass panels at the sides of the front door. The woodwork was painted a deep jade green, an old-fashioned flavour. It was the sort of place that the estate agents describe as full of original features.

The creamy lace curtain moved when I drew up. Agnes looked out and waved. She was ready and waiting. Her white hair was carefully styled and she wore the same navy coat. I got out and opened the

passenger door for her. She was nervous. She got the seat belt tangled up with her handbag and the more she struggled the worse it got.

'Here, let me sort that out.' I leant across and unwound everything, buckled the seat belt. Set off.

'Have you told Mrs Palmer we're coming?'

'Yes. I popped in on Tuesday after I'd been to see you. I don't know whether she took it in really. I said I'd be back later in the week, that I'd be bringing a friend. She didn't ask who.'

'We'd better agree on who I am, in case anyone asks. Perhaps we should pass me off as your niece or something like that.'

'No.' She was shocked. 'No, I'd rather a friend of the family.' Her hand worked away at the jet brooch on her coat. I'd obviously touched a nerve. A niece she preferred to forget? I couldn't ask about it. The colour had drained from her face and I needed to put her at ease before we reached Homelea.

'Fine,' I said. 'A friend of the family. Call me Sal – it sounds better than Miss Kilkenny. I prefer it anyway.'

'Yes, and you had better call me Agnes.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yes. I know a lot of my generation like to keep to the formalities but it really doesn't matter any more. There's hardly anyone left to call me Agnes now, you know.'

'OK. How was Mrs Palmer on Tuesday?'

'Very restless. Other times she just dozes off.'

'That could be the side effects of the medicine. Anyway, I just want to meet her today and get a look at the place. I've had a word with a GP I know and she's suggested we find out from Mrs Palmer's doctor exactly how the trouble started and what drugs she's on. It's possible that there's been a wrong diagnosis and

that she hasn't got Alzheimer's at all. I was reading this book . . .'

'Acute confusional disorder,' said Agnes.

'Yes.' My surprise showed.

'I've been reading too,' she smiled. 'I got some books from the library.' She pointed. 'It's left here.'

We turned into a gravelled driveway between large stone gateposts. I parked in front of the house. It was a huge place with outbuildings beyond and a conservatory along one wall of the house. Homelea was probably built by one of the Manchester merchants, a visible statement of his wealth and success. It even boasted a small turret on one corner.

I let Agnes lead the way. There was a ramp as well as steps up to the front porch. Agnes rang the bell. The door was opened promptly by a young woman who recognised her and invited us in. She disappeared. My first impression was of warmth and tasteful decoration, everything in cream, pale green and rose. The aroma of fresh coffee. The broad entrance hall had a large room off to each side, stairs ahead and more doorways at the bottom. Those led to the kitchen and dining room, I assumed. The door to our right was closed; I could hear the murmur of television. But Agnes went through to the room on our left.

This was a corner room with two bay windows. In the recess of the one at the front there was a table with high-backed chairs. A woman sat writing. In the other bay two women, deep in conversation, sat on a chintz-covered sofa. Each held a cat on her lap.

Around the rest of the large room were three clusters of high-backed easy chairs and side tables. People were sitting in some of these, reading papers and books, sewing and playing chess. The atmosphere was relaxed, quietly busy.

'She must be in the other room,' said Agnes.

We crossed the hall and opened the door. The room had the same decor but a semicircle of chairs faced us, arranged to focus on the television set, which was blaring out. There were six people there. A couple looked up as we went in. Agnes moved over to the woman sitting nearest to us, on the outside of the group.

'Lily, hello. How are you?'

The woman turned to face her. She stared blankly, unwavering, at Agnes for two or three seconds then turned back to the television set. I heard Agnes sigh. I put my hand on her arm. The poor woman. Her closest friend had no idea who she was.