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Written by Christina James

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CHRISTINA
JAMES
**ALMOST
LOVE**



CROMER

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*For Chris and Annika, always appreciated
for their alert and perceptive reading*

CHAPTER ONE

IT WAS THE boozy night before the conference, towards the end of the evening, and Alex, who was neither sober nor completely drunk, was heading for bed. It had been a long day and she had not enjoyed the pre-conference dinner. She'd had to look after the speakers, an irascible bunch of eccentrics who had taken a dim view of the wine waiter's capabilities; they'd complained to his face in loud, alcohol-charged voices that had gradually tipped over into unpleasantness. The argument was about credit cards. Alex had been sitting at the far end of the long speakers' table, and she hadn't caught the start of it. The waiter, a youth of about nineteen, was standing there stolidly, holding the card machine in his hand and woodenly absorbing their opprobrium. Nevertheless, Alex was afraid that someone from the hotel management would come diving into the fracas and there would be a scene.

Without enquiring what exactly had gone wrong, Alex had smoothed things over by herself paying for their wine. As she was keying in her PIN, the thought had crossed her mind that their indignation might have been a ploy to get the extra alcohol buckshee. She dismissed it as uncharitable – less because she did not think that it might be true than because she did not want to descend into a depressed state of cynicism ahead of two days in the company of these people.

She had intended to leave the hotel dining-room immediately dinner was over and headed for the shallow staircase that led past the maitre d's desk to where the lifts were. Oliver Sparham suddenly emerged from the small bar where everyone was now gathering. He was one of the more civilised delegates whom she had managed to bounce into acting as conference chairman on the following day. Grasping her elbow, he asked her if she would join him for a drink. She was both too dazed and too polite to refuse; she knew that she owed him for the task that he had agreed to (and, more to the point, which he had yet to perform). She nodded consent and allowed him to steer her, still holding on to her elbow, past the knot of people gathered at the bar's double doors and into the inner drinking sanctum itself. She knew that many of the conference delegates would now be ensconced in this room until the hotel closed it at 2 a.m.; she was determined not to be among them.

“There's a table over there with two seats free,” said Oliver. “You go and claim it, and I'll buy you a drink. What will it be?”

At least these words gave her an excuse to shake him free. Her mind was fuzzy with wine and fatigue. What could she ask for that would not give her a blinding headache the next day?

“Prosecco,” she said. “Just a small one.” She tried to smile at him. He nodded and trotted off, his face pink under the lights, his spectacles gleaming, evidently unaware that her response was barely lukewarm.

She sat on one of the red velvet upholstered stools at the small, cockly table that he had indicated and, picking up a beer mat, slowly began to shred it. Someone said close in her ear: “Bored again, I see. It’s an occupational hazard at these events. Mind if I join you?”

She knew it was not Oliver before she looked up; glancing across at the bar, she saw that he was still queuing and some way from being served. She had not recognised the voice, however, so when she turned to meet the eye of her new companion she was surprised to see that it was Edmund Baker, the Heritage Officer for South Lincolnshire and currently Honorary President of the Society. His voice must have sounded strange because he’d been drinking. She sighed inwardly. Edmund was famous for being a bore when he was sober; when he was drunk, his stupor-inducing talents were almost legendary.

“Hello, Edmund,” she said offhandedly. “Did you have a good dinner?”

He wrinkled his long nose rather comically.

“So-so,” he said. “I got saddled with Lois Merton. Not much of a looker, is she? Even if she has got the equipment up top.” He mimed two enormous breasts, accompanying the gesture with the exaggerated leer of a schoolboy.

“Really, Edmund, that is a disgraceful comment. I’d rather you talked to someone else if you can’t behave any better.” She smiled, though, in spite of herself.

“I’ll behave if you let me talk to you,” he said. “Can I buy you a drink?”

“Oliver’s getting one for me; and in fact he was sitting just there. You’ll have to give that seat up to him when he comes back.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said, pulling another schoolboy face. His hair was silver-white. Alex wondered what colour it had been in his youth. She guessed sandy, which meant that he probably hadn’t been as attractive then as he was now.

She gulped inwardly. Had the thought just flitted through her brain that Edmund could be in any way attractive? She’d always found him difficult to deal with and very boring on occasions; and actually quite asexual. When Oliver came back with her drink, she would down it as quickly as she decently could and go to bed. Her judgment had been impaired by the booze.

“What’s up?” said Edmund. He was evidently in a good mood. She saw that he was clutching a large scotch.

“Nothing,” said Alex. “I’m just tired, that’s all.” She cast around for something to talk about. Afterwards, she could never quite understand why she had shared her pet project with Edmund.

“Since you’re there,” she began, “there *is* something I’d like to talk to you about. It’s all those cases of old finds we’re holding at the Archaeological Society. I’d really like to organise a project to classify them, before all sense of where they came from gets lost forever. Some of them are beyond classification already. The trouble is I don’t have the time – or even the knowledge, for some of the stuff – to do it myself. I’d need to set up a research project, probably involving academics and students, over a period of time. And I’d need a joint project manager, because I’m away so much. So it would have to attract some quite substantial funding. I thought you might be able to help me to get it: point me in the right direction, advise on writing a proposal, that sort of thing. I know you have more experience in attracting money than I do.”

Edmund looked at her for a long moment, swirling the scotch in his glass as he did so.

“I could help you with more than securing the funding,” he said unexpectedly. “I’d be happy to work with you on it, if you’d let me be joint project manager. It would be good to find out if we work well together. I’ll be retiring soon, and I’ll need something else to fill my life with. I’ve often toyed with the idea of setting up a little business with you.”

Alex was taken aback. She tried to think quickly. Edmund was much older than she was – as he said, he was close to retiring, which made him more than twenty years her senior – and, although she’d long dreamed of setting up a sort of research consultancy for archaeological projects, she’d always thought that if she made a go of it, it would be a business that Tom might like to work in as well. Even Tom couldn’t spend his whole life doing social work. But, counter-intuitively, she suddenly found something appealing in the idea of working with Edmund.

Oliver came back with their drinks before she could reply. Edmund launched himself to his feet, swaying a little.

“Alex says that this is your seat,” he said. “Don’t let me interrupt anything. Ah, I see there’s another chair over there. I’ll just fetch it.”

He turned his back. Oliver handed Alex her glass of Prosecco, pulling a face as he did so.

“Sorry,” he said. “That’s what happens when you leave a girl on her own; she becomes a maiden, or perhaps I should say matron, in distress. How long has he been boring you?”

“He hasn’t been here for very long, and actually he hasn’t been boring me at all.” She meant to sound surprised, but she realised as soon as she

spoke that she had delivered the sentence rather aggressively.

“Oh. Well, to quote Edmund, ‘Don’t let me interrupt anything.’ If you’re happy talking to him, I’m quite willing to leave you two alone. I have no wish to play gooseberry,” he added, smirking slightly.

“Don’t be ridiculous. And don’t go, either. There’s no reason why the three of us shouldn’t have a perfectly civilised conversation. We’re all far too old for playground squabbles.”

“You’re right there. Especially Edmund.”

“Especially Edmund what?” said Edmund, returning in triumph with a spindly gilded chair that looked as if it would not take his weight.

“Nothing,” she and Oliver said together. They both giggled.

“I see. Talking about me behind my back, were you?” said Edmund. He spoke genially, without rancour. Alex reflected that she had never seen him in such a good mood.

Oliver launched into test-delivering a series of little vignettes that he had prepared by way of introducing the speakers the next day. Alex thought that they succeeded in being quite as humorously malicious as he had intended, but she could hardly concentrate on what he was saying and she wished he would lower his voice; she knew that his performance tomorrow would fall flat if too many people overheard in advance what he was planning. Edmund didn’t contribute to the conversation at all, which was unlike him, but she was grateful for it. She knew that he could be both rude and tactless if he was feeling cantankerous. But he continued to swirl the whisky in his glass, smiling and nodding almost beatifically. Afterwards, it occurred to her that he had been very drunk. She herself was quite drunk by this time. The room had taken on a surreal quality; voices rushed at her and then retreated; a wicked little pang that she’d felt in her forehead while she was shredding the beer mat was growing into a Goliath of a headache. Her replies to Oliver, as he showed off his genial but lethal character-assassination skills and asked mock-modestly for reassurance that he was delivering ‘what she had anticipated’, became ever more perfunctory. Edmund continued to grin and swirl, and then suddenly downed what was left of the whisky.

“Anyone want another drink?” he asked.

“Not for me, thanks,” said Oliver. “It’s time I went to bed. I need to have a clear head tomorrow. So does Alex, don’t you, love?”

Alex watched Edmund’s eyes widen and knew, with a shock, that he thought that Oliver was trying to proposition her, whereas she was quite certain that all he meant to do was release her from Edmund so that she could go to bed; her own bed, in the magnificent suite that was always allocated to her in recognition of her hard work in organising the conference, but which she barely saw because her every waking hour had to be spent elsewhere. It was because she could not bear to give Edmund

grounds to believe this inference that she made herself accept his offer of yet another drink. Oliver stood up and made a waving gesture.

“Have fun,” he said. “I’ll see you tomorrow. Bright and early, Alex, I hope. I’ve asked the AV people if we can do a quick run-through before breakfast.”

Edmund also stood, swaying even more than when he had first approached her.

“I’ll go and get those drinks,” he said thickly. “Prosecco, was it?”

Alex nodded weakly. Her evening was turning into a disaster, yet one from which she felt powerless to extricate herself. She knew that tomorrow she would feel sick and hungover and that, when she got up, the day’s programme of conference presentations and ‘gala dinner’ would seem to drag on endlessly before she could crawl into bed again. She desperately needed her bed now, but getting to it seemed harder than walking through a maze for the first time.

Edmund came back with a much larger glass of Prosecco than the one that Oliver had bought and what seemed to be at least half a tumbler of whisky on the rocks. He sat down heavily. She took the glass of wine from him and sipped it. He started talking about her idea again. Alex said little, but took a few more sips of the wine. Miraculously, the pain in her head lifted.

CHAPTER TWO

THE FOLLOWING MORNING, Alex awoke early with a thumping headache. You should know better at your age, she chastised herself. She let the familiar hangover remorse and self-disgust seep through her, and then tried to push them away. She lay inert in bed for a while, staring at the LCD figures on the hotel alarm clock. Pull yourself together, she chided. She made herself take in the clock's message, concentrating carefully in order to focus her eyes. The digital display read 06.15. Six fifteen! She could stay in bed for another thirty minutes before she had to get up and prepare for the day. She knew that she would be unable to sleep again. Shutting her eyes made her feel sick.

Something niggled at the back of her mind: some reason why she had more cause to dread the day ahead than the knowledge that she must spend its entirety hobbled by the pain caused by too much alcohol. Of all the kinds of suffering, it was the one that nobody with an ounce of self-respect would acknowledge, so she would just have to put a brave face on it.

Besides the drinking, what else had happened during the early hours? She thought back over the events of the previous evening . . . and remembered Edmund. She could recall the conversation in the bar. After it had become unbearably noisy, she had asked Edmund if he would like to come to her sitting-room to discuss further his suggestion that they should work together. After that, her memories were hazy, with gaps.

She remembered Edmund standing over her as she sat in one of the leather armchairs with her feet tucked up under her. Why was he standing? He had extended a trembling hand to stroke her hair. She had looked up at him and said something, but could not remember the exact words. She did recall their substance: it had been something about Christine; Christine, his wife, whom she had never met. It seemed unlikely, but she thought she might have asked him if he loved Christine. Whatever her question, she could remember his response quite clearly. He said, "Yes, of course," but in a clipped, almost strangulated, way, as if signalling either that this was a considerable achievement, or that his love was necessarily qualified in some way. He had then withdrawn his hand very precipitately, and left.

My God, she thought, had Edmund made a pass at her? It would certainly explain the fear with which she was facing the day ahead. It must have been that; otherwise, why had he disappeared so quickly? And what

an idiot she had been; she could understand why even Edmund, the least sexually interesting of men and, as far as she knew, one of the least interested in sex, would mistake the signals sent out by a half-drunk woman who had invited him back to her room. That the sitting-room and bedroom were quite separate was hardly a convincing defence.

She hauled herself out of bed. She knew she would have to try every trick in her repertoire to combat her mental and physical wretchedness. She lay on the floor and tried to relax her limbs in preparation for some gentle yoga. She managed the 'tense yourself, relax' technique all right, but, as soon as she closed her eyes, waves of nausea swept over her again. She got up slowly, sat on the edge of the bed for a while and then turned on the television.

A bomb had gone off in Oslo, wrecking the railway station. At least one hundred people had died and the casualty figures were climbing rapidly. She stared at the screen for a while, gazing in horror at images of wrecked cars piled on top of each other and huge twisted chunks of masonry, followed by some jumbled footage of people lying in the streets, blood-speckled and injured or running hysterically with stretchers bearing the dead and wounded. She pointed the remote again. She knew she was being cowardly, but she was not yet in a fit state to take in an international catastrophe.

She walked over to the glass balcony doors and flung open the curtains. The hotel had originally been an eighteenth-century country house and her room overlooked a flagged courtyard. Holding back the gauzy net and peering down, she saw what was unmistakably a column of cigarette smoke curling up towards her. Someone must be standing in front of the French window on the ground floor. She could not see who it was. She tried moving to the far right hand side of the glass in an attempt to catch a glimpse of a head or arm, but still could make out nothing except the regular curlicues of smoke. She did not doubt that it was a man. If she opened the door and went to stand on the balcony, she would be able to see him, but he would almost certainly hear the doors opening and look up at her. Her curiosity was not keen enough to make her want to expose herself to view, dressed as she was only in a short nightshirt, the depredations of the night before unconcealed by make-up and her hair all over the place. She dropped the net curtain and propelled herself towards the bathroom.

Twenty minutes later, having showered and washed her hair and dressed in the smart navy suit that she had bought especially, with make-up applied and her outfit discreetly complemented by gold stud earrings and a slender gold chain, she felt a little more able to face the world. She drew back the net covering the balcony doors and unlocked and opened them. She stepped out onto a narrow stone platform bound by tall piano-leg-shaped columns and a sturdy rail of Portland stone and into sunlight that was already quite strong, despite the earliness of the hour. Below, she saw a

white delivery van arrive. Painted in black on its side, in letters that were made to resemble elaborate handwriting, was the legend *Gourmet Seafoods Ltd. Proprietor: E. Gregory* and a telephone number and website address. A man got out and opened the back doors of the van. He loaded himself up with three large cardboard boxes and disappeared into the hotel with them. Otherwise, the courtyard was deserted. The secret smoker had vanished.

Alex went back into her room and looked at her watch. It was just after 7 a.m. She decided that she couldn't face meeting anyone for breakfast – especially not Edmund or Oliver. Although she wasn't the slightest bit hungry, a light snack might help her to get through the morning better. She called room service and ordered croissants and coffee. Smoothing her skirt carefully, she perched on the end of her bed and pointed the remote at the television again. A politician and a well-known historian sat hunched on sofas intended to make them look casual. They talked about the situation in Norway. The politician was very red in the face and kept saying, 'If you'll let me finish . . .' whenever the anchorwoman or the historian tried, however courteously, to interrupt him. The result was a stultifyingly tedious, one-sided harangue about how such a situation could never arise at home while the present government was in power, because. . . .

She was about to consign him to oblivion when, quite suddenly, the interview was concluded and the anchorwoman announced that the news would now continue with regional items 'where you are'. Welland Manor was, of course, some thirty miles from 'where Alex was' usually and fell within a different local television region from the one at home. Nevertheless, as she always enjoyed local news more than the national news because it was more about people, less about big business and political set-pieces, she decided to watch it.

The first item was about hunting and the second about the wedding of a local woman who had married her soldier fiancé despite his having been terribly disfigured during the invasion of Iraq. After a third clip on local authority cuts and the consequent reduction in bus services and provision for pre-school children, the newscaster – a dapper, bald little man with a strong local accent – was in the process of returning viewers to the main newsroom when he interrupted himself with a 'breaking news' announcement.

"We have just heard that Dame Claudia McRae, the archaeologist, has disappeared from her home in suspicious circumstances. Police were called to her house early this morning after Guy Maichment, her nephew, failed to reach her by telephone. Because she is elderly and quite frail, Mr Maichment decided to check on her. When he reached her house, which is situated in Teapot Lane, about five miles from the village of Welland, near Helpston, he found the front door wide open. Dame Claudia was not

there, but there were no signs of a struggle. Dame Claudia, if you are safe and well and watching this programme, City of Peterborough Police would like to appeal to you to contact them immediately. The police would also like to talk to anyone who has had contact with Dame Claudia over the past forty-eight hours. Dame Claudia pioneered the use of archaeological dating techniques based on the semantic development of ancient languages and is particularly well-known for her work in the Middle East, especially in the region known to bible scholars as Mesopotamia, and for deciphering the text of what has become known as the McRae Stone.” Pictures of the house were shown. It looked like a story-book thatched cottage, its walls washed pale pink. It was surrounded by trees and apparently stood in a very isolated location.

Claudia McRae. Alex did not know her, but she had met her once. She had heard her speak at a lecture when she was a student and had been introduced to her briefly afterwards. Miss McRae must have been about seventy at the time; a bulky, arrogant woman, as far as Alex could remember. She had announced her retirement shortly afterwards. Some of the conference delegates would undoubtedly have been past colleagues and acquaintances and had probably looked up to her when younger. Alex herself had found her theories about semantic dating fascinating and had read several books and papers by Claudia McRae before she had attended that lecture. In some ways, she had regretted going to it; the woman had seemed so much less distinguished than the corpus of work that she had produced. Perhaps that was being unfair: it is bound to be difficult to live up to the expectations of your admirers when your work has become a legend.

There was a tap at the door. Alex thrust her feet into her black court shoes and opened it. A white-jacketed waiter stood before her, bearing a tray.

“Where would you like me to leave this, Madam?”

Alex indicated the desk, walking ahead of him to move the cardboard folder containing the day’s schedule of events. He put it down carefully and asked her to sign a chit.

“This is also for you, Madam,” he said. “It was left with the night porter early this morning.”

He handed Alex a thick vellum envelope embossed with the Welland Manor’s coat of arms.

“Thank you.”

He inclined his head and left the room slowly. When he finally reached the door, he closed it quite smartly behind him. Too late, Alex realised that he had been expecting a tip.

She glanced at the television screen again. The national anchorwoman was back. She had just finished summarising the news headlines and was

handing over to the weather forecaster. Alex snapped the remote again, relishing the instant peace that this brought. She sat down at the desk and poured herself coffee. Sipping it carefully, she thought that perhaps her headache was easing. She looked at her watch: seven-thirty. There was still half an hour before she had to meet Oliver in the conference suite. If she could eat at least one of the two croissants that the waiter had brought, and drink the orange juice as well as the coffee, she might make a passable recovery.

She was topping up her coffee when her eye fell again on the envelope that the waiter had handed her. She had barely registered what it was when she had taken it from him, distracted as she had been by Claudia McRae, her own hangover and the slight feeling of unease that she always experienced when being served by over-attentive hotel staff. She sighed. It was probably connected with the *contretemps* over the wine yesterday evening. She hoped that it would be nothing more controversial than, perhaps, a routine – and probably insincere – apology from the sommelier. The flap of the envelope had been sealed down, not just folded. She ripped it open, creating an untidy ragged gash in the expensive, cream-laid paper. Inside, there was a single sheet of the hotel's notepaper. Like the envelope, it was of expensive, cream-laid vellum and had been neatly folded into three so that it fitted the envelope exactly. She opened it out and smoothed it down flat on the desk. The hotel's address and crest, printed in the same discreet grey-blue in which they appeared on the envelope, but magnified to about twice the size, were centred at the top of the sheet of paper. Otherwise, it bore only two words: *Be Careful*. These had been inscribed in black ink right in the middle of the page, in a handwriting which attempted to copy Victorian copperplate. There was no date, and no signature: just this single curt message.

Alex sighed again. The missive aroused in her more irritation than alarm. It had almost certainly come from one of the curmudgeonly old men who had made such a nuisance of themselves yesterday evening. If so, how cowardly of the author not to identify himself! It flitted swiftly across her mind that, alternatively, it might have been written by someone who had seen her leave the bar with Edmund. But she didn't think that anyone besides Oliver had really been aware that they had been sitting together and he had headed for bed long before her own departure. She was all but certain that no-one had seen her enter the suite with Edmund: one of the clear memories that stood out from the blur of the events of the small hours was of Edmund glancing nervously up and down the corridor as they stood outside her room and she fumbled with the key-card. He would certainly have alerted her – and probably bolted – if anyone had been watching. In any case, she thought defensively, if they had been seen, what could anyone do about it? Tell Tom? Tell Christine? Neither featured at all in the lives

of this group of archaeologists; and besides, exactly what was there to tell?

She looked at her watch again. It was 7.45 a.m. now: time to tackle the croissant. Taking small bites, she masticated the papery mass as thoroughly as she could and managed to swallow about half of it, her gorge rising slightly each time a morsel was dispatched. She spent five heroic minutes at this task, then swigged the last of the orange juice, downed some more coffee and went to the bathroom to brush her teeth and apply lipstick. She snatched up her handbag and the folder, inwardly declaring that she was as ready as she would ever be for what the day had in store. It was next to impossible to escape through the mock hallway that led out of her suite without consulting her reflection in its floor-to-ceiling mirror. She threw a sidelong appraising glance at her image and decided that it passed muster. With exaggerated bravado, she strode out of the room to keep her appointment with Oliver.

CHAPTER THREE

DESPITE THE FACT that it was an unspoiled morning and he was driving along some of his favourite country lanes in brilliant winter sunshine, Inspector Tim Yates was not happy. He thought that he had probably been sent on a fool's errand, for one thing; to a place near Helpston, as well, which was not, strictly speaking, in his territory. For another, he had had one of his rare disagreements with Katrin – OK, he conceded, as he rewound the events of the previous evening in his mind, it was a row. Katrin had been behaving strangely of late – she was not her usual sunny, rational, forgiving self. There had been a heated exchange, during which she had said that it was he who had been behaving thoughtlessly. She would say that, of course. Nevertheless, her comments had prompted him to embark on some unaccustomed moments of introspection. Perhaps she was right. Perhaps they both needed a holiday. Perhaps he would be in a better mood if Superintendent Thornton hadn't landed him with this bloody 'incident', or rather, non-incident. It would turn out to be a wild goose chase, he would put money on it. In the meantime, Detective Constables Juliet Armstrong and Andy Carstairs were investigating what appeared to be a contract killing that had taken place in Spalding the night before – a man had been found dead in Ayscoughfee Gardens, the cause of death apparently a single bullet through the forehead. Drugs, thought Tim. Drugs would be at the bottom of it; though it was odd that the man seemed to be a vagrant. He had been trying to persuade his superiors for months that there was evidence of an organised drugs gang at work in South Lincolnshire. Perhaps now they would believe him. Discovering the identity of the victim in the park could lead to the uncovering of a drugs network. If so, it would probably be the most important case that South Lincolnshire police had worked on for many years. And here he was, traipsing around the countryside looking for a vain old woman who had contrived to go missing.

His assessment of Claudia McRae's character was not entirely based on prejudice. As a history undergraduate, he had developed a passing interest in archaeology and, of course, he had heard of her. Dame Claudia McRae, as she was now. Most people had heard of her, even if they barely knew what archaeology was about. Her fame had been attributed to her having pushed back the boundaries of what the women of her genera-

tion were allowed to achieve; she had succeeded in gaining eminence in a science (art?) that had previously been a fiercely-guarded male preserve. Tim had read one of her books, however, and he suspected that vanity and a decided talent for self-promotion had also been major factors in her rise to stardom – not to mention her many friends in politics and other influential spheres. He did not deny the inventive virtuosity of the theories that she propounded; indeed, he found them fascinating, because they lent to archaeology the very quality which for him it had traditionally lacked: the power to recreate the voices of the past. But her prose style was thumping and arrogant and she allowed no room for doubt that she was right. Some of her hypotheses were based on extremely tenuous interpretations of tiny examples of barely-decipherable scraps of ancient writings whose languages could not be fully reconstructed. It was therefore difficult to say that she was wrong (particularly as she was the pre-eminent ‘expert’ in her field), but for a trained mind it was equally difficult to swallow that all of her theories were irrefutable. Remarkably, no-one of either her own generation or the one succeeding it had publicly challenged her writings, though conversely she had never received much acclaim from her peers. He wondered if a new young crop of would-be famous archaeologists was now busily casting a sceptical eye on the corpus of her work and coming up with alternative explanations for her ‘findings’. If so, he hoped that they would be diligent in researching the many accounts of recent discoveries that could no doubt be cited to provide a legitimate pretext for undertaking such a project and, also, that they would apply absolute integrity to whatever counter-arguments they might come up with. Otherwise it would just be the usual academic tit-for-tat refined slanging match, of no practical use to anyone. Thank God he had turned his back on all of that and chosen to become a policeman.

The thought cheered him. His mood was lightened further when his mobile phone chirruped its ‘text message waiting’ ditty and, pulling over into a lay-by, he saw that the message was from Katrin. It read simply: ‘Sorry. XXX.’ He texted her back. ‘My fault. XXX’. The day was already beginning to look a great deal brighter.

The last leg of his journey took him deep into the country lanes beyond Helpston. He made a few wrong turns, cursing equally the inadequate map which he had printed from the Internet and the local council’s failure to signpost the maze of tiny lanes in which he found himself. Claudia McRae’s cottage, when eventually he reached it, stood at the end of a narrow unmetalled farm track which gradually petered out altogether, so that for the last two hundred yards or so he was just driving on hard mud.

The house itself was a confection, almost too picture-book pretty with its thatched roof and rose-coloured walls. Its walls were bowed with age and seemed to grow up out of the grass – there was evidently no proper

garden, nor even a boundary fence – and it bore more than a fleeting resemblance to the picture of the cottage into which Hansel and Gretel had been lured in the edition of Grimm’s Fairy Tales from which his grandmother had read to him as a child. Taking the analogy further would turn Claudia McRae into a witch. If the cap fits, thought Tim.

There was a police car and a battered Citroen parked in front of the house. Tim parked his own car – a BMW and also battered – at some distance from them and walked up the slight slope to the house. The front door was wide open. A police cordon had been looped through stakes set in a box shape around the entrance. Wary of contaminating evidence, Tim shouted out ‘Hello?’, feeling faintly foolish as he did so.

A uniformed policeman appeared from somewhere behind the house. He was carrying a plastic bag and was followed by a slightly-built man of about fifty who held up his head with an almost aristocratic bearing, although he was dressed in very shabby, dirty clothes. Tim recognised the policeman.

“PC Cooper?” he said. “Have they sent you out here as well? Don’t City of Peterborough Police have any coppers of their own, for God’s sake?”

Gary Cooper grinned. “It was Superintendent Thornton’s idea, sir,” he said. “He thought you would appreciate working with one of your own team, so to speak.”

Tim rolled his eyes. “Heaven preserve me if the Superintendent has started getting in touch with his feminine side. What next?”

“When you’ve finished your banter,” said the slightly-built man quietly, but with unmistakable, if contained, hostility, “my aunt has disappeared and I think that you should lose no time in setting about finding her. If you are able to, that is. It is already several hours since I first called for help and nothing at all constructive appears to have happened yet.”

Tim took an instant dislike to the man, but he knew he must guard against showing it. Both Katrin and Juliet Armstrong had told him that his opinions of other people could often be read only too clearly in his face. Not a good trait in a policeman.

“Mr Maichment?” he said, extending his hand. “Detective Inspector Tim Yates, South Lincolnshire Police.”

Guy Maichment placed his slight and none-too-clean hand in Tim’s and let it linger there limply for a moment before withdrawing it.

“Delighted,” he said. “Now, if you will come into the house, I’ll show you what I found when I arrived here during the night.”

“About what time was that, Mr Maichment?” Tim asked.

“Just before 1 a.m. Why do you ask?”

“Rather late to be visiting an old lady, wasn’t it?”

“I’ve already explained several times that I was trying to reach my aunt by telephone during the whole of yesterday evening. She’s in quite good

health for her age, but obviously not strong. She usually has someone with her – Jane Halliwell, a sort of companion and secretary rolled into one – but Miss Halliwell is not here this week.”

“Do you know where she is?”

“I believe that she is on holiday abroad somewhere.”

“So you haven’t been in touch with her to ask if she might know where your aunt could have gone?”

“I haven’t been in touch with anyone, except you people,” Guy Maichment said peevishly. “The policeman whom I spoke to on the telephone told me just to stay here and not touch anything until someone arrived to help.”

“Which policeman was that?” asked Tim, directing his question to Gary Cooper.

“Superintendent Little, of the City of Peterborough force, sir. Mr Maichment’s call was taken very seriously. Superintendent Little was alerted and dealt with the matter personally. He sent a panda car here straight away.”

“I would expect Roy Little to take a call from me ‘very seriously’,” said Guy Maichment. “He is a friend of my aunt’s.” He almost preened himself.

“Presumably there was a policeman – or even two – from Peterborough. Where are they now?”

“There was a policeman and a policewoman, sir. I’ve written down their names. They left just after I got here. They asked Mr Maichment some preliminary questions, I believe, and now they’ve gone to check the hospitals and old people’s homes in the area.”

“I see.” Tim didn’t actually see at all. If Superintendent Little was so keen to help, and a friend of the family to boot, why involve South Lincolnshire Police? And why had Superintendent Thornton agreed? Tim was here now, however, and there was work to do. He would get to the bottom of whatever Thornton was up to later.

“Let’s go into the house now, shall we, as Mr Maichment suggests?”

Gary Cooper produced some white overshoes from his plastic bag.

“Best to wear these, then, sir. SOCOs haven’t got here yet.”

“You’ve called the SOCOs in? That was a bit precipitate, wasn’t it?”

“You’ll see why, sir.”

Tim took the shoes and eased into them. PC Cooper lifted out more shoes for himself and Guy Maichment, who made quite a palaver of putting them on. Tim had the strange feeling that he was enjoying himself.

Gary Cooper ducked under the police cordon. Guy Maichment hopped over it nimbly, close on Gary’s heels. Tim himself hurdled it in rather an ungainly way and followed them both through the open door of the house. They each halted abruptly and stood a few paces back from the left-hand wall in the poky, corridor-like entrance hall. Both turned simultaneously to face the wall itself, as if to signpost to Tim what he was supposed to be looking at.