1

'Have you got somewhere safe to go?' asks the barrister after the verdict. His dark brows knit together with anxiety. Over the last few weeks of the case, I've noticed that this is not uncommon. But right now, the worry lines seem even deeper.

Outside the Old Bailey, the crowds are baying for blood. We're in a small room inside the building. The place is like a rabbit warren, with so many stairs and levels that there's no way I could find my way out alone.

Somewhere safe to go to? It occurs to me that I should have thought of this before.

'Yes,' I say. 'Tall Chimneys.'

Whether it's safe is another matter. Hadn't I always told myself I'd never go back there?

'Where?' he asks.

'It's a sort of family bolt-hole in Devon.'

I think of the beautiful three-storey white Regency 'boarding house', as they used to call it before the term B&B became commonplace. My grandmother's home. The one my mother left me.

He interrupts my thoughts. 'But the locals would know you there.'

'Not necessarily. I was fifteen when I left.' The memories swarm back as I speak. I can't help it. That voice from the past is as clear as if he is standing right next to

me now. Stroking the side of my face. Then slowly and deliberately, tracing an invisible line down the side of my throat. Tilting my chin very gently, so I am forced to look straight at him.

'*You've got such beautiful eyes, Nancy.*'

'We could give you a new identity,' chips in the detective inspector, breaking into my thoughts. 'Is this place empty?'

Place? It's not a place, I want to say. *It's more like a person*. At least that's how I had felt when Mum, Dad and I had packed the car every summer and headed south from London for the five-hour drive with the dog, our cases and my father's paints in the back. Before Duncan had wrecked our lives.

'Yes,' I say, numbly. 'My mother rents . . .'

I stop. It still seems impossible that she has gone. Then I force myself to continue.

'My mother *had* been renting it out for years, but the tenants left recently.'

'Convenient,' says the DI.

He speaks as though I have engineered it. As if it was I who had been imprisoned for life instead of Martin.

Not for the first time, I wish my defence barrister had been a woman. The same goes for the DI. I can't help it. I'm naturally distrustful of men.

'I'm afraid that, through no fault of your own, you've been given what is known as a "silent sentence",' says the barrister grimly.

'What do you mean?' I ask.

He shakes his head. 'Crime – like fame – tends to rub off on anyone connected with the accused and the convicted. You're the nearest they can get to Martin.'

My mouth goes dry. 'What might they do to me?'

The DI chips in again. 'Send you nasty emails. Put excrement through your letterbox. You name it. They can do it.'

I wince. The barrister notices.

'These pressures that they put on you, Nancy,' he says in a kind voice, 'might make it hard for you to live a normal life. That's why some families of prisoners say they feel as if they are serving a silent sentence – even if they're innocent.'

Even if they're innocent. Does the Crown Prosecutor still believe that I had something to do with the murder of my own mother and stepfather?

I feel sick inside. 'Who are *they*? And why might they persecute me?'

The DI gives a hoarse laugh. 'Joe Public. Anyone reading the case in the paper or online or hearing someone else talk about it. Someone you might have known years ago, perhaps, and who recognizes your name. A busybody. A fantasist. You'd be amazed at the folk who are glued to murders like this – especially when it's a high-profile victim, as in this case.'

There's a pause for breath. Isn't that enough? But the list continues. 'The press. The man or woman next door. A total stranger. A nutter. Someone who feels that your brother hasn't been punished enough – or that the whole truth hasn't come out.'

'Stepbrother,' I remind him quickly.

'Yes. Of course. Sorry.'

The shouts are getting louder now. '*Get the bastard!*'

'*Kill him!*'

'*And the rich bitch too. I don't believe her.*'

'*She's hiding something.*'

Fear tightens my chest. If Mum hadn't been loaded, would they have been so interested? Maybe they don't know that her wealth was virtually an accident. My father's paintings, which he'd struggled to sell during his lifetime, had been 'discovered' after his death by a well-respected critic, which sent prices escalating to heights we'd never imagined. If only my beloved dad could have lived to see this. Maybe that's why I've never taken an interest in the money. It feels wrong to enjoy a fortune that Dad should have benefited from. He deserved the kudos too.

Of course, I could use my inheritance to buy a private jet and hole up somewhere abroad. But I'm sure the press would find me. Besides, it would make me look even guiltier.

I touch my pearl necklace in the way I often do when I need reassurance. My mother gave it to me when I was twenty-one. Before her, it had belonged to my grandmother Adeline. It's the only thing I have of hers. My grandfather had been shot down during the war. My mother told me that the necklace had originally been a present from Adeline's best friend Elizabeth. '*Take care of it, won't you?*' Mum had said.

'We need to get you out the back way,' says the DI curtly. His sharp tone brings me back to the present. 'And quickly. Let's go.'

2

'You can do this,' I say out loud, my hands gripping the wheel. 'You've got to.'

Steeling myself, I edge down the slip road and on to the M3. My hands are sweating. I'm one of those drivers who's reasonably at ease on ordinary roads within fifty miles of somewhere I know well. But motorways have always scared me.

It's the risk you have to take that I don't like; the split-second decision about joining that never-ending stream of traffic that appears to form a solid rank against you. And even if the motorway is comparatively quiet, as it is now, supposing that red car which seems so far away suddenly zips forward? What if my car stops or stalls as I take the plunge and venture out? The one behind might go headlong into me and then . . .

I shake myself. All my life I've thought the worst. Actually, that's not entirely true. Before Dad died, I'd never felt this kind of anxiety. The shock of his death put me on constant alert in case something awful happened to Mum too. Then she married Duncan. I started to feel guilty because Mum persuaded me to take his surname so we'd be a 'proper' family, and it went on from there. But right now, I'm facing the toughest situation of my life. Joining a motorway is small fry in comparison.

Move across! Be brave!! I've done it! I glance in my

rear-view mirror. The red car is behind me. It's closer than it was before but it's still at a respectable distance. No one has been hurt. No one has died.

Not here, anyway.

Taking a deep breath, I switch on the radio. '*Martin Greenfield, the thirty-eight-year-old man who was convicted of slaughtering his father and stepmother in their remote Sussex farmhouse, is starting a life sentence . . .*'

My knees start to judder. Swiftly, I turn it off. That red car is overtaking me. The driver glances across. Is he following me? No. He can't be. Or he'd have stayed behind, waiting to see where I am going. That's if he's a man. It's hard to tell from this distance. Mind you, women can be just as dangerous. Look at me.

'Don't underestimate journalists,' the DI had told me. 'They're like bulls after a red rag. But when the next big story comes along they'll leave you alone. You just have to lie low until then.'

'But I won't ever be able to go back to my normal life, will I?' I'd said. 'People at work know. Everyone does.'

I thought of the advertising agency where I was a senior copywriter. Remember *Banish the blue – find the new you!* for that multivitamin campaign? That was one of mine. But there's no slogan that can help me right now.

I'd told my director about the trial just before it started. I had to. I needed time off. Besides, the case would be reported. His eyes had widened. 'Shit, Nancy. Are you serious?'

No, I'm not. I don't have a dead mother. There are no sirens screaming. No 999 call. No police banging on the farmhouse door. No blood. Not one tiny red drop. See

how I can pretend? I'm a creative. I can make anything happen in my mind. I've always made up stories in my head, ever since I was a child.

But I can't stop the news. It attacks me from all directions. Nor can I stop the messages. On my Twitter account, Instagram, Facebook. Most of them furiously disbelieving: *You must have known what he was like!* As if we really know what anyone is like. Let alone a man like my stepbrother. I get a brief flash of Martin as a gangly youth from that summer in Devon.

The red car has disappeared and I force my memories to do the same. But there's a grey car behind me now. It's keeping a steady speed. I'd like to go into the fast lane but I'm too scared. I feel safer in the slow. It's like swimming as a child. I used to panic if I went out of my depth. 'It's all right,' Dad had said. But it hadn't been, had it? I don't mean the swimming but the bigger stuff. Later. When he hadn't been around to save me.

Twenty miles further on the grey car is still there. Five years ago I had sensed someone behind me when I'd been walking down Mile End Road in the dark. His footsteps were getting faster and faster. I was scared that if I ran, he'd run too. So I'd got my phone out and called Martin. 'I think someone's following me.'

'Cross the road,' he said quickly. 'Knock on a door. Any door. Stay on the line. Talk to me all the time so I know you're OK.'

I'd followed his instructions for the first part but I hadn't needed to knock on a door. The person I'd been scared of had simply walked on, minding his own business.

Why had I rung Martin? Because history had already

bound us together. He was – is – the only other person in the world who knows what it was like to live with Duncan. Apart from Mum, of course, and she's dead.

What would Martin say now if he knew a grey car was following me? *Get off the motorway, Nancy. Take this next exit. If the car stays behind you, ring the police.*

So I do. When I reach the roundabout at the bottom of the slip road, I glance in the mirror. Nothing is behind me. I almost choke on the relief in my throat.

My satnav tells me that this road leads to the South West, even though it's going to be a longer journey than the motorway. I decide to go for it.

I'm passing through a small town now. On the left, I spot a hairdresser's. There's a fancy sign on the window with a pair of scissors. Once, during a holiday in Devon before Martin and Duncan had come into our lives, I'd knelt by accident on a pair of cutting-out scissors that I'd left on the carpet while doing my scrapbook. The blood had spurted everywhere. I'd been so shocked that I couldn't talk until the screams had forced their way out.

'It's all right, Nancy,' my father had soothed, scooping me up and carrying me to the cottage hospital near the seafront. The doctor had stitched me up while Dad had held my hands. My mother had always been terrified of blood. 'You're all right now, love.'

Afterwards, he took me down to my favourite ice-cream parlour on the 'front' as he called it. I was allowed to have a chocolate '99' flake with it as a special treat for being so brave. The memory makes me smile now, despite everything.

I slow down. There's an empty parking space on the

road near the hairdresser's. I was booked with Max to have my blonde highlights done this weekend. I'd forgotten to cancel it. Would my stylist be expecting me still? Or would he be telling another client, right now, that one of his regulars was that woman who'd been on the front page of the paper all week? I can imagine his voice now: *I'd been due to do Nancy Greenfield's hair for her wedding last year as well, but it got called off. Some people have a lot of trouble in their lives, don't they?*

The car stops. I don't actually remember pulling in. I'm right outside the salon and there's even a payment machine next to it. Is this a sign?

'I know it's rather last-minute,' I say to the receptionist, 'but I wondered if you had an appointment for a colour.'

My heart is beating fast at the thought of her recognizing me. The tabloids had really gone to town on us. '*Us?*' repeats Martin in my head. '*Glad to see you still think that way*.'

'I don't,' I tell him sharply. Had I said that out loud? If so, the woman doesn't seem to have heard.

'You're in luck,' she chirps. 'Is it highlights you're after?'

'No,' I say, trying to sound casual. 'I fancy a change. I want to go dark.'

When she's finished, I look in the mirror. My heart pounds. This wasn't what I expected. My mother stares back at me. Her hair had been raven black, whereas mine had been blonde like my dad's and then mousey as I moved into my thirties. '*Please come to my birthday party*,' she had pleaded.

Was she kidding? That date will be tarnished for ever in my mind.

'*Why?*' I challenge.

'*Because I want my daughter to be there.*'

'No,' I say to my reflection.

'You don't like it?' asks the hairdresser, startled.

'Yes. No. Sorry. It's great.'

Mum's mirror image makes me shudder as his voice comes back to me again. '*You've got such beautiful eyes, Nancy.*' I used to like them too. But not any more. Not after the summer I turned fifteen and life changed for ever.

I fish about in my bag for cash. No cards, the DI had advised. Not for a while. Too easy to trace.

'Thanks,' she says, looking surprised at the tenner I leave for a tip. I'm not usually so generous but it's to make up for pretending to be asleep while she'd plastered on the dye. Besides, I can afford it now I'm an 'heiress' (another word the headlines had delighted in using).

When I get back into the car, I take a second look at the mirror. If I sweep it back, I look less like Mum. 'You aren't the same Nancy any more,' I tell my thirty-six-year-old self sternly. 'You aren't your mother either. You might not have an official new identity. But this is still your chance to put it all behind you.'

I turn the key in the ignition and drive on.

3

I switch on the radio again only to find that the news is about to start. So I switch it off before I can hear it. I need to stay calm.

PING. I glance across at my mobile, lying on the passenger seat.

Alex.

I ignore it.

It pings again. I stretch across to put it on silent.

As I drive, I try to remember the breathing routine from the meditation app I've been using. But all I can see in my head is Duncan's body and the knife in my hand. *The blood. So much blood.*

And then I see the sea.

I pull into a lay-by and stare. It's as though there's a huge invisible STOP sign on the beach and then . . . nothing. Just miles and miles of water.

'*Are we there yet?*'

I can hear my childish voice from the back of the car.

'*Nearly!*' my father sings back. Sometimes I felt he was more excited than my mother about going to Devon, even though she'd been the one who had grown up there. 'The sea gives me inspiration,' he would say.

I drive on. A road sign announces I have left Dorset and am now in Devon. My satnav tells me there's another forty minutes to go until I reach my destination. I begin to

shake. What if reporters are waiting for me? Suppose someone who works at the court has tipped them off? Or the police? Can I trust anyone after what has happened?

I think about my so-called 'silent sentence'. Until now, I'd never considered the implications for the families of criminals. Who does?

Not that I've got a family any more.

Would I have been better hiding in London instead of coming down here with all the memories swarming round my mind? Already I've thought about the past more than I've allowed myself to do in years. I could always turn round and go . . . where? I'd ruled out going abroad, but even a hotel in the UK would be too obvious. Someone could easily recognize me there. The same if I rented a place. No. I have no choice.

The road is feeling vaguely familiar now as it drops down through fields. The hills on either side appear to form strokes going upwards, the sea in the middle of the V.

'*We're there!*' my mother says in my head. '*You'll love it, Duncan!*'

Mum had married him when I was nine. Martin was still living with his mother in France. He was going to join us later for the summer holidays. His school reports that year made my stepfather really cross, though he'd won a prize in history. This stuck in my memory because even then Duncan hadn't been satisfied. 'Why can't the boy be good at something useful like maths?'

Why am I doing this? Why am I coming back to the very house where it all started to go wrong? I have a flash of Martin leaning towards me and begin to shake.

'Tall Chimneys also has happy memories, darling,' I can hear my mother saying now. 'You learned to walk there. And your father taught you to swim, remember?'

Yes. Of course I do. I'd been trying for months in the public baths in Watford, near our main home. But the buoyancy of the sea made it so much easier.

'You clever girl!' said my father, lifting me up into the air and giving me a cuddle when we came out of the water, before wrapping me up in a big towel. Then we'd saunter back, arm in arm, to Tall Chimneys and have a hot chocolate. Later, I'd go to bed in a room that had 'Nancy' on a china plaque on the door, and dream of the waves carrying me safely back to shore.

My grandmother Adeline had inherited the boarding house from her best friend Elizabeth in the 1950s. She'd continued to take in guests, and on her death she'd passed it to my mother, Violet, who'd used it as a holiday home.

Duncan, who was a friend of Dad's, had married Mum shortly after this unexpected wealth appeared. I sensed he both enjoyed the money yet also resented it because my mother 'held the purse strings' – a phrase I often heard during the arguments that took place behind their bedroom door.

'Please don't be so horrid,' I would hear Mum say. I'd often wished she would leave him but Mum was the kind of woman who needed a husband by her side. I always knew I was never going to be like that. That's why I worked my socks off; made things happen for myself. I still want to, even though Mother has left everything to me. Including Tall Chimneys.

'The house is very old, you know,' Mum would say. 'It

goes back to 1812. Just think of everything it's lived through!'

I do a double-take at the WELCOME TO SIDMOUTH sign. I'd been so lost in my memories that I hadn't realized how close I was.

Wow! There's the cinema! I remember going there with my parents and munching Maltesers in the plush maroon seats. We saw *Jungle Book*, and for ages after that, Dad and I would sing the songs together. There's the garage on the corner where they fixed a flat tyre after Mum had reversed into a kerb too hard. Past the row of cottages standing slightly back from the road. And then a tall white house with very high chimneys, surveying it all, like a queen.

Tall Chimneys.

My chest caves in. The magnolia tree has gone.

I'd forgotten it had been there at all until I am reminded by its stark absence. Instead, there's a gravel drive with plenty of parking space. No cars are there. But what do I expect?

I fumble in my bag for the key. The police had given it to me after forensics had finished with the contents of the farmhouse. The fob has TALL CHIMNEYS clearly written on it in my mother's handwriting.

Tears mist my eyes, making it difficult to turn the key in the lock.

'You can do this,' I say to myself. 'Just pretend it's all right.'

I'm in.

Childish memories usually make things much bigger than they really are. But not now. The hall is just as spacious and bright and airy as I remember. The stairs rise through three levels in a gracious Regency spiral above me.

Some of my father's pictures have gone from the walls, leaving only hooks and a dusty outline. Had Duncan persuaded my mother to move them, or even sell them? He was always jealous of our past.

There's a faint whiff of damp and a stale smell – the type you get when a house hasn't been lived in for a while. I open the windows for fresh air and throw the curtains wide (some are closed as though it is night).

Then something amazing happens as the light streams in from the neighbouring house, bathing the side of my face with warmth.

I feel at peace.

All I have to do is lie low. Keep quiet.

Just as Martin had told me to.

4

I wander from room to room.

There are lines of dust on the picture rails and the panels in the doors. The beds are stripped bare. In one of the bathrooms there's a half-empty bottle of green liquid with a label that promises to soothe aching limbs.

There's an Aga in the kitchen but, of course, it's cold to the touch. I've no idea how to light it. I can only vaguely remember how to cook on it. When I open one of the cupboards, I find a not-very-clean-looking sandwich toastie maker. Without a plug. The panel below the cupboard falls out onto the floor. I push it back again, hoping it will stay in place. DIY is the last thing on my mind right now.

My mother had let the house to tenants over recent years, and the previous ones – a family who had come down here to escape the height of the pandemic in London – had left without paying the final lot of rent.

'I might spend some time there myself now,' Mum had said, only a few months before her death. 'Why don't you join me for a weekend?'

'After what happened there? I don't think so.'

She'd looked at me wide-eyed, as if in genuine astonishment. 'What do you mean?'

'You know,' I'd muttered.

'Don't bring that up again,' she'd snapped.

It was the last proper conversation I'd had with her, apart from that final night in the farmhouse. Of course, now I wish it had been different. How I miss her. How impossible it is to think she is gone. But the truth is that I lost my mother years ago, when she got together with Duncan.

What was it they'd said in his obituary in *The Times*? *An upright man with a distinguished military career.*

Upright? Hah!

I make my way past the door to the cellar, trying not to look at it. My heart beats and I feel sick. I can smell the apples my mother would store down there. Or is that my imagination? I've no intention of finding out.

Then I open the patio doors in the sitting room, which I remember my father putting in before he'd died. They're a bit stiff but the effect is instant. A lovely blast of spring air hits me.

That's better. It will clear the stuffiness. I shake out the dust from the cushions on a faded blue-and-pink sofa and take a seat. I don't remember it from before. Maybe Duncan had bought it with my mother. I get off it. I'd rather lie on the floor than touch anything that man had had anything to do with.

As soon as possible, I'll buy a new one. It still seems weird to think I am seriously rich. I could have more if I were to accept the financial offers I've received from several newspapers to tell my side of the story. But I don't need it. And even if I did, there's no way I'd risk it. At some point I'll have to think of ways to use this money to do some good. But it still won't take the guilt away. Or the fear.

I notice that the fridge is completely bare. My stomach is rumbling although I feel sick at the same time. Maybe I should force myself to eat something. There was a small supermarket that I'd seen on my way in. That definitely hadn't been there in my childhood. But I can't help hanging around for a bit, exploring more rooms. When I finally go out – it's almost evening now and dusk is beginning to fall – I notice that the door of the garage is open. It contains a rusty old bike with a wicker basket that has a silver flute-like whistle inside it. I test it out. It works. Then I wonder if I should have put it to my lips before cleaning it. The tyres are flat. Maybe I could get them fixed. I like the idea of cycling around town. Besides, it would be less obvious than my car.

As I go back into the driveway, I jump out of my skin. A woman is advancing towards me with a stick in her hand. 'Who are you?' says a sharp voice. 'And before you answer, don't try to pull any funny tricks. I've dealt with one burglar in the past and I can deal with another.'

'I'm not a burglar,' I bleat. 'I own this house.'

The stick drops to the ground. I take in this tall wiry woman in a yellow jacket, her eyes wide. 'Violet?'

I wince at the sound of my mother's name. 'I'm her daughter,' I stutter. 'Nancy.'

She comes towards me, crunching over the gravel.

'Of course you are. I'm so sorry. It's just that you look so much like her. I read about your poor mother in the paper.'

Hadn't everyone?

'I'm Vera, by the way. I live next door. I didn't mean to give you a fright but you can't be too careful. Those

tenants your mother had in, they weren't very responsible. Often left the front door open and had rubbish piling up at the back. You've never seen so many empty bottles. I'm Vera, by the way, did I say that? Vera Robertson. Devonian born and bred, I am. And proud of it. Are you moving in or are you just using the place for holidays?'

All this is said in such a rush that it feels like one long sentence.

'Probably the latter.'

I need to change the subject before she asks any more questions. 'I found an old bike in the garage.'

She chuckles. 'That belonged to your grandmother. I can still remember her tearing around on it.'

That must put Vera at about eighty then, maybe more. She doesn't look that old. I want to find out more about my grandmother Adeline. My mother never seemed to want to talk about her. All I know is she lost her husband in the war, and brought up Mum on her own. But now is not the time. I've got too many practical things to sort out.

'It's very rusty and the tyres are flat,' I say. 'Do you know of anyone who could fix it?'

'You want the bike-shop man in Temple Street. He'll sort you out. Tell him that Vera sent you.'

Temple Street. The name rings a bell, but I can't place it.

'Turn right at the cinema and then straight up for about ten minutes. You'll find it on the left-hand side. Or you can choose the scenic route and go through the Byes. It's a kind of community park that goes on for miles. Take a left at the second bridge, keep going and then turn left.'

'Thanks.'

'It's what neighbours are for, love, isn't it? 'Sides, it's nice to see the house occupied again.'

'I won't be here that long,' I say quickly.

She sniffs. 'Pity. Well, let me know if you need anything else.'

'Thank you. There is one thing. I don't want anyone to know I'm here.'

'That might be difficult. People here notice things. But I'm not going to the papers, if that's what you're asking. I'm not like that.'

Oh dear. Have I offended her?

'If you're staying for a while, you'll need to get that garden sorted out, sooner or later,' she adds in a brisk voice. 'The apple tree by the kitchen window needs pruning back. In fact, there's quite a lot I could tell you about your house when you have time.'

I watch Vera go back into her house, mulling over her words. '*Quite a lot I could tell you*'? Was she talking about the practical side or something else? Once more I feel that sense of unease.

I check that all the doors are locked – Vera's warning has reminded me that I need to be vigilant – and begin to walk towards the town. As I do so, my phone rings. Alex again.

I have a flash of his kind smile. The warmth of his arms around me.

But it's no good. I don't deserve him.

I press Decline.

As I do so, I have a sudden yearning to see the sea, even though I'm hungry.

'Can you hear it?' my father would say whenever we got close.

'Hear what?' my mother would ask teasingly.

'The waves!' I'd call out from the back.

It was part of our holiday ritual. The exchange we always had. I'd buried it for all these years but now the longing is overtaking me. I change direction and run back towards the hump-back bridge that Martin and I used to lean over, playing pooh sticks even when we were teenagers. Right and over the ford – still the same too, thank goodness – and on through a playground that hadn't been there before.

Up to the promenade by the lifeboat station. The doors are shut. There's an emergency number on the front. And there it is. The sea. The waves are choppy. The sun has not quite set but the moon is coming up. I love it when they share the sky like that. A few evening dog-walkers pass one another on the shingle. But the music is the same. Sea music. That's what Dad had called the sound of the waves. Once more I feel that sense of peace I'd felt earlier in the house.

After a while, I walk back through the town. There's the department store that I remember from my childhood. (The clothes in the window look stylish and very chic.) The old bookshop is still there, and a new one too.

And look! The museum! My father often used to take me there when I was a little girl. 'See this?' he would say. 'That's a mammoth tooth from thousands of years ago! Over there is an old gramophone player from the 1920s. History is a wonderful thing, Nancy. Never forget it. It can help us make sense of the present.'

'Evening,' says someone.

I jump. Have I been recognized? A man with a walking

stick nods as he limps past. Then I remember that everyone says 'hello' to strangers here.

At the supermarket, I buy a loaf of bread and a tin of tomato soup. Easy comfort food. I choose the self-service checkout. Keep my head down. Back to the house. It seems even colder than when I'd come in. A sharp shot of fear passes through me as I see why. The patio doors are open. But I'd shut them, hadn't I?

Yet what if I hadn't? My memory is usually good. But since the murder, I keep forgetting the simplest things. Still, it's possible they might have blown open since there's no lock and the doors are rotten.

Even though I know I'm probably being silly, I go round the house, searching for an intruder. Under the beds. Behind the curtains. In some of the wardrobes.

'Let's play hide and seek,' Martin used to say when we were younger. And I agreed, as I'd agreed to so much else he suggested, because he was older. So I 'had to do' as he said. (His words.) Once he freaked us all out by hiding at the bottom of the garden instead of in the house. We formed a search party for him. He was totally unrepentant.

No one is here. No photographer lurking, ready to leap out and demand 'your account of the events'. It must have been me who left the doors open. I have to be more careful. And not just with locking up.

I have two things left to do now. First, get the duvet out from the car – at least I'd had the presence of mind to bring that. In the morning, I'd sort out linen from somewhere.

And the second.

I open my overnight bag and take out the knife. Its steel flashes in the moonlight streaming in through the bedroom window.

My mind shoots back to a different blade I'd been holding, seconds before the police had kicked in the door.

I put it under the bed.

Tomorrow I'll find a safer hiding place.

5

I wake with a start at 4.12 a.m. after one of my nightmares.

I'm in a car, hurtling over the ice with tyres skidding, on the way to the farmhouse. Then suddenly I'm in the undertaker's looking down at my mother's face. In my dream, I know it's my mother, although it doesn't look anything like her. Her jaw has dropped, distorting her features as if she is an overblown image in a fairground mirror. Suddenly she sits up and looks at me. 'Don't say anything to upset him,' she whispers. 'Or we'll all die.'

Then I'm back in the farmhouse. My stepfather is swigging out of a giant whisky bottle that towers over him. Martin is standing next to him, dressed as a clown with huge red lips. He opens his mouth and knives come hurting out. They hit the floor and then bounce on the ceiling. One of them flies towards me. I scream with terror.

That's when I open my eyes.

Dimly aware that I am somewhere other than at home in my London flat, I fall back on my pillows. The next thing I know, the sun is streaming in through the window where the curtains don't quite meet. Where am I?

Then I remember. Tall Chimneys. That feeling of peace from yesterday has gone. I'm suddenly scared.

But I'm so exhausted from yesterday that I drift in and out of sleep for a bit. At some point, I wake again, aware it's much later. Getting up, I look through the window at

the flat line dividing the sea from the sky. In between are rooftops with grey slate, red tiles, tall chimneys like the ones this house was named after and short squat ones. Above, I can hear seagulls screaming. It's a far cry from London, with its bustling streets full of courier bikes and people shouting at each other.

I wish I was still there. If I close my eyes, I can pretend it's a normal day. I am going to the office. No one has died.

But my trick of pretending isn't working right now. Maybe it's because of this old childhood room of mine where I would lie in bed and listen to my mother and Duncan arguing, and then making sounds that I couldn't interpret at that age.

'You don't have to sleep here,' I remind myself. The house is mine now. I can do what I like. So I gather my things and go up to the second floor where there's a twin-bedded room which had been used for storage when we came here on holiday. From the beautiful window that drops down to just above floor level there's a view over the back garden. I can see a pink rose that is just coming into flower, even though it's only March. It feels safer up here, especially after finding the patio door open last night.

I go to put my things in the built-in wardrobe. I open it to find the 'back' is actually the wall. As I put in my folded clothes I look a bit closer. Someone has written something there.

Maisie was here. SO WAS SHIRLEY! 8 October 1941

I can't believe I've never noticed this before. Who were they? That year, 1941, was not long after the start of the

Second World War, wasn't it? It seems extraordinary to think of other people living in this house at what must have been a terrifying and uncertain time. It puts my own problems into perspective. Well, some of them.

I go back to my old bedroom and retrieve the knife that I'd hidden under the bed last night. Carefully holding it as I go downstairs, I use my other hand to grip the mahogany bannister that goes round and round, down and down. I'd forgotten how high the house is. 'Never lean over the staircase,' my father had warned me when I was young. 'It was built during a time when there weren't the safety regulations of today.'

'Great exercise!' I remember my mother saying. 'You can't put on weight when you're always running up and down three floors!'

My mother had been obsessed with weight. She wasn't fat – just 'rounded'. My grandmother had apparently been fanatical about feeding her up to compensate for the rationing and general deprivation when she had been young. 'I didn't see a banana until I was five!' my mother had told me. 'Imagine that!'

I couldn't. Mum had been middle-aged when I was born. The Second World War was like ancient history to me.

I hide the knife in the kitchen behind the loose panel I'd dislodged earlier. It gives me some comfort to know it's there.

My stomach is rumbling with hunger, even though I feel sick. I fiddle with the controls of the Aga, hoping to make some porridge, but nothing happens. Looks like it's bread again.

I take my breakfast into the garden – still in my pyjamas – and sit at the wooden table on the patio. It's pretty weather-worn. Daffodils are everywhere. So is the ivy and the bindweed wrapping itself round that early rose, climbing up the brick wall.

Good. Gardening will keep me busy, even though I'm no expert. I wander to the bottom, where there are some raised beds with overgrown vegetables. Then I notice that bits of chicken wire are poking up, and some planks of wood. I heave them aside and gasp. There's a space below that could take six or so people. It reminds me of a picture I'd seen in a supplement recently about air-raid shelters.

I ease myself down – still in my pyjamas. The air is damp and makes me sneeze. The walls are lined with metal sheets and planks of wood. There are noughts and crosses games scored into it. Someone has written something too. *There is nothing to fear in life but fear itself.*

It feels like a personal message. But what about the people who had hidden here? How must they have felt, while bombs dropped around them? What courage that must have taken.

I clamber out, dust myself down and head back to the house to check my phone, which I'd left in the kitchen. Nothing. No messages, not even from Alex. No emails apart from the usual ones that don't matter.

Then I comfort myself with the detective inspector's words: 'When the next big story comes along, they'll leave you alone. You just have to lie low until then.'

Right now, that seems impossible. Everyone at work knows. All my friends, though the only one of them who

really matters to me is Claire. She had lived on our road and virtually grown up with me. She'd known what it was like when Dad had died. When Mum had married Duncan. When I'd cancelled my wedding after my mother had died.

I ought to text her. I do. *Am OK. Just hiding until it blows over.*

Her reply comes back almost instantly.

Where are you?

'Don't tell anyone,' the DI had advised.

But Claire is different. We tell each other everything. Almost everything.

Remember those bikinis? I type back.

Mum had bought them for us when Claire first came on holiday with us. We were twelve at the time. The summer had been scorching. We shared my bedroom and nudged each other if we walked past a boy in the street. Any boy. It didn't matter. All we wanted was to actually meet one and fall in love. How we envied the teenagers who had barbecues on the beach and seemed to know each other!

Then Mum bought us matching bikinis. They were candy-pink. Striped. We lay on the beach sunbathing and two boys came up to chat. We barely got beyond the exchanging names stage, but it didn't matter. When you went to an all-girls' school, this was a big deal.

You're in Devon? comes back the reply, bringing me back to the present.

Don't tell anyone, I tap back.

Course not. Take care.

How's the bump? I add.

Claire is heavily pregnant. If she wasn't my best friend, I'd feel jealous. She has everything I've always wanted.

'*Great. She can't wait to meet you.*'

If the baby arrives soon, sod the press, I'll drive straight back to London to meet her. I can't miss the most important time in my best friend's life.

Then I realize something so obvious that I can't believe I haven't thought of it before. My car! Someone might have taken a note of the number plate before I left. It might have been recognized on the motorway.

My heart starts to beat furiously. My blue Mini has been sitting on the driveway since I arrived. Anyone looking for me could have seen it.

Swiftly I run outside, still in my pyjamas, and drive it into the old-fashioned garage. There's not a lot of space and I have to wheel out the old bike to make room. Duncan never used it because his cars were too flash and wide. A cobweb brushes against me as I close the door.

I remember Vera's advice about the bike shop. After getting dressed, I push it up the narrow lanes to Temple Street, glancing over my shoulder every now and then.

There's a woman behind me, carrying a shopping bag. 'Morning, love,' she says.

Is she being chummy or has she recognized me? I walk on faster, gasping a silent sigh of relief when I get to the bike shop.

The owner has a quietly reassuring manner. 'This is rather special,' he says, running an eye over the markings on the frame. 'One of the last of its kind made before the war, if I'm not mistaken. Give me a couple of days and I'll make it roadworthy. Oh and don't forget the whistle in the basket.'

Since it all happened, I keep overlooking things. Brain fog or guilt? Who knows.

I walk back into town – this time through the Byes. I'd forgotten how beautiful it was: a series of green glades with huge trees, many of which must have been planted years ago. There's also a line of allotments with quite a few people working away. My mother had grown vegetables at the farmhouse. It seems like a dream now.

There's water flooding the path ahead. 'Don't slip, love,' says someone walking past. 'One of the pipes is leaking. We're waiting for the council to come.'

People are so caring here!

Making my way down the high street, I spot several TO LET shop signs that I hadn't noticed on my walk last night. I wonder if they're casualties of the last few years.

Then I stop to take in the sea. Today, it looks grey and uninviting – very different from the memories of my youth. Different, too, from the turquoise-blue waters of Greece, where Alex and I had gone on holiday last year. If only I'd known then what was going to happen . . .

Turning back sharply, I go into the department store opposite the fish market. 'Good morning,' says a lovely assistant with a chignon as I weave my way through the cosmetic and fragrance department. The smell is so beautiful here that it's like walking into a florist's. The bedding section is on the first floor. It feels wonderfully normal after what I've been through. Safe. Reassuring. I think of the busy shops in London. Part of me feels slightly nostalgic for the buzz. The other part of me is comforted by the slower pace here – and relieved to be out of sight.

I pick up a white broderie anglaise duvet cover. It reminds me of one that my mother used to have.

Instantly I see her body covered in blood in the farmhouse kitchen.

I put it down quickly and pick up a primrose yellow design instead. I wait for the blood. But it doesn't come. Emboldened, I buy two pillows.

I'm walking down the left-hand side of the street now – *my* street, although it feels weird to say that – past a terrace of elegant Regency houses. I'm about to cross over when a voice calls out.

'Heard you just moved in! Welcome!'

It's a cheery woman of about my age with a wide smile. She's in a wetsuit and her red hair is damp, as if she has just stepped out of the sea. 'I'm Jasmine.'

'I'm Nancy,' I say. Instantly, I wish I hadn't given out my name. Then again, if I'm going to be living here for a bit, it's only practical, isn't it? Unless I pretend to be someone else. And I'm tired of that.

She beams. 'Where've you come from?'

'London.'

'The bright lights, eh? I lived in Tooting once. Was that near you?'

'Not far,' I say. It's a lie but I don't want to go into details. Has she read about my family? One of the earlier headlines comes into my head: *Stepson arrested after art millionairess hacked to death.*

'What do you do?'

If it wasn't for her friendly manner, this might sound nosy. But somehow it doesn't.

'Actually I work as a copywriter at an advertising agency, but I'm having some time off at the moment,' I say.

'Cool. So do you come up with slogans and stuff?'

I feel a bit embarrassed, as I always do when someone asks this. 'I try to.'

'We ought to get together. Are you here on your own?'

'Yes.'

'Well, come round for a glass of wine sometime.'

Actually, I haven't drunk a drop of alcohol since the night it happened. But I don't want to go into that now.

'By the way,' she adds, 'you've just missed someone.'

My skin prickles.

'Sorry?'

'I was weeding my garden out front and this bloke came over to ask if I'd seen you. Couldn't get a reply when he knocked on the door apparently.'

I can feel my heart thudding in my throat.

'Did he leave his name?'

'No. But I saw him put a message through the door. Not bad looking!' She grins. 'Anyway, I'd better get going. I need to get to work.'

I mumble my thanks and fumble for my house keys, dropping all my shopping on the step. Ignoring it, I open the lock.

There's a business card on the mat. My mouth dries. It carries the name of a well-known newspaper that thrives on gossip. On the back is a scrawled note.

What's your side of the story, Nancy? Ring soon. We'll make it worth your while!

They've found me.

6

When I'm stressed, I clean. It helps me pretend that I'm in control of my life.

I'd scrubbed the flat from top to bottom when I'd told Alex that I couldn't marry him. I'd scrubbed every square inch of the farmhouse after forensics had left. It had been hard to see through my tears but still I worked until every surface was clean. When the first viewer came, the place was like something out of a glossy magazine. That's not why it sold so fast, of course.

'You'd be amazed at the number of people who want to buy houses where a murder has been committed,' said the young estate agent jauntily.

And now I'm scrubbing Tall Chimneys from bottom to top, apart from the cellar and one other room that I can't bring myself to go into. It's filthy with neglect but it's the perfect distraction from the fact that the press have found me.

I find an old bucket and a wire brush in a closet off the kitchen and set to work on the floor tiles. There's a soft broom for the wooden floors and a vacuum cleaner, which hasn't been emptied. When I work out how to change the bag and click it back together again, it still doesn't do the job. So I get down on my hands and knees to use the dustpan and brush instead.

After that, I wash and dust every surface, and only then

do I realize that I should have done it the other way round because the muck has dropped off onto the floor.

So I wash and sweep all over again. As I do so, a memory comes into my head for no obvious reason. Martin and I are going swimming. I must have been about thirteen: 'Let me carry that for you,' he says, taking my beach bag as we walk down from Tall Chimneys towards the sea. His hand brushes mine. Of course it is an accident. But I move away.

I scrub the floor even harder to wipe him out. And then I go outside with the refuse bags (including the torn-up business card offering me untold wealth) to the dustbins. That's when I find three cars parked on the drive outside.

'Nancy!' calls out a woman in a black quilted coat. Her jolly 'How are you?' tone makes me think for a moment that I must know her. Then I spot the notebook in her hand.

'Nancy!' calls a man leaping out from the car next to her. 'We're writing a piece on family massacres and the effect on the survivors. It will help others in the same situation. It must have been awful to witness your mother's throat being cut. Can you give them any advice?'

'Nancy,' says another woman, getting out of the third car. 'I'd like to give you these, along with our condolences.' She thrusts a massive bouquet of lilies into my hand. 'I'm from the women's page of . . .'

She names a daily paper that I don't read.

'We wondered if you'd like to write us a piece about step-relations and . . .'

No. *No*. NO.

'Just go away. Please. All of you.'

A seagull screams overhead, echoing my panic.