

NOWHERE IS SAFE...

Kevin Brooks

'Unputdownable
and riveting'
MO HAYDER

A Dance of Ghosts

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About the Book

My name is John Craine and I am trying to forget ...

PI John Craine is struggling to cope with the weight of his past. Sixteen years ago his wife, Stacy, was brutally murdered. Craine found her body in their bed. And since then, to escape the pain and the unanswered questions, he has buried himself in work by day, and whisky by night.

But one phone call changes everything. The mother of missing young woman Anna Gerrish calls on his services, and Craine soon finds himself at the centre of a sinister web of corruption and lies that leads back into the murky waters of the past – and to the night that Craine has spent over a decade trying to forget. As he delves deeper and deeper into the case everything gets increasingly, terrifyingly, personal. And it's down to Craine to stop history from repeating itself ...

About the Author

Kevin Brooks has written nine children's novels and has won several awards including the Canongate Prize for New Writing, Branford Boase Award, Kingston Youth Book Award, North East Book Award, Deutschen Jugendliteraturpreis Jury Prize, Buxtehude Bulle and the Golden Bookworm. *A Dance of Ghosts* is his first adult novel. He lives in North Yorkshire with his wife, Susan.

A Dance of Ghosts

Kevin
Brooks



arrow books

For my mother, Marion Phyllis Brooks
18 September 1936 – 1 March 2010

∞

Sorry you never got to read it, Mum

I will dance
The dance of dying days
And sleeping life.

I will dance
In cold, dead leaves
A bending, whirling human flame.

I will dance
As the Horned God rides
Across the skies.

I will dance
To the music of His hounds
Running, baying in chorus.

I will dance
With the ghosts of those
Gone before.

I will dance
Between the sleep of life
And the dream of death.

I will dance
On Samhain's dusky eye,
I will dance.

Karen Bergquist Dezoma, 'An Autumn Chant'

13 August 1993. Friday afternoon, 5.15. It's another sweltering hot day, and I'm driving home from work. The car radio is playing - 'Young At Heart'. I can feel the thin cloth of my cheap white shirt sticking to the stale sweat of my skin. My hands are moist on the steering wheel. The car windows are open and I can smell the stink of traffic and the heat of the baking streets. People are drinking outside pubs, getting ready for a hot night out. The sound of laughter and clinking glasses passes by in the stifling air.

I'm tired.

My head is aching.

But I'm going home now.

I'm happy.

I'm looking forward to the weekend. Two whole days with Stacy. No going to work, no getting up in the morning and putting on a cheap white shirt ... just me and Stacy and a weekend of blue summer skies.

We can talk about the baby.

We can think some more about names.

We can slide away into our own perfect world and dream about what's to come.

At 5.30 I pull up outside our house, park the car, and turn off the engine. I pick up my jacket from the back seat, shut the windows, get out of the car, and lock it. I walk along the pavement and turn right, through the gate, and head up the garden path. Jangling my keys and humming quietly to myself, I skip up the front step and unlock the door.

I'm as happy as I'm ever going to be.

Inside the house, I drop my keys on the hall table and call out, 'Stacy! It's me ... Stacy?'

There's no reply.

PART ONE

∞

WEDNESDAY 6 OCTOBER – FRIDAY 8 OCTOBER
2010

I was watching a man called Preston Elliot when I got the phone call that brought the ghosts back into my life. Elliot was nothing, just a cheapskate Essex Boy trying to make some easy money on the sly. He'd been involved in a minor accident at work which he claimed had resulted in a severe and ongoing back injury that supposedly prevented him from doing just about anything - walking, driving, working, sleeping. He was currently on long-term sick leave and had recently put in a compensation claim against his employers, an industrial cleaning business called StayBright. StayBright's insurance manager had hired an investigation company called Mercer Associates to look into the claim, and Mercer had subcontracted the case to me.

So there I was, sitting in my car on a cold and rainy October morning, trying to stay awake while I gathered evidence against a man called Preston Elliot. Like most of the work I do, it wasn't particularly demanding. I'd taken the case on Monday, started my initial surveillance on Tuesday, and this morning I'd got up early and followed Elliot from his low-rise council flat to a run-down terraced house in a scratty little side street on the south side of town. Two other men had been waiting for him in a white Transit van outside the house - a shortish ginger guy in a tartan jacket, and a lank-haired teenager with a pock-marked face - and for the last hour or so I'd been watching all three of them as they trudged in and out of the house, loading up a skip with pieces of old furniture and rusty radiators. I guessed they were gutting the place in

preparation for some kind of renovation work – not that it made any difference to me what they were doing.

All I needed to know was that Preston Elliot was fit enough to drive, fit enough to walk, fit enough to spend all morning hefting tables and wardrobes and rolls of old carpet out of a house and into a skip.

I had plenty of video footage. I'd filmed him leaving his house that morning, walking without any obvious pain or discomfort. I'd filmed him getting into his car and driving across town. And right now I was filming him as he struggled through the rain carrying a stained old mattress on his back.

I checked my watch and clicked on my digital voice recorder. '10.47 a.m.,' I said into the the recorder. 'Subject continues to work at the house. Surveillance ends.' I turned off the voice recorder, clicked off the camcorder ...

And that was when my mobile rang.

There was no sense of foreboding to the sound of the ringtone, nothing to suggest that this was a moment that might return to haunt me, or that in days to come I'd wonder what would have happened if I hadn't answered my phone that morning ...

No ... there was nothing like that at all.

My mobile just rang. And I just took it out of my pocket, checked the caller ID, saw that it was Ada, my secretary, and answered it.

'Hey, Ada.'

'Where are you?' she said.

'Croke Street, down by the football ground. I'm just finishing up on the StayBright thing –'

'Are you coming back to the office?'

'Yeah.'

'How long will you be?'

'I don't know. Why?'

'You've got a client.'

'A client?'

'Yeah, you know ... someone who pays you to work for them.'

'You're a funny woman, Ada.'

'I know. Anyway, she's here, in the office.'

'What does she want?'

'I don't know, she won't tell me anything. She wants to talk to you. Do you want her to come back later, or should I tell her to wait?'

'Yeah, ask her to wait. I won't be ... hold on a minute.'

While I'd been talking to Ada, the ginger man in the tartan jacket had come out of the house, got into the Transit, and reversed it across the road. At first, I'd just assumed that he was driving off somewhere – maybe to get some cigarettes or something – but when he stopped in the middle of the street and turned off the engine, and when I saw Preston Elliot coming out of the house and start walking towards me with a ball-peen hammer in his hand, it was pretty obvious that I'd been spotted. And that Elliot was about to do something about it.

'John ...?' I heard Ada saying. 'Are you still there?'

Elliot wasn't much to look at. A squitty little man, he had a small head, cropped hair and a pair of glasses that didn't seem to go with his face, and up until then I hadn't really considered him to be any kind of a threat. But now ... well, now he had a ball-peen hammer in his hand, and he was heading straight for me, and the look in his eyes made me realise – far too late – that he was one of those runty little men who'll pick a fight at the drop of a hat just to prove that size doesn't matter.

'Shit,' I muttered, glancing quickly over my shoulder.

'John?' Ada said. 'John? What's going on?'

'I'll call you back in a minute,' I told her, ending the call.

My options, I realised, were fairly limited. I could stay where I was and try to bluff it out – pretending to be an estate agent was my usual cover in this kind of situation –

or I could start the car and get the hell out of there as fast as I could.

I looked at Elliot again. He was about ten metres away from me now, and from the look on his face – a mixture of pent-up aggression and mindless resolve – I didn't think he'd go for the estate-agent bluff. But the road up ahead was blocked by the Transit van, and there were cars parked on either side of the street, making it far too narrow for a quick U-turn, so the only way out was by reversing all the way back along the street. And I was shit at reversing at the best of times.

'Ah, fuck it,' I said, sitting back in the seat and lighting a cigarette.

As Elliot drew level with the car, I was mentally setting the odds as to what he was going to do. Evens, he'd just stand there waving the hammer around, shouting and cursing at me from the pavement; 2-1, he'd try to yank the door open; and 3-1, he'd give the car a whack or two with the hammer, probably going for the bonnet or the door.

As it turned out, I was wrong on all counts.

He just walked up to the side of the car, stopped by the door and stared at me for a moment or two, and then – with an air of almost admirable nonchalance – he swung the hammer and smashed it into the side window. There was a loud *CRACK!* as the window shattered, showering my face with chunks of safety glass, and then all at once the car seemed to explode in a fury of noise and chaos. The wind came gusting in, blowing loose papers all over the place; the cold rain hissed in through the broken window, stinging the side of my face; and Preston Elliot's raging voice bellowed in my ear.

'I KNOW WHAT YOU'RE FUCKING DOING, YOU NOSY FUCKING CUNT! WHAT DO YOU THINK I AM? YOU THINK I'M FUCKING STUPID? HERE, GIVE US THAT FUCKING THING ...!'

‘That fucking thing’ was my camcorder, and as he reached in and grabbed it off the ledge above the dashboard, I tried to snatch it back off him. But he was too quick and too strong for me, and before I could do anything else to stop him, he’d yanked the camera out of the car and thrown it down on the rain-sodden pavement. As I heard the expensive crack of shattering metal and plastic, my immediate thought was, ‘Shit, there goes the best part of a grand.’ But Elliot hadn’t finished yet. And as he started pounding away at the camcorder with his hammer – *smack, smack, smack* – smashing it into a thousand little pieces, I felt something flash through me, some kind of unfamiliar passion ...

I still don’t know what it was.

I definitely wasn’t angry. Or aggrieved. And I wasn’t even that bothered about the camcorder. It was just a thing ... a piece of equipment. It didn’t *mean* anything to me. And besides, I knew I’d probably claim the cost of it back from StayBright’s insurers anyway. But there was just something about the way Elliot was smashing it up that galled me ... it *offended* me. The sheer stupidity of it, the pointlessness, the unnecessary level of violence ...

Whatever it was, I found myself getting out of the car and approaching Elliot as he leaned down again and gave what was left of the camcorder another hefty thump with his hammer, and before I really knew what I was doing, I heard myself saying to him, ‘Hey, come on, Preston ... there’s no need for that ...’

He froze in mid-hammer swing, stayed perfectly still for a moment, then slowly turned to face me. His staring eyes reminded me, oddly, of the eyes of a porcelain donkey that my mother used to keep on the mantelpiece.

I gave Elliot my best placatory smile, holding up my hands to let him know that I wasn’t a threat, and I was just about to say something else to try to calm him down, when all of a sudden he stepped towards me and said, ‘I’ll give

you “there’s no fucking need for that.” And then he swung the hammer at me.

I moved quickly enough to avoid the worst of the impact, and thankfully Elliot had gone for me with the handle of the hammer instead of the business end, but it still caught me a glancing blow on the side of my face, and although it didn’t really hurt that much, it was enough to send me staggering back against the car.

And that was enough for me. Holding the side of my face, I just stood there in the rain, leaning against the car, and watched in resigned silence as Elliot went back to the remains of the smashed-up camcorder and began stomping the broken pieces into the ground.

Over at the house, his two colleagues were watching him as well, both of them standing in the doorway, smoking cigarettes, neither of them showing much interest. I could see other spectators as well – residents watching from their windows, little kids on bikes pointing and laughing ... an old man with an old dog, the old man disdainfully shaking his head – this kind of thing never happened on the street in *his* day – while the old dog impassively lifted its leg against the back wheel of a parked car. They were all just watching. No one wanted to get involved. It was just something to look at, that was all: a small-headed man angrily smashing a camcorder to pieces in the rain.

It was something to talk about later on.

Eventually, after about a minute or so, Elliot either ran out of energy or decided that he’d done enough damage, and after a final cursory kick at the shattered mess on the ground, he straightened up, took a couple of deep breaths, and turned to me.

‘All right ...’ he said, breathing heavily. ‘Now you can fuck off. And if I ever catch you following me again, if I ever see your fucking face *anywhere*, it won’t be bits of your camcorder in the gutter, it’ll be bits of your fucking brain. D’you understand me?’

‘Yeah,’ I said. ‘I understand.’

‘You’d fucking better.’

I smiled at him.

I thought for a moment he was going to hit me again, but all he did was stare at me for a couple of seconds, the hammer swinging gently in his hands, then he spat on the ground, wiped his mouth, and began walking back to the house.

I watched him all the way.

I watched his colleagues grinning at him and patting him on the shoulder, I watched him light a cigarette, and then I watched them all get into the Transit van and drive off slowly down the street. I waited until they’d turned the corner at the end of the road, waited a little more, and only then did I fetch an empty carrier bag from the back of my car, get down on my knees, and start gathering up all the bits of smashed-up camcorder from the ground.

I found the memory card in a shallow brown puddle. It was soaking wet, of course, and there was a bit of hammer damage to the top left corner, but apart from that it didn’t look too bad. There was a chance it might still work. And if it did, Preston Elliot was fucked.

And if it didn’t ...?

Well, I could always get more evidence against him. Or someone else could. Or maybe no one would, and he’d get away with conning some money out of his employers. But in the end ... well, it didn’t really matter, did it? It didn’t *mean* anything.

Not to me, anyway.

Nothing means anything to me.

Not any more.

Back in the car, I put the carrier bag full of camcorder bits on the back seat, lit a cigarette, and checked myself out in

the rear-view mirror. There was a small cut above my right eye where a bit of broken safety glass had nicked me, and the side of my face was marked with a raised red welt from the hammer handle. Blood was running from the cut, mingling with the sheen of rain on my face, and there were pale pink spots on my shirt collar. As I took a tissue from the glove compartment and started cleaning myself up, my mobile rang again. I gave my face another wipe, rested the cigarette in the ashtray, and put the call on speaker.

‘Hi, Ada.’

‘John?’

‘Yeah, sorry about that, I got a bit –’

‘What the hell’s going on?’ she interrupted. ‘Are you all right?’

‘Yeah, I’m fine. It was nothing –’

‘It didn’t *sound* like nothing.’

I picked up my cigarette and took a long drag. ‘Really,’ I said. ‘Everything’s fine. I’ll tell you all about it when I get back.’

‘Are you coming back now?’

‘Yeah ... is the client still there?’

‘Yes.’

‘OK. Tell her I’ll be there in about fifteen minutes. And Ada?’

‘What?’

‘Be nice to her, all right? Talk to her. Make her a cup of tea or something ... are you listening?’

‘Yeah,’ she drawled. ‘I’m listening. Be nice, talk to her, cup of tea ... anything else?’

‘Try not to fart too much.’

She laughed.

I ended the call, dropped my cigarette out of the window, and drove off into the rain.

The town of Hey is pretty much the same as any other medium-sized town in the south-east of England. It's got a town centre, housing estates, supermarkets, a bypass, outlying villages, a river, a park, pubs, clubs, fights, drugs ... it's got 200,000 people living 200,000 lives, and it's got no more goodness and no less shit than any other place I've ever been to.

It's Any Town, Anywhere.

It's Hey, Essex, England.

It's where I live.

It's where I come from.

My office is situated on the second floor of a three-storey building at the lower end of Wyre Street in the middle of the town centre. Wyre Street is a narrow pedestrianised lane that runs parallel to the High Street. It's mainly populated with small businesses, like mine, and independent shops that can't afford to be located in the High Street: hippy shops, comic-books shops, skateboard shops, candle shops ... the kind of shops that don't make much money and never last more than a year or two.

It's OK.

It's a street.

It's where I work from.

*

It was getting on for midday by the time I got back to town. I left my car in the usual place - a council car park in the old market square - and walked up the steep stone steps that link the car park to Wyre Street. The streets were as quiet as you'd expect on a rainy Wednesday lunchtime, and

most of the people I passed were too busy keeping themselves out of the rain to pay any attention to me, but I still got a few wary looks as I made my way back to the office. It was only to be expected. I'd been driving in the rain with no side window, so I was soaking wet and dishevelled. My face was still bleeding, the welt from the hammer blow had swollen up and was starting to turn blue, and I was carrying a manky old carrier bag filled with smashed-up bits of camcorder.

If I'd seen myself in the street, I probably would have been a bit wary too.

When I reached the office building, the front door was open and George Salvini was lounging against the porch wall smoking a cigarette. A middle-aged man, and always impeccably dressed, George runs an accountancy business from an office on the ground floor.

'Hello, John,' he said, grinning at my appearance. 'You're looking very gorgeous today.'

'Thanks, George,' I said, nodding at him as I went past into the corridor and started climbing the stairs.

The second floor of the building is all mine. It has a corridor with a cinnamon-coloured carpet, a toilet with a sink and hot water, and a window that looks out onto the alley at the back of the building. The door to the office has a pebbled glass panel lettered in faded black paint - *John Craine Investigations* - and I can still remember the childish kick of pride and excitement I used to get whenever I saw those three simple words: *John Craine Investigations*. But that's all it is now - a memory, as faded as the paintwork on the glass. And as I opened the door and went in that day, I didn't feel anything at all. No kick, no pride, no excitement. I was a private investigator. It was a job, that's all. It paid the bills.

I shut the door behind me and looked over at Ada. She was sitting at her desk across the room, almost hidden behind a wall of papers and box files and computer stuff -

monitor, printer, scanner. Ada was over sixty now, but she still looked the same as she'd always looked: overweight, tired, dressed like a bag lady. Today she was wearing a scratty old cardigan over an XXL Nirvana T-shirt, and although I couldn't see her feet, I knew that she'd be wearing her foul-smelling old furry slippers.

I smiled at her.

'Jesus *Christ*, John!' she said, getting up from her desk. 'What the fuck happened to you?'

'It's all right,' I told her. 'Honestly, it looks a lot worse than it is ...'

'I *knew* something had happened,' she said, coming over to me and peering closely at my face. 'I just knew it.' She took out a tissue, spat on it, and started dabbing at my wounds.

'Please, Ada,' I said, gently easing her away. 'It's OK ... really.'

'Who did it?' she asked.

'Preston Elliot. You know, the StayBright insurance case?'

She frowned. 'I thought that was just routine surveillance.'

'Yeah, it was. It just got a bit out of hand, that's all.'

She stared at me. 'A bit out of hand?'

I held up the carrier bag and shook it. 'We need a new camcorder.'

'Shit,' she said. 'Do you know how much that cost?'

I took the damaged memory card from my pocket and passed it to her. 'Can you see if this still works?'

'I doubt if it will,' she said, taking it from me and studying it. 'But I'll give it a go.' She looked at me again. 'Are you sure you're all right? That lump on your face doesn't look too good.'

'Yeah, I'm fine,' I said, gazing round the office. It looked the same as ever: Ada's desk, a window, a couple of easy chairs against the wall, a fridge, filing cabinet, stationery

cupboard. And over to the right, the connecting door to my private office.

'Is she in there?' I said to Ada.

'Who?'

'The client,' I sighed. 'The woman who's been waiting to see me. Remember? The one I asked you to be nice to?'

'Oh, right,' Ada said. 'Yeah, I thought she'd be more comfortable in there.'

'What's her name?'

Ada shook her head. 'She didn't say.'

'Did you ask her?'

'I'm not your receptionist.'

'Yes, you are.'

She frowned at me again. 'I thought we agreed that my job title was administration manager?'

'Yeah, and the administration manager's responsibilities include secretarial work and receptionist duties.'

She grinned. 'Really?'

'Yeah, really,' I said, smiling back at her. 'It's a good job we don't get many face-to-face clients, isn't it?'

She shrugged. 'Well, you're not exactly in the ideal state for face-to-face meetings yourself at the moment, if you don't mind me saying.'

'I'm a private investigator,' I said. 'I'm *supposed* to look rough and mean.'

She snorted. 'You don't look rough and mean. You just look as if you've been beaten up, that's all. There's nothing remotely rough or mean about that. In fact, if anything -'

'Yeah, all right,' I said, looking at my watch. 'Do you want to go and tell our nameless client that I'll be with her in a minute, please?'

'OK.'

'I'm just going to clean up a bit first. Would you mind making us some coffee?'

'Coffee?'

'Yeah.' I gave her a look. 'Is that all right?'

She shrugged. 'I suppose so.'

'And could you call the garage too? My side window got smashed. I need someone to come round and fix it. The car's in the car park.'

She raised her eyebrows. 'Anything else?'

I smiled at her again, glancing down at the furry slippers on her feet. They were purple. And today she was wearing a matching purple crushed velvet miniskirt that was equally as old and threadbare as her slippers.

'Very nice,' I told her.

She smiled. 'You're too kind.'

'I know.'

I cleaned myself up as well as I could in the toilet along the corridor, then I towel-dried my hair, slicked it back with my fingers, and took a final look in the mirror. I wasn't exactly presentable, but I didn't look quite so much like a beaten-up wino in a cheap black suit any more.

The face in the mirror looked back at me for a moment, asking me why I was bothering with my appearance. *What's the point?* it said. *What do you care what you look like, or what anyone thinks of you? You don't really care if this woman in your office gives you a job or not, do you? So why are you even bothering?*

I didn't have an answer to that.

I sniffed, slicked back my hair again, and went back to the office.

She was sitting in the chair across from my desk, staring vacantly at a mobile phone in her lap. She had a thin and angular face, no make-up, and shortish silvery-grey hair. Her clothes were prim and cheap - a brown tweed coat over a pale blouse and a long shapeless skirt - and she wore the kind of glasses that teachers and librarians

usually favour – unnecessarily large, with a coloured plastic frame. I guessed she was about forty-five.

‘Sorry to keep you waiting,’ I said as I came in and shut the door. ‘I got held up with something.’

She looked across at me, flashing a quick nervous smile, and I saw her take in the state of my face, but she didn’t say anything. She just tightened her smile for a moment, then leaned down and put the mobile away in her handbag.

I went over to my desk. ‘I’m afraid my secretary didn’t get your name.’

‘It’s Mrs Gerrish,’ she said. ‘Helen Gerrish.’

‘John Craine,’ I said, offering my hand. ‘Pleased to meet you, Mrs Gerrish.’

She gave me that tight little smile again and shook my hand. Well, I say she *shook* my hand – it was actually no more than the briefest brush of her fingertips. It felt like the frightened touch of a very frail and very cold child.

As I sat down at my desk, I was trying to remember where I’d heard her name before. Gerrish ... Gerrish ... it definitely rang a bell, but for the moment it just wouldn’t come to me.

‘So, Mrs Gerrish,’ I said. ‘What can I do for you?’

She hesitated for a moment, looking down at her hands in her lap, and then – without looking up – she said, ‘It’s my daughter ... Anna. She’s missing.’

‘Anna?’

She nodded.

And now I remembered the name. It had been on the front page of all the local newspapers about a month ago, and maybe in one or two of the nationals too. Anna Gerrish, a woman in her early twenties, had gone missing after leaving work one night. She’d simply put on her coat, walked out of the door, and no one had seen or heard from her since.

‘Anna Gerrish ...’ I heard myself mutter.

‘I expect you read about it,’ Mrs Gerrish said.

‘Yes ... yes, I did.’ I looked at her. ‘How long has it been now?’

‘Four weeks and two days.’

‘Have the police made any progress?’

She let out a bitter little laugh. ‘Progress? No, the police haven’t made any *progress*. As far as I’m concerned, they haven’t done anything at *all*.’

‘I’m sure they’re doing their best –’

‘No, Mr Craine,’ she said firmly. ‘I don’t believe they are.’

‘Really? What makes you say that?’

She shrugged. ‘They haven’t found her, have they? They haven’t found *anything*. And they don’t even seem to be trying. They haven’t made a televised appeal or a reconstruction of her last known movements ... they haven’t done anything like that. And they keep telling me that this kind of thing happens all the time ... that if someone over eighteen *wants* to disappear without telling anyone, there’s very little they can do about it.’

‘Well,’ I said, trying to sound sympathetic. ‘It *is* quite common for young people to simply –’

‘No, Mr Craine. Not my Anna.’ Mrs Gerrish’s eyes were fixed firmly on mine now. ‘She wouldn’t do that to me. She just *wouldn’t*. She’s not that kind of girl.’

I didn’t bother asking her what kind of girl she imagined *would* do that to her mother. Instead, I asked her what she thought might have happened to Anna.

She shook her head, and I could see her eyes beginning to moisten. ‘I just ... I really don’t know. All I know is that if Anna *was* safe and well, she would have let me know.’ She took a tissue from her handbag and wiped daintily at her eyes. ‘She would have let me know, Mr Craine ... believe me. I know my daughter. She wouldn’t just ... she wouldn’t ...’

There was a knock at the door then, and Ada came in carrying two cups of coffee on a tray. She came over and

put the tray on the desk. The coffee was in proper cups and saucers, not the usual chipped old mugs, and Ada had also provided a bowl of sugar, teaspoons, a little jug of milk, and a plate of biscuits.

‘Will there be anything else, Mr Craine?’ she said, smiling obsequiously at me.

I looked at her, shaking my head. ‘That’s all, thanks, Ada.’

She gave me a little curtsy, then turned round and walked out, glancing over her shoulder and wiggling her fat arse in a sexy-secretary kind of way as she went.

I waited for her to close the door, then I turned back to Mrs Gerrish. She’d stopped crying now and had gone back to staring at her hands. They were in her lap again, obsessively twisting and tearing at the tissue.

‘So, Mrs Gerrish,’ I said. ‘What is it you’d like me to do, exactly?’

She looked up at me, frowning almost disdainfully, as if I’d just asked her the most unnecessary question in the world. ‘I want you to find my daughter, Mr Craine.’

‘Why me?’ I said.

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘Why did you choose me? There are plenty of other investigation agencies, bigger companies with more resources ...’

‘You were recommended,’ she said.

‘By whom?’

She looked slightly uncomfortable for a moment. ‘Well, to be honest, Mr Craine ... I did try some other agencies, but none of them were willing to help. The last one I went to, a company called Mercer Associates, they suggested that I contact you.’ She smiled thinly. ‘No offence meant, Mr Craine, but if *you’re* not able to help me, I really don’t know what else I can do.’

I nodded, smiling. ‘No offence taken, Mrs Gerrish. None at all. Do you remember who you spoke to at Mercer?’

She shook her head. 'I can't remember her name ... it was a young lady. She said they don't handle domestic cases, only corporate work ... whatever that is.'

I nodded. 'And do you mind me asking why you came here in person without making an appointment first?'

'Does it matter?'

'No, no ... of course not. I'm just curious, that's all. Most of my personal clients either contact me by telephone first or get in touch through my website.'

She looked down at her lap again, and when she spoke again I knew she was lying. 'Yes, well ... I *was* going to call you, but I happened to be in town today getting some shopping, and when I passed your office ...' She shrugged. 'Well, I just thought I'd call in.' She looked up at me. 'I didn't think you'd mind.'

I smiled. 'I don't.'

'So will you help me?'

I don't know why I didn't say no. I didn't *need* the work, for a start. And even if I did, the prospect of working for this strangely unappetising woman didn't exactly fill me with joy. There wasn't even anything particularly interesting about the case. It would probably involve a lot of fairly tedious work without much hope of success. And if, as Helen Gerrish had claimed, the police really hadn't made any progress, that either meant that there wasn't anything to find, or that they were fairly sure Anna had simply gone away of her own accord.

But, despite all that, I didn't say no.

And, even now, I still don't know why.

I just opened my mouth and found myself saying, 'If I do decide to help you, Mrs Gerrish, you'd have to understand that there's very little I can do that the police haven't already done. No matter what you think of them, I can assure you that the police have far greater resources for finding people than I have.'

'Yes, I understand that.'

‘And, unlike the police, my services aren’t free.’

‘Money isn’t a problem, Mr Craine. My husband and I have sufficient funds.’

‘Does your husband feel the same way as you? About hiring a private investigator, I mean?’

‘Yes, of *course*,’ she said, just a little too forcefully. ‘He’s as desperate to find Anna as I am.’

Yeah? I thought. *So how come he’s not here?*

‘All right,’ I said, removing a writing pad from the desk drawer. ‘Let me take a few basic details first, and then we’ll see about getting a contract drawn up. Is that OK?’

She smiled, the first genuine smile I’d seen from her, and reached into her handbag. ‘This is the most recent photograph I have of Anna,’ she said, passing me a 6" x 4" colour print. ‘It was taken about a year ago. You probably remember it from the newspaper reports.’

I thought it slightly odd that she just happened to have a photo of Anna in her handbag, even though she claimed that she was only in town to do some shopping ... but I let that pass and concentrated on studying the photograph.

Helen was right, I did remember it from the newspaper reports. It was a posed picture, a head-and-shoulders shot, and it looked as if it’d been taken in a studio. Anna was trying to look sultry and mysterious – her head turned demurely over her shoulder, all pouting lips and come-to-bed eyes – and she seemed to be reclining on a red leather divan. There was nothing unprofessional or overly tacky about the photograph, it was simply that the intended effect just didn’t work. Anna was trying too hard, for a start, and although she was reasonably attractive – almond eyes, long black hair, a nice face, pretty mouth – there was something about her, something indefinable, that robbed her of any allure.

She looked hollow to me.

Haunted.

Used up.

‘She was a model,’ Mrs Gerrish said proudly. ‘Well ... she was *hoping* to be a model. It’s what she always dreamed of.’

I nodded. ‘She didn’t make her living from it, then?’

‘No ... it’s a very hard business to break into. And, of course, you have to make certain sacrifices if you’re really determined to make it.’

‘What kind of sacrifices?’

‘Modelling is the kind of work that requires you to be available all the time, just in case something suddenly turns up. So Anna was forever turning down excellent job opportunities because she didn’t want to tie herself down.’

‘I see ... so where was she working when she disappeared?’

Mrs Gerrish hesitated. ‘Well, it was only a temporary post, a part-time catering position ...’

I looked at her, my pen hovering over the pad. ‘I need the details, Mrs Gerrish.’

‘The Wyvern,’ she said quietly. ‘It’s a restaurant ...’

I knew The Wyvern, and I knew that it wasn’t a restaurant. It was a pub. And a shit-hole pub at that. The only menu you were likely to be offered at The Wyvern was a menu of Class A drugs.

‘I don’t know the address, I’m afraid,’ Mrs Gerrish said. ‘But it’s –’

‘It’s all right,’ I told her. ‘I know where it is. Was Anna living at home?’

‘No, she has her own little flat down near the docks. Do you want the address?’

‘Please.’

She gave me the address and I wrote it down.

I said, ‘Is it a rented flat?’

‘Yes.’

‘What’s happening with it at the moment? Is Anna’s stuff still there?’

Helen nodded. 'The rent was due last week ... we've paid it up for another month.'

'Does Anna live on her own?'

'Yes.'

'She's not married?'

'No.'

'Boyfriend?'

'No ...'

'Are you sure?'

'Anna would have told me if she had a boyfriend.'

'What about old boyfriends?'

'Well, yes, of course ... she was always a very popular girl. I can't think of any names offhand at the moment ...'

'Didn't the police ask you for their names?'

'Well, yes ... but I told them I couldn't remember. I think they got them from somewhere else.'

Somewhere else? I thought. *What the fuck does that mean?*

'OK, Mrs Gerrish,' I said. 'I'll need Anna's phone numbers - landline and mobile, please.'

She gave me the numbers, I wrote them down.

'Have you got any other recent photos of Anna?' I asked. 'Anything a bit more ... natural?'

'There's a few more at home, I think. They're not very recent -'

'OK, don't worry, we'll sort that out later. How about a key to her flat?'

'The police have Anna's keys, but I've got a spare at home.'

'Well, I'd like to take a look round her flat as soon as possible. Could you drop the key off later?'

She looked slightly pained. 'Well, it's a bit difficult ... you see, I don't drive, and my husband has the car all day -'

'How about later on this evening?'

'He's working this evening.'

'All right,' I sighed. 'Where do you live, Mrs Gerrish?'