

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Dark Angel

Geoffrey Archer

DARK ANGEL

Geoffrey Archer



arrow books

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Also by Geoffrey Archer

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2004

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Scorpion Trail
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To Eva, Alison and James

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Prologue

January 2004
London

It had taken courage for Tom Sedley to come up to London. Seeing his mother on the screen always stirred bad memories. But there she was now, the monochrome face smiling down at him in the cinema by the Thames, and it was all right.

And yet, seeing those hauntingly alluring eyes which his dead sister Sara had inherited, being here in the city where it had all happened, he couldn't help feeling uneasy. And guilty that so much remained unresolved after so many years.

It wasn't Maureen Stuart herself who was being celebrated in this retrospective at the National Film Theatre, but the whole genre of Second World War films produced in Britain in the 1940s and '50s. She'd starred in several of them. Somehow the NFT researchers had tracked Tom down and invited him to a viewing as bait for the media. He'd thought long and hard before accepting. London with its bitter associations was a place that he tried to avoid. But eventually he'd decided to attend. The showing had been preceded by a buffet lunch, where he'd been interviewed about his mother by a couple of young journalists whose reading of the cuttings had, to his relief, been surprisingly superficial.

The woman up there on the screen was considerably younger than Tom was now. She'd been beautiful then. It was later, after Sara was killed, that her famous smile had lost its seductive power.

Her old films came on TV from time to time, but Tom avoided them, because they took him straight back to that dreadful summer of 1948. He'd never been much of a movie fan anyway, preferring books to celluloid, and in recent years the simple pleasures of his garden in the Cotswold village he'd retired to from GCHQ more than a decade ago.

The film drew to an end. Polite applause rippled through the sparsely filled rows as the closing credits rolled. Then the house lights went up and Tom got to his feet. He'd been eager for the film to finish, because the longer it went on the less he could stem the tide of foreboding that was creeping up on him. At the age of seventy-two he felt he ought to be beyond the reach of these reminders of his past, but some events scar a person for life and his sister's murder was one of them.

'Enjoy it, Mr Sedley?' It was the young man who'd invited him here.

'Don't make them like that any more,' Tom purred non-committally, as they made their way up the aisle.

'Absolutely. Well, thanks so much for coming. It's been jolly nice meeting you.'

'Likewise.'

They shook hands, then Tom hurried through the foyer café, out into the crisp January air. He gulped it in, hoping the oxygen would blow away the feeling of unfinished business that clung to him like a cobweb. To his left, the sun was setting, bloodying the sky beyond the London Eye.

The showing of the film had finished earlier than he'd expected and the train he'd planned on taking back to Gloucestershire wasn't for another couple of hours. He

walked over to the parapet and stared at the sinuous brown river, wondering how best to use the time.

He was on the point of deciding to head for Paddington and catch an earlier train when he suddenly became aware he had company. He didn't actually see the figure standing there looking at him, but sensed it. At his age and living in the country, Tom thought of London as a nest of muggers. Skin tingling with fear, he half-turned his head. It wasn't a thief standing there, however, but an elderly woman. Keeping a few feet away from him, as if plucking up the courage to speak.

Begging, he thought. He looked down at the river again, hoping she would go away.

'Tom.'

Her voice sliced through him. He'd not heard it for a very long time. Hoping his ears were playing tricks, he turned for a proper look. The white hair fooled him for a moment, then with a sickening jolt he realised it *was* her.

'Binnie ...'

More than twenty years had passed since their last unhappy encounter. Her face had aged significantly. Deep lines where there'd been smooth skin. It was a face that he'd once known almost as well as his own. For years he'd seen it in his dreams.

'I guessed I might find you here,' she said, pointing back to the film theatre. 'I'm on their mailing list and saw the billing for your mother's picture.'

'I see.' So this was no chance meeting. She'd sought him out. The question in his head was *why*?

'I thought how nice it would be to see you again,' she said, answering it.

Tom didn't respond, knowing there'd be more to her stalking him than that. As he looked at her, still startled by her sudden appearance before him, he was affected by the same painfully conflicting feelings he'd felt long ago.

Binnie was the same age as him. The homes they'd been brought up in were next door to one another. Her hair was still short, he noticed. A lustrous brown once, instead of this snowy grey. Still with that straight teenager's fringe. She looked burdened, he noted, worn down by life.

'It's over twenty years ...' she reminded him.

He tried to read her face. Was it desperation that he saw in her eyes? It dawned on him she might be here simply because she was lonely.

'Last time we met you were off to Australia to stay with your daughter,' he said, finally getting some words together.

'Well, I came back.'

'So I see.'

'I live alone now.'

'Ah.'

For a split second her obvious sadness caused the warmth he'd once felt for her to flicker back to life.

'Difficult, isn't it?' she said. 'To know where to begin.'

'Yes.' Or even whether it was sensible to begin at all.

'Shall we go back into the café?' she suggested, her face pinched with anxiety. 'My feet are freezing.'

'What do you want, Binnie? Why did you seek me out?'

She looked away. A water-bus hooted on the far side of the river, its mournful note echoing towards them like a tormented soul.

'Please, Tom,' she whispered. 'I need to talk with you.'

He steeled himself. There were unresolved issues between them. Questions that had bugged Tom for most of his life. If she was ready to answer them at last, then he owed it to himself to listen.

'Well, all right. But no coffees. You can walk with me if you like. I'm heading for a train.'

They started to move along the Embankment towards Hungerford Bridge.

The damnable thing was that, as Binnie matched his pace step for step, it felt the most natural thing in the world for Tom to have her by his side.

1948

One

September 1948
North London

There was no shortage of greenery in the North London suburb of Wood Park. Sprawling trees and lush grass wherever you looked. Well-mown lawns in front of the houses. Playing fields for the children to run about in. Dappled woods nearby, reeking of leaf mould. The adults with enough wealth to buy homes here loved the fact that they were in London yet had so much space around them. Relished the social status that went with the mortgage.

For their older teenage offspring, however, the place bore a different image. Many felt stifled by the suburb. There was nothing to do. No pub or cinema for miles. No cosy gathering place where boy-girl relationships could fumble into life away from the inhibiting eyes of parents.

Two worlds. The adults coping with the aftermath of war, grateful to be living in peace, somewhere free of bomb damage. The young, aflame with hormones, longing for a new world filled with choice and excitement. A generation gap, which in some Wood Park homes was chasm-wide.

Then, on Tuesday, 14 September 1948, tragedy struck the community, uniting parents with their disaffected offspring in shared horror at what had been done to one of their own. At the epicentre of the crisis was the Sedley family, but the disaster gripped each resident, forcing them

to confront the fact that an unspeakable evil had emerged within their idyll of a community.

The police had been called late the previous night, three hours after fourteen-year-old Sara Sedley had failed to reappear at her home for bedtime. Her mother was distraught, imagining the worst.

‘Probably at a friend’s and forgotten to phone,’ the pinched-faced detective suggested, trying to calm the situation. He’d recognised the girl’s mother as Maureen Stuart who’d played a Spitfire pilot’s wife in a war film he’d seen at the Odeon a couple of weeks back. A flighty character. With her husband shot down and locked up in Stalag Luft something-or-other, both his legs severed in the crash, she’d gone off on a dirty weekend with his best mate. A woman not to be trusted. Which was what the detective felt about women in general and actresses in particular. Temperamental creatures. Burdened with overactive imaginations. And the missing daughter, he guessed, was probably a similar type.

The Sedley family – Stuart was the actress’s stage name – had of course already rung everyone they could think of. Sara’s friends from school, the woman who ran the tap dancing class. But nobody had seen the girl.

Tom Sedley, Sara’s stocky, fair-haired, seventeen-year-old brother, had found himself taking charge of the crisis when his younger sister disappeared. Their father, Michael, was in Manchester on BBC business, producing a play to be broadcast live the following night, and couldn’t get away. His absence had added to their mother’s hysteria. Tom coped with his own growing sense of panic by organising things – ringing people and touring the neighbourhood on his bike in case Sara was wandering about in a daze. His mother imagined that she might have tripped on a paving stone and banged her head.

Now it was an hour before sunset on the day after Sara’s disappearance. She’d been missing for nearly twenty-four

hours. The police had decided to search the parkland and woods bordering the suburb, rounding up volunteers to help. There'd been no shortage of takers. Most of the fathers weren't back from work yet, but some twenty mothers and older teenagers home from school were now spread in a line at the edge of the long grass which bordered the open space of the park. Each volunteer ten paces from the next.

Tom, slight of build and shorter than most of his peers, stood in the middle of the line, close to the police Inspector. His sister's disappearance had wrung him dry. At first he'd been angry at her for causing such anxiety. Much as he loved her, she'd become an attention-seeking flirt in the last few months. Recently he'd taken to growling warnings about her behaviour, saying she'd get into trouble if she didn't become more ladylike.

When midnight came last night he'd begun to fear the worst. In the hours of darkness he'd sat with his mother, waiting for the phone to ring or a knock at the door. He was angry at his father for not being there. He was often angry at his father. It was as if a wall stood between them. Or as though they were different species. The man was artistically pretentious, whereas Tom was down-to-earth. Unreliable as a parent when Tom wanted someone to depend on. There was no point of contact. They had little in common except blood.

And now it had come to this. A search.

'For what, exactly?' he'd asked, hoping to be fobbed off with some lie. But the policemen's faces were deadly serious. 'For anything,' they'd replied. 'Anything relevant.'

Tom had been close to tears several times that day, visualising just what sort of 'trouble' his sister might have got herself into. He knew a little about prostitutes. Had seen them plying their trade in Soho where he and his friend Marcus sometimes went to look at foreign films, dirtying their chins to look old enough to get membership

of the clubs where they were shown. Some of the girls in Wardour Street had been young. Almost as young as him and Marcus. Was this how they got there? Kidnapped from the suburbs, indoctrinated with the tricks of the trade, then put up for rent by some swarthy thug?

Tom glanced up and down the line. Marcus was there, trying without much success to smile reassuringly at him. Marcus Warwick who lived opposite the Sedley house in the Close. The same age as him, Marcus had been Tom's closest friend for as long as he could remember. And next to Marcus, Binnie. Binnie Rowbotham, the tall, slender girl who lived next door. Columbine, her parents had christened her, a name which made her cringe if it was ever used accidentally by her friends. For Tom, Binnie epitomised what a female should be like. Considerate. Gentle. Caring. And with that indefinable air of mystery that made girls different from boys. She looked very tense today. Pale. Paler than usual, even. Everyone's face showing the anxiety they all felt. Everyone knowing it was twenty-four hours since Sara had last been seen walking out of the garden, telling her mother she was off around the corner to see a friend whose cat had just had kittens. Back in half an hour ... She'd never arrived at her destination.

Tom Sedley's heart thudded like a steam hammer. Until they'd begun lining up for the search, he'd been able to kid himself that things would turn out all right. That there could still be some simple explanation for Sara vanishing. But the seriousness of what they were now doing filled him with dread. The blue-black uniforms. The grim faces as the Inspector quietly briefed his men. And an unspoken certainty in the minds of those around him that this could only end one way.

Tom gulped air, fighting to control his emotions. He'd been strong up to now because of the need to comfort his mother. But she wasn't with the search party, unable to cope with people staring at her tear-streaked face. Even at

a time like this there was her image as a film star to consider. She was sitting at home being comforted by an actress friend with the help of a bottle of amontillado. Waiting for Tom to tell her that nothing untoward had been found.

Tom stared across the grass. In the middle of the park some two hundred yards away was a large clump of trees, known simply as 'the woods'. Neighbours walked dogs there. On the far side was a small amphitheatre where local amateurs performed Shakespeare in August. But above all, the woods were *their* territory, the playground for the boys of Wood Park. Rival gangs had formed when they were younger, each with their own camps amongst the trees and bushes, but with a common purpose. To keep out the girls. They'd spun their sisters stories about wild dogs, snakes, and old men in mackintoshes. When a few girls had dared venture in, they'd been hounded out with animal noises and wild charges from the bushes. In later years, when he and his contemporaries reached their mid-teens, the woods had become a place to smoke and to ogle pictures of bare-breasted women in the magazines left behind by the Americans who'd had a camp in the parkland at the end of the war.

And it was towards the woods that they would soon be heading. That male domain which Sara would never have entered on her own, but where Tom sensed this dreadful mystery would be resolved.

The police Inspector blew his whistle and raised an arm. Like a football referee, Tom thought. A hawk-faced ref. He caught Marcus's eye, saw his forced smile. Binnie's expression was a blank, her pale skin, round spectacles and small, thin-lipped mouth a mask of forced calm. The Inspector dropped his long, thin hand and they were off.

Tom noted how close Binnie was keeping to Marcus. He felt a little jealous of the attention she was giving him, despite being pretty sure his friend wouldn't respond to it.

The two of them had often discussed Binnie behind her back, Marcus saying how unkissable she was, with her plain round face and owlish glasses. How with her flat chest and straight hips she looked more like a boy than a girl, a fact that didn't bother Tom particularly.

Binnie's crush on Marcus had emerged during the summer holidays. Tom worried that she would get hurt. There was a wild, almost dangerous side to Marcus which Binnie in her trusting way seemed unaware of. Tom feared she'd be damaged by Marcus. Robbed of the sweetness that he so prized in her.

Tom looked along the rest of the line, at all those other faces he'd grown up with but whose owners he hardly knew. For years he'd felt a misfit in the neighbourhood, and in the Sedley household. Mother a famous actress, father a drama producer, little sister a budding performer, dressing up and trying out grease-paint. The whole acting business bored him. Model aeroplanes, trains and crystal sets had been his own preferred playthings. He'd once overheard his mother describe him to a friend as dull. 'God knows where that one came from. Reads something called *Practical Wireless*, would you believe. I have the oddest of feelings he might've been switched at birth.'

In the last twenty-four hours, however, Tom knew he'd grown immeasurably in his mother's eyes. As they sat through the night in their living room, its walls hung with framed theatre posters, she'd told him he was 'mature beyond his years'. This, the reward for assuring her she wasn't to blame for Sara's disappearance. Telling her she was not a lousy parent. That, even if her work meant being away from them a lot, leaving them in the hands of au pairs, he and Sara had always liked the fact she had a glamorous career, because it set them apart from the crowd. Made them special, too.

Even to his own ears Tom had sounded grown-up last night. Coming out with the very words his father might

have spoken if he'd been there.

'She's simply run away for a bit, Mum. Some silly girly reason. You know what Sara's like. She'll be back.'

But now, twenty-four hours later, he was ceasing to believe it.

During the morning, as news of Sara's disappearance spread, he'd seen it grip the neighbourhood. Passers-by slowed their pace and sneaked glances at the house, hoping to spot some famous face who'd come to give succour to the family. Despite what he'd told her, he hated his mother's fame for the rubbernecking it provoked.

The cul-de-sac where they all lived had been like a nest for him and his friends, a safe playground, which had made Sara's disappearance all the more shocking. A close community shattered. One of their young missing. Men in blue asking questions door-to-door, like in some 'B' movie. The stir caused had been the first real disturbance to the calm of the place since an errant V2 had destroyed the tennis club and a few nearby houses in 1944.

Half a dozen law officers were coordinating the search. They'd been allowed to remove their helmets. Most looked not much older than himself, Tom thought, as the line moved slowly forward. 'If you find anything, don't touch it,' the Inspector ordered. 'Call one of my officers. Let us decide what's interesting and what isn't.' The policeman's manner was brusque. Almost contemptuous. As if he had little time for civilians and was only using their help because he had to.

On either side of him people swished at the long grass with sticks. Tom watched Marcus Warwick beat at the cow-parsley and nettles with an old cricket stump. Then, to his alarm, Marcus dropped to his knees and called out to one of the officers.

'There's a cig packet here. Don't know if it's important. You said report anything.'

A police constable picked it up with a gloved hand and put it in a brown paper bag. Capstan Full Strength, Tom noticed. His and Marcus's choice, if ever they could afford it. Roll-ups were their usual fare.

Another shout went up. A child's sock fished from the grass on the end of a stick. Alarm flickered along the line until they saw how small it was.

Tom had heard Marcus lie to the police about his age when they'd asked an hour ago. 'Eighteen and above, please,' the Inspector had shouted as they'd gathered to help. Binnie Rowbotham was standing next to him and had lied as well. He knew that as his closest friends they couldn't not be involved in the search for Sara. They'd all grown up together. He and Marcus as two musketeers, with Binnie as a would-be third. They'd all watched Sara develop into a physically precocious teenager, Binnie trying not to be jealous of her shapely chest.

It was true that Binnie was beanpole-thin, and with her short, light brown hair and the dungarees and blue check shirt she was wearing today she could have been mistaken for a boy. Tom felt quite comfortable with her androgynous looks, however. He would never admit it and hoped soon to develop a taste for them, but he found women's breasts intimidating. He watched her now, wondering if her all too obvious infatuation with Marcus was the cause of the open space that had come between him and his friend in recent weeks. Marcus had begun avoiding him. Finding excuses why they couldn't spend time together. Stopped coming to the house. He didn't blame Binnie for that, but suspected that her desire to be with Marcus could have something to do with it.

He kept his eyes on them, looking for clues as to what there was between them. What secrets they shared. What they were excluding him from. Their faces revealed nothing, though, except the tension they were all under. They hardly spoke to one another, although at one point

Tom heard Binnie say her stomach felt as if there was a brick in it.

Tom looked down at the ground, pushing aside the nettles with his feet. Soon they would be through the overgrown edge of the park and on to the trimmed grass of the recreation ground. He scanned the line again. He knew so many people here by sight but not by name. He knew Marcus better than anyone in the world. Next year they would both be leaving school and doing their National Service. Tom had discussed things, done things with Marcus he'd not done with anyone else. If it was all right to love someone of the same sex, then Tom would happily say he loved Marcus.

Which was more than Marcus would say about his own brother, Sebastian, whom Tom spotted further along the line, making his number with the dour police Inspector. Sebastian, two years older than them, an Oxford undergraduate already. Someone who considered himself a man of the world and who treated his younger brother like a child. Showing how adult he was by talking to the man in charge of this whole affair, Detective Inspector Wilkie. Even sharing a joke with him.

Binnie was trailing a little way behind Marcus now, as if he had her on a long lead. Tom understood why she'd fallen for him. Despite being nowhere near as good-looking as his older brother – gangly, with spots here and there – Marcus had a way of looking at girls, openly, carelessly, that made them melt. And there was another reason for her new-found infatuation. At the beginning of the summer Marcus had sketched a portrait of Binnie. Art was his main interest at school and he was constantly looking for sitters. She'd volunteered, remaining as still as a statue while he worked away with his pencil. Marcus had told Tom about it afterwards. Claimed to have cut through what he called her suburban smugness and seen for the first time Binnie the young woman. He'd got her to remove her spectacles. 'She

was thinking about sex. I could see it in her eyes.' Tom had dismissed the idea, convinced that sex was not a preoccupation that filled the female mind. Marcus still considered Binnie to be a girl whose ambitions lay no further than the end of the street, but he'd flattered her with his drawing. Put in things that weren't there. Made her beautiful, he said. Even, as a joke, talked of signing the portrait 'Leonardo'.

The line of volunteers reached the mown grass and quickened its pace. Soon they were closing with the railings that fenced off the woods. In his mind Tom could smell the leaf mould in the rhododendron thickets beneath the oaks. Suddenly he heard a commotion and turned round. His mother was joining the search party, clinging to her actress friend whose face was even better known than her own.

'I had to be here, darling,' she whispered, touching Tom's cheek.

Maureen Stuart had thick auburn hair. This evening she had what Tom called her 'actress face' on, the look of the brave heroine waiting by the winding gear on a Welsh hillside for the rescuers to bring up news from the flooded mine. Tom wished desperately that she'd stayed at home. People were staring. All along the line heads turned to gawp at these two famous women.

Ignoring her, the Inspector gathered his volunteers together for the assault on the woods.

'The undergrowth's pretty thick in there. No point all of us going in.' He scanned the attentive faces, picking out those of the boys. 'Some of you lads probably know these woods quite well. I need a couple to point us to places we mightn't immediately think of.'

Tom saw Marcus flinch as the Inspector's eyes focused on him.

'How about it, you two lads?'

At first Tom didn't grasp that the other 'lad' was Binnie. Someone snorted with amusement as the realisation spread.

Tom disengaged himself from his mother's arm.

'Not her. Me. Marcus and I know these woods as well as anyone.'

The Inspector smothered his surprise at having mistaken Binnie's sex.

'All right. You two, follow me, please.' The policeman detailed four of his own men to accompany him and led the way into the wood, strutting ahead like a general.

The ground smelled mustily dry. There'd been no rain for weeks. Tom was filled with dread. Sara had always been scared of this place, yet he had an awful feeling this was where she'd come.

'Okay, lads,' said the Inspector softly. 'How many hiding places do you know of?'

Marcus and Tom glanced at one another. 'There's a good half-dozen,' said Tom.

'Any favourites?'

There was no avoiding it. No way of keeping secret the one place they'd always used whenever they wanted to be absolutely sure of not being seen by anyone walking through the woods.

Guessing the reason for their hesitation, the Inspector took out a packet of Players and offered them. They both shook their heads.

'Go on. I know you smoke. There's nicotine on your fingers.'

Marcus looked at his hands. To Tom's eye they were perfectly clean.

'I'd rather not,' he said.

'In case your mum sees you?'

'Something like that.'

Marcus's father had promised him fifty pounds if he didn't smoke until he was twenty-one.

'But you do come in here to smoke, don't you?'

'Sometimes,' Tom admitted.

'Show me. Where do you go?'

Tom felt utterly powerless. Like being poised at the top of a big dipper, awaiting the inevitable plunge.

'Well, it's over here.' Marcus led the way towards a particularly thick bank of rhododendrons.

'Looks impenetrable,' the Inspector commented.

'There's a bit in the middle where you can sit without being seen ...'

The boys stood aside, expecting the constables to push their way through the branches.

'Show us. Lead the way. Slowly, mind, one step at a time so we can have a good look at the ground.'

Marcus was hanging back, so, with his heart in his mouth, Tom led the policemen to the other side where there was a small gap in the dark green leaves.

'In there.' He pointed.

'Lead on, lad.'

Above their heads a blackbird chipped away, alarmed at the disturbance. Pigeons clattered from their roosts higher up.

Tom pushed his way in, followed by the Inspector. Twigs cracked as they penetrated the thicket.

Then he saw her, not six feet away. He froze, sick with shock. Marcus came crashing in behind and yelped with anguish.

'No ...!'

There, on the small piece of brown earth where the two of them had so often lain, looking at the sky through the branches, was Sara, her pretty face a ghastly yellow, her pink cotton blouse unbuttoned, exposing her breasts. The short blue skirt she'd worn most of the time that summer was bunched up at the waist and her white cotton pants were round one ankle.

'Don't touch anything,' the Inspector said.

‘Check for a pulse, sir?’ one of his men suggested.

The Inspector gave him a withering look.

‘Been dead for hours,’ he answered. ‘Strangled. See the bruising?’

Tom stared disbelievingly at the purple-blue stripes on his sister’s slender neck. It was make-up, he told himself. This was Sara’s stupid game. Any minute she would leap to her feet and ask what they thought of her performance.

Then he looked at her breasts. He’d never really seen them before – she’d gone shy on him since puberty. They looked so firm. So perfect in their shape, as if fresh from a mould.

And the little dark smudge of pubic hair ... Shocking for him to see. So coarse. So animal-like. So out of place on his angel of a little sister.

Her slim thighs were a little apart, streaked in places with a silvery sheen ... At last it sank in what had happened.

‘No ...’ Marcus backed away from the scene, shaking his head. ‘No. It’s not poss—’ The words gagged in his throat.

Numbly, Tom turned and stared at him. Questioning. Wanting reassurance that this wasn’t happening. Wanting Marcus to make things all right, as he’d so often done in the past. But his friend’s face was white as milk. Marcus the problem-solver was at a total loss. So unable to cope that he turned and fought his way out of the thicket, lashing at the branches.

‘Better take Tom back to his mother,’ the Inspector said to one of the constables.

Tom felt hands guide him back into the open. He didn’t resist. Everything was a blur, the branches swirling around him. All he wanted was for the spool to be rewound, to make all this a fiction. As they passed back through the gate in the railings Binnie was there, her face a block of stone. Then her composure broke. Her shoulders began to quiver. The two of them were little children again, both

needing comforting but too young to do it for one another. They both began to cry, their faces contorting with the effort to control it. The shock of their emotions rippled through the cluster of volunteers surrounding them, triggering muted cries and stifled sobs.

Then Binnie ran from him, clutching her face, heading blindly away. A male arm caught her mid-flight and enveloped her. Instinctively Tom expected it to be Marcus's, but it was Sebastian who'd provided the shoulder to cry on.

Then his mother stood before him, all poise, all control gone. She clung to him, her face wet against his cheek.

'It's not true ... It can't be. Tell me it's not true.'

But Tom couldn't. The image of his dead, violated sister was branded into his brain.

Suddenly he realised that they hadn't checked. Hadn't made absolutely sure. He pushed his mother away and rushed back towards the gate. A policeman barred his path.

'I'm sorry, son ...'

'But she may be alive. Has anyone ...? Her heart - maybe she's breathing?'

The policeman shook his head. Not just once but continually. The finality of that gesture brought it home.

Tom's chest felt gripped in a vice. He couldn't breathe.

'Who?' he croaked. 'Who did this?'

'We'll find out, son, you can be sure of that.'

Tom looked around wildly, as if the murderer might be amongst them. Some stranger lurking, watching. Gloating over their misery. Voices rang in his head. Cries, murmurs, angry exclamations. The crowd of helpers was incensed as well as shocked. He saw the Inspector questioning Marcus. Tom stumbled towards them, wanting to know what was being said.

'You knew the girl.'

'Of course. We ... we all did.'

'When did you last see her?'

'I don't know ... A few days ago.'

‘And when did you last come into these woods?’

Marcus had a scared look in his eyes. He caught sight of Tom and appealed to him for help.

‘When, Tom?’

Tom couldn’t speak, unable to grasp what was being asked.

‘Was Sara with you when you last went into the woods?’ the Inspector asked.

‘God, no,’ Marcus protested.

Inspector Wilkie drew himself up to his full height.

‘Now look here, lad, you ran away just now.’

‘Did I?’

Yes, thought Tom. He did.

‘Why was that, lad?’

‘I dunno. I ...’ Marcus’s voice dried. Then he began to snivel again.

‘All right, lad. All right. We’ll need statements from all of you later. When you’ve got over the shock.’

Suddenly Tom found his mother beside him again, icy calm. She glared at the Inspector.

‘I want to see her.’

‘I’m sorry, madam. The pathologist. Forensics. We can’t let anyone near at the moment.’

‘She’s my daughter ...’

‘I’m sorry, ma’am.’

Tom glanced away, out across the grass. The volunteers were being dismissed by the police. It was over. He gripped his mother’s arms. They both stared towards the woods, he knowing the precise horror of what had happened there, she tormented by what she could only imagine. Then Marcus loomed in front of him. Marcus whom the police had been talking to as if he were a suspect.

‘Tom,’ Marcus choked, ‘Tom. Whoever did this, we’re going to get him. Understand?’

‘Yes,’ said Tom, his head filling with wild suspicions. ‘We’ll get him. However long it takes.’

1950

Two

28 August 1950

HMS *Unicorn*, off Pusan - South Korea

Standing on the flight deck of the aircraft carrier, Second Lieutenant Marcus Warwick was as unprepared for the foul smell of Korea as he was for the whole extraordinary adventure he was embarking on. A reek of human excrement wafted from the shore as the giant warship made a slow turn for the entry into harbour.

‘What a horrible pong. *Shit!*’ His disgusted exclamation amused the man beside him.

‘That’s exactly what it is, old boy,’ chuckled Lieutenant Richard Carter. ‘Shit of the human kind. They fertilise the rice paddies with it. Foul practice. *Most* unhealthy.’ He was from a landowning family in the Midlands and knew about such matters. ‘Same in the New Territories. Surely you must’ve ...’

‘I wasn’t in Hong Kong long enough, remember?’

‘Ah. Yes, of course. Well, welcome to East Asia.’

‘Thanks a million.’

The carrier HMS *Unicorn* had sailed from Hong Kong three days before, carrying Britain’s makeshift response to the emergency in Korea. And now, after a passage dominated by PT and weapons testing, they were approaching the decaying port of Pusan. Their orders – to support the American-backed South Koreans against the