

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Change of Heart

Charlotte Bingham

About the Book

Anyone arriving to stay at Stoke Park in Worcestershire could be forgiven for thinking that the house has a timeless quality. Certainly this occurs to Frederick Jourdan, the American composer who has rented the place to escape from overwork and from his well-meaning but exhausting fiancée. He revels in the peace and beauty of the place, until, early one morning, happening upon the heartstopping sight of the reclusive young occupant of the nearby Folly feeding deer at early dawn, he finds his life has been changed for ever.

Time has indeed stood still for Fleur Fisher-Dilke, but for reasons that the new tenant of Stoke Park cannot possibly guess. Born to an ambitious surgeon and his social-climbing wife, as a child Fleur was moved to Worcestershire for the sole purpose of improving the family's social prospects. Quite by chance, however, she finds she has a prodigious gift, and in spite of her parents' opposition, her talent blossoms and she becomes famous beyond anyone's imaginings. Choices are made, but not forgiven, and it is only when her life takes a sudden and tragic turn, and she meets a fascinating and irreverent figure who is her opposite in every way, that Fleur finds that she has suffered a change of heart.

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Change of Heart

Charlotte Bingham

For my beloved partner without whom indeed



There is more than one reality.

Buddhist belief

*Some things that happen for the first time
Seem to be happening again
And so it seems that we have met before
And laughed before
And loved before
But who knows where or when?*

Lorenz Hart

Prologue

They are all around her, silent figures gathered in the half darkness, watching and waiting. He knows that they're there even though he can only hear them, their footfalls cracking sticks in the bracken, their feet padding softly over beds of leaves. He thinks he can smell them, smell the mixture of sweat and tobacco and gunpowder that a breeze carries to him, a smell that grows stronger as now they pass right by him and begin to run, and he hears their breath hard and short as the chase begins in earnest.

They are in woods lit by the pale light of a summer's sun not yet risen, its radiant fingers only just beginning to spill over the edge of the world and in the half light he can see them closing on her. They run her up against a fence which is too high for her to jump but somehow she manages to escape and starts to run along the line of the fence, ahead for a moment of her pursuers.

Now she is maddened with terror and panic-struck as she plunges through brambles which tear her and thorns which paint ribbons of blood along her back and sides. The men raise their guns, he can see the sunlight glint on the barrels and tries to call out to warn her, but no sound comes as beside him he suddenly finds a gate just where the risen sun has now entered the woods in one huge beam of clear bright light.

He opens the gate and she runs through it, into the light and is gone, vanished from the shadowy huntsmen who fade silently back into the dark woods which have spawned them.

Turning to follow her he finds he is in a garden which is fresh with a summer dew. The air is pungent with the heady scent of old-fashioned roses, filled with larksong and the music of thrushes who sing like nightingales, while a whisper of wind stirs the leaves of the great beech trees and dapples the bright water of a carp pond.

On the far side of this beautiful place is a group of deer gathered around the foot of a flight of stone steps on which stands a girl who is feeding them. She has her head down so that he cannot yet see her face and he knows she hasn't yet seen him because she doesn't look up.

But he knows her. He has this feeling that when she does finally look up he will know exactly who she is.

FIRST MOVEMENT

Introduction and Allegro

3rd June 1994

FREDDIE WAS STILL trying to find out which button to press for recording from the radio when Mrs Davies came in to tell him he was wanted on the telephone.

'Hell,' he muttered, getting up from the floor with a tangle of hi-fi wires around one foot. 'Darn it, is it urgent?'

'It seems so, Mr Jourdan,' his new housekeeper replied. 'It's a Miss Smith-Werner calling from Washington.'

It would have to be, Freddie thought as he pulled the wires from round his foot. Diane only ever called him when he was in the middle of something, and knowing how she talked now not only wouldn't he be able to record the violin concerto to which he was listening, because he had tuned in late he wouldn't even know what the music was or who was playing it.

'Hell and darnation,' he muttered again as he padded barefoot into the stone-flagged hall. 'Hell and darnation, anyway.'

'Freddie?' said a voice as he picked up the telephone.

'Hi, Diane,' he said. 'Sorry, I was just busy.'

'I guess that makes a change from sleeping, sweetheart. Every time I ring, that quaint housekeeper of yours tells me you're *asleep*. How much sleep does a person *need*, darling?'

Freddie sat himself down in one of the pair of Chippendale carvers which stood either side of the telephone table,

stretched his long legs out in front of him, and hooked his spectacles into the top of his grey tee shirt.

‘I *said* – how much sleep does a person need, Freddie?’

‘Yes I know you did, Diane,’ Freddie replied, staring up at the ornate ceiling high above him, its plasterwork picked out in pale pink and white. ‘But I just can’t find an answer. You know, how long is a piece of string exactly?’

‘Freddie,’ his fiancée sighed in reprimand at the other end. ‘I was simply worried about the amount of time you were spending sleeping, *that* was all.’

‘Sure you were, Diane. But isn’t that what I’m here for?’

‘So what in fact were you doing?’

‘I was trying to find out how to work this state-of-the-art hi-fi I’ve rented.’

‘I should get an engineer in, Freddie,’ Diane laughed. ‘You’re the man who can’t even put batteries in a torch, remember? So. Tell me about the house instead. You haven’t really told me *anything* about the house yet.’

Freddie privately sighed, regretting as always Diane’s habit of overemphasizing parts of her speech and invariably the wrong parts, before describing to her in some detail the handsome Queen Anne house which he had rented for his sabbatical. Like all true WASPS few things interested Diane Smith-Werner more than other people’s possessions, particularly their houses. This one was built in a red brick which had now paled to a warm pink with the passing of nearly three centuries. The main house stood on four floors, only three of which were visible since the kitchens and utility floor lay out of sight in a dry moat below ground level. It was approached up a long drive lined with fine horse-chestnut trees and flanked on either side by iron-railed paddocks which ended in a broad carriage sweep in front of the house, while at the back a flight of fine stone steps led down into formal gardens originally designed and laid out, so he had already been told, by a pupil of the enchantingly nicknamed ‘Capability’ Brown.

‘How do the gardens look now?’ Diane asked. ‘Seeing the house hasn’t been lived in for so long.’

‘The whole place is just perfect,’ Freddie replied, hearing what sounded like the concerto coming to an end and holding the receiver away from his ear in a futile attempt to catch the details of the recording, but from where he stood in the large echoing hallway the announcer’s voice was no more than a barely audible murmur.

‘It sounds *very* grand,’ he heard Diane saying. ‘I *can’t* wait to see it.’

‘No it’s a fine house, but it really isn’t what you’d call grand,’ Freddie said, hoping thereby to put her off. The last thing he wanted was Diane coming over anywhere in the foreseeable future.

‘I’ve been looking at my diary, sweetheart—’ she began, only for Freddie to cut her off hastily.

‘No, there’s no point in looking at your diary *yet*, Diane,’ he said. ‘Heck I’ve only just got here and all I want to do at the moment is crash out, hang out, chill out, blank out – I’m going to do all the outs I can think of.’

‘Good,’ Diane purred approvingly. ‘That is exactly what I was hoping to hear. Just remember the one thing that is most definitely *out* while we’re talking outs. The one thing you are *not* to do is work. You’re not *even* to think about it. Is there a piano there?’

‘Sure there is. Why?’

‘Because you’re to keep it shut and locked, that’s why. You know perfectly well what the doctors said.’

‘They didn’t say anything about not playing the piano, Diane. At least not for pleasure.’

‘They said you were to have a complete rest from everything, Freddie.’

Freddie closed his eyes. He hadn’t forgotten what the doctors had told him, he just didn’t want to be reminded of it. He knew how vital it was that he took this six-month break, but even so the thought of living all that time without

working was unbearable. His work was his second nature, like breathing out and breathing in. But there was no point in remonstrating because he knew full well that work to Diane was something that began at nine and ended at five.

So to distract her he told her more about the house, about its proximity to the Malvern Hills where the famous composer Edward Elgar was said to have found so much of his inspiration, about the ornamental lake and the trout stream that ran through its grounds both of which he intended to fish, about the horses which grazed in its paddocks, the courtyard stable block and the staff cottages, the staff themselves – Mrs Davies the cook-housekeeper, Thomas the lugubrious Welshman who managed the house and the grounds, and Enid the sharp-faced endomorph who cycled up every day from the village to clean. He even recounted how just before Diane had telephoned, on only his second day in the house, the very first piece of music he'd heard when he turned on the hi-fi equipment he'd just rented had been appropriately enough Edward Elgar's *Enigma Variations* which seemed to personify the woods and the countryside by which he was now surrounded.

As he finally put down the phone he realized he'd told Diane everything that had happened to him, and indeed everything he had learned so far about the place, with only one exception. For some reason and he didn't yet know why, he had told her nothing of the white house which stood in its own grounds on a hill to the north end of the park, a small white-painted Regency house with Gothic windows which, because it stood on higher ground and was completely surrounded by a ring of mature trees, was almost hidden from sight at ground level. It was known, Mrs Davies had told him when asked, as The Folly.

He hadn't told Diane about it because even after only two days at Stoke Park, he found that for some unknown reason he was already intrigued by it, and he couldn't have borne hearing Diane make one of her inevitable remarks about it –

the sort of remarks she invariably made when Freddie enthused about something and she wished to cut whatever it was back down to size. If he'd tried to describe the pretty little house in the woods which so far he had only seen from his bedroom, she'd have called it something like cute or *perfectly Disneyesque*, immediately removing some of its magic and its mystery. So he'd left the house on the hill out of the picture he had painted for his fiancée for that very reason, and because he was determined that for as long as possible it should remain his secret.

Later that day, when Freddie was exploring the big house more fully, he found himself up in the attics on the fourth floor. From the largest of the rooms, which judging from the way it was still half furnished must have been the day nursery and which looked out down the long drive and over the parkland, he found there was a perfect view to be had of the house on the hill which half hidden away behind its belt of trees and shimmering in the summer haze looked as if it were something out of a fairy tale. How long he stared at it he had no idea, but when he came out of his reverie he found he was sitting on the window seat with his knees pulled up under his chin and his arms wrapped around his legs, still staring dreamily out across the park. Moreover the sun, which had been at about three o'clock in a cloudless sky was now much nearer four o'clock, and sure enough when he checked his watch he found he must have been sitting there for the best part of an hour.

Sitting there asleep, he decided, yet he had no recollection of taking up the position in which he now found himself nor of waking up. He didn't feel he had been sleeping either because he had no sense of weariness and none whatsoever of that feeling of slight disorientation people admit to when they find themselves awakening from an unexpected sleep. Instead he felt as he had felt when he'd successfully undergone hypnotherapy to conquer his

fear of flying, as if his bodily mechanism had simply been switched off for a given period and then switched back on. At the time his therapist had described it as like being in a spell, just as he imagined ancient enchantments to have been, namely a form of deep hypnosis.

Freddie would have preferred to put this unfathomable slumber down to delayed jet lag had he not remembered that before flying he had taken a recommended dose of melatonin to insure that the body's biorhythms remained undisturbed by the time change. Besides on the many occasions when he had previously been jet lagged he'd known it, and he'd certainly never before found himself just dropping off into an inexplicable sleep with no recollection of having done so. So something else had happened to him, something else must somehow have mesmerized him and induced a kind of trance. Maybe some unseen siren had sung to him, Freddie grinned to himself, in an effort to lure him on to her rocky island. Or perhaps it was that odd little house over there in the far woods. Perhaps it was enchanted, and while he had been sitting there looking at it, he had been caught up in its spell. In fact the more he looked at it the more he got a growing feeling that his lost hour was all to do with the house, however absurd he knew that seemed, because he felt it was a house he already knew which, of course, was impossible because he had never visited this part of England before in his entire life. So why, he wondered, this feeling of *déjà vu*? Why this bewildering feeling of familiarity?

As if a closer sight of it might help, he suddenly found himself hurrying off to fetch a pair of powerful field glasses he'd seen hanging downstairs in a cloakroom and then running back up the two floors taking the stairs two at a time in his rush to see what was actually there.

There was no visible sign of life, although through the field glasses he could see the place was quite obviously immaculately maintained, with its lawns freshly mown and

the earth in its full-flowering rose borders recently turned over. To one side he could quite clearly see a large ornamental pond decoratively set with shrubs and small trees, which he stared at hard and long because he again felt that he knew it – yet he didn't know from where. Even so he was certain that the path at the end of the two-tiered lawns led down towards a gate which itself opened onto a beech wood, although he couldn't see on account of the screen of trees which backed the property. But nowhere was there any other human being to be seen, neither at any of the windows nor anywhere in the gardens.

Then just as he went to put his field glasses down he saw something. Behind the shrubs which surrounded the pond he caught sight of a slowly moving shadowy form. Refocusing the glasses he trained them exactly on that spot, just where he could see the branches of a bush still moving quite vigorously as if someone was tugging at them.

Seconds later the culprit came into view, and the moment Freddie saw it the back of his neck prickled and his hands began to shake, for there standing looking out across the lawn chewing the leaves it had just plucked from the branches of the shrub it had been attacking was a deer.

But that wasn't what took his breath away. What made him look so hard and look again was the fact that the deer was white. Just as he remembered from somewhere before.

AS MRS DAVIES served Freddie his second unappetizing dinner in a row, this time one of cold ham, chicken and an undressed salad of lettuce, tomato, hard-boiled egg and beetroot, he asked her what she knew about the white house at the far end of the park.

‘It belongs to this house, Mr Jourdan,’ she explained, setting down a full bottle of Heinz mayonnaise beside him, ‘as far as I understand it and I’m relatively new to these parts. Meant to have been built as some sort of music room. Somewhere where the family of the day could go and play and not disturb anybody. Only wish I could have afforded such a thing. You couldn’t hear yourself think when our son was growing up, not once he started playing the electric guitar. You never heard such a noise.’

‘Who lives there now?’ Freddie wanted to know, putting a surreptitious finger in the salad and finding the lettuce to be warm. ‘Is it still family owned?’

‘Again I can’t be too sure, Mr Jourdan, not knowing all the ins and outs, but as far as I hear, the family haven’t used it since some time in the seventies. Not to live in, that is. It was let for a long time, but now it’s rented out summer only. Now is everything all right, Mr Jourdan? I do hope the food’s to your liking. Because if it isn’t you just have to say.’

Freddie took off his glasses and frowned then put them back on again, pretending to take a closer look at the salad.

‘I was wondering if you have any oil, Mrs Davies?’ he said as quietly as he could, trying to make it sound like an afterthought rather than an absolute necessity.

‘Oil, Mr Jourdan?’ Mrs Davies repeated. ‘Whatever would you be wanting oil for while you’re eating?’

‘No no, oil for the salad, Mrs Davies,’ Freddie said, removing his glasses once more and scratching his mop of long dark brown hair with one sidepiece. ‘Olive oil, you know? And wine vinegar and maybe some black pepper? I think maybe that’s what this salad might need.’

Mrs Davies stared at Freddie as if he was speaking in a foreign tongue, which Freddie supposed now he came to consider what she had prepared for him so far, he undoubtedly was. He had heard plenty about old-fashioned English domestic cooking but this was his first experience of it and for an expert cook such as Freddie it was not a happy one.

‘Come along, Mrs Davies,’ he said getting up from the table. ‘Let’s go have a look in the pantry.’

A thorough search of the cupboards in the larder revealed some of the ingredients which Freddie required, and with the addition of some spring onions, green peppers, bottled olives and a tin of anchovies, Freddie remade the salad and then proceeded to demonstrate to the nonplussed Mrs Davies how to make a proper French dressing.

‘You’re obviously a bit of a cook then,’ she observed finally, as he tossed the salad.

‘It’s my hobby,’ Freddie replied.

‘Lucky you,’ Mrs Davies said with a sigh. ‘I’d far rather cook as a hobby than a job.’

‘I love cooking. Cooking is like love. You have to enter into it with abandon, Mrs Davies. Or not at all.’

Contrary to what he was expecting, Mrs Davies gave a great guffaw of laughter at this remark.

‘Yes. Well – that puts a different complexion on it altogether, Mr Jourdan!’ she said. ‘Oh yes, I’ll remember that all right next time I’m making a spotted dick!’

Freddie grinned and pinching the rest of the new potatoes Mrs Davies had cooked and all but ruined, he set about

redeeming what was left of them with a parsley-and-butter dressing.

‘Tell me more about the little white house,’ he said, as he finished off his act of redemption.

‘The Folly, Mr Jourdan. Least to give it its proper name.’

‘I take it someone’s staying there, yes? I mean the gardens look awful neat.’

‘The gardens are always done come what may, Mr Jourdan. All the year round no matter what. The family have always insisted on that.’

‘But I couldn’t actually see any sign of life,’ Freddie said, setting the freshly made dishes on a tray which Mrs Davies took from him, following him back to the dining room.

‘You been up there already then. Pretty little place, isn’t it?’

‘Utterly charming. But it appears there’s no-one there at present?’

His housekeeper set the tray down on the table without replying while Freddie retook his seat. As he helped himself to a glass of Chablis from the bottle he’d already opened, Mrs Davies wiped both her hands down the front of her floral apron, preparatory to leaving.

‘Right,’ she said, taking the wine bottle and placing it out of reach on the sideboard. ‘Then if you’ve got everything you want, Mr Jourdan—’

‘You still haven’t told me whether or not anyone’s living there, Mrs Davies,’ he reminded her, pointing out of the window ahead of him. ‘In The Folly. I think there has to be.’

‘What makes you think there might be, Mr Jourdan? As I said, the gardens are always done on a regular basis, and—’

‘Because I can see a plume of smoke from behind the trees. Look.’

Where Freddie was pointing, against the evening blue of the summer sky a faint curl of smoke could be seen rising up from the house on the distant hill.

‘Most likely the gardener,’ Mrs Davies remarked. ‘Most likely the gardener lighting a bonfire.’

‘I suppose so,’ Freddie replied, sensing his housekeeper’s evasion. ‘I guess it has to be far too warm an evening for anyone to be lighting a fire in the house.’

When he had finished picking his way through his now almost palatable meal, instead of retiring to the drawing room and listening to music on the now fully operational hi-fi, Freddie sat on at the dinner table watching the column of smoke which was now rising steadily and more thickly from behind the ring of trees.

He knew it wasn’t a bonfire because bonfire smoke billows in clouds and soon dies down, while this smoke had risen in a steady plume all evening, just like smoke which rises from a chimney. This suspicion was confirmed the moment Freddie went upstairs to the attics and, looking out once more across the parkland through his purloined binoculars, saw against the evening sky a line of fire-smoke curling clearly up from one chimney. He sat watching it in fascination, as if it might be a signal to him from the mysterious occupant of the house.

He carried on watching until the evening finally turned to night and the house disappeared into the darkness.

Unable to contain his curiosity any longer, the following morning he made his way across the parkland, out of the back gate and climbed up the road which he imagined would lead him to The Folly. At first he was unable to find a way in since the entrance was unmarked by either a sign or a gateway and thus was all but invisible. Finally he found a single track leading off the lane up which he had climbed from the back gate of the park, and which must have been built originally purely as a service road for the house. In fact so anonymous was the first part of the entrance to The Folly that anyone ignorant of the fact that there was a house

there would think it was simply a path leading into beech woods.

Knowing better, Freddie sunk his hands deep in the back pockets of his chinos and trying to look as casual as he could, mooched up the unmade road for a good hundred yards until it divided into two. There were car tracks up both, and guessing wrong first time Freddie took the left-hand turn and a hundred or so yards further on came to a dead end where the path simply ran out. Turning back and trying the other route he finally arrived outside a pair of high ornamental iron gates. They were closed and when he tried them he found they were not only closed, they were also locked. On the right-hand stone pillar was a small dark green professionally painted sign which read:

PRIVATE

Visitors strictly by appointment only.

Below the notice there was a brass grill, and underneath that a bell. After a moment's contemplation while he stared at the bell wondering who or what it was going to conjure up Freddie pressed it, then stood back and waited. Through the gates and just beyond the turn of the drive he could see part of the front of the house, the rest of it being half hidden by the shrubbery and trees. But above the trees the plume of smoke still rose from the chimney, even though it was now nearly eleven o'clock in the morning on a hot June day.

He tried the bell again, having waited fully two minutes for an answer. On this occasion after only half the time a voice suddenly spoke to him through the grill. It was a woman's voice, not young and definitely not welcoming.

'Yes?'

'Oh. Good morning. My name is Frederick Jourdan.'

'Yes?'

'Yes. I've - I've taken Stoke Park for six months. For a sabbatical. Maybe you heard?'

‘And you obviously can’t have read the notice, Mr Jourdan. The one right in front of you.’

‘No, I read it all right. I read it as I was waiting. But then I thought since we were kind of neighbours—’

‘You don’t have an appointment.’

‘No, that is correct.’ Freddie took his glasses off, checked them for invisible dirt, and then put them back again as he spoke. ‘That is perfectly correct I do not have an appointment. But as I was saying I thought that since we’re neighbours I’d come up and introduce myself.’

‘I’m sorry, Mr Jourdan, but admission is strictly by appointment only,’ the voice said. ‘Good day.’

‘Now wait a minute! I’m only trying to be neighbourly! Are you there? I only wanted to call and say hello!’

But the voice behind the grill was now silent and stayed that way, despite Freddie trying the bell again in a vain attempt to call it back.

‘Okay,’ he muttered to himself as he made his way back down the driveway. ‘Fine. You want to play hard to get whoever you are, then that’s fine by me.’

He found Mrs Davies down in the kitchens when he arrived back, sitting at the long scrubbed wooden table sharing a pot of tea with Enid.

‘Lunch made, Mrs Davies?’ Freddie asked, still feeling faintly exasperated after his unsuccessful call. ‘I like to eat not much later than one as a rule.’

‘Lunch is all done, Mr Jourdan,’ Mrs Davies replied. ‘And you’re all right for time, because it’s still not gone five to.’

The women sipped their tea and watched in what seemed to him to be a critical silence as he unpacked the dozen or so bottles of wine he’d bought in Worcester where he’d gone to shop after his abortive call at The Folly.

‘So what’s on the menu today then?’ he asked, putting two bottles of Pouilly-Fuissé in the large old-fashioned refrigerator.

‘What’s the recipe today, Raymondo?’ Enid said for what seemed to Freddie no good reason at all.

‘I’ve done you a nice tongue salad, and a gooseberry flan with custard,’ Mrs Davies replied. ‘And a nice shepherd’s pie for tonight.’

‘I don’t like tongue, Mrs Davies,’ Freddie said. ‘I don’t even much like the word, let alone the taste. And what in heaven’s name is a shepherd’s pie?’

After his housekeeper had described the dish she was intending to make him for dinner, Freddie told her kindly but firmly that they were going to have to discuss menus, explaining that he had very particular tastes.

‘In fact if it’s all the same to you,’ he added, ‘I’d like to help out with the cooking. I’ll design the menus, you can help me prepare, and I’ll cook.’

‘Mr Jourdan is a bit of a cook, Enid,’ Mrs Davies told the cleaner who was busy pouring herself yet another cup of tea. ‘He likes to cook as a hobby.’

‘It wouldn’t be my idea of a hobby,’ Enid said, eating the last of the cookies. ‘My idea of a hobby’s not doing nothing.’

To prevent himself from laughing out loud, Freddie busied himself with opening a bottle of good dry sherry and pouring a glass, held it up to the light to admire its amber glow.

‘Now then,’ he said, eyeing the two women through the glass of sherry. ‘There is someone in The Folly. Because I called there before I went into the town. I know there’s someone there because they spoke to me through the entryphone.’

As he sipped his drink he watched attentively as the pair of them first eyed each other in silence and then carefully eyed him.

‘Yes. Well time I was going, Freda,’ Enid said getting up from the table. ‘Leonard won’t get no dinner otherwise.’

‘Come on, ladies!’ Freddie laughed. ‘Who precisely is the mysterious occupant? What’s the big secret for heaven’s sake?’

‘I really must be off, Freda,’ Enid repeated, stuffing her last bit of cookie into her mouth and hanging her housecoat on the back of the door. ‘If I’m late again it’ll be more than my life’s worth.’

As the cleaner departed Mrs Davies tried her best to get Freddie to take his drink upstairs while she prepared his lunch, but he wasn’t in the mood to be fobbed off. Far from deterring him, the fact that no-one would give him one straight answer about the occupant of The Folly only doubled his interest.

‘Oh for goodness sake so what if there is someone up there now, Mr Jourdan?’ Mrs Davies finally relented. ‘I don’t really see what concern it is of ours.’

‘My concern is purely a neighbourly one, Mrs Davies,’ Freddie replied, pretending that was the sum of his concern. ‘That’s the American way when we move into a new neighbourhood. We like calling on each other, and introducing ourselves.’

‘Don’t misunderstand me, Mr Jourdan,’ Mrs Davies said as she ladled out onto his plate a portion of cold mashed potato. ‘What I meant by it not needing concern you was because it won’t, you see. It won’t concern you because the person staying up there in The Folly won’t concern herself with you. She don’t with anyone, not ever. She comes down with her companion or housekeeper or what-have-you for the summer — in fact it was most likely her what spoke to you this morning, her housekeeper or whatever. Anyhow that’s the way it is. She comes down here for the summer from June through August, no-one sees her, she don’t see no-one, and then she goes back to wherever she come from again. And that’s the way it is. That’s how it’s always been.’

‘For how long is it “how it’s always been”, Mrs Davies?’ Freddie asked, finding himself following her back upstairs once again to the dining room. ‘And is this person young, or what? If young, how young? If old, how old?’

‘I’ve only been here two years, Mr Jourdan,’ his housekeeper told him as they made their way through the pass door. ‘So all I can say is like that’s the way it’s been ever since I been here. I’m not from these parts, you see. After my husband died I come down from London when I got this job. So all I know is what I seen, Mr Jourdan. Which isn’t much over two years, as you may imagine.’

‘Someone must know who she is, Mrs Davies. Whoever is staying up there in The Folly can’t be a total mystery to everyone.’

‘I never heard the matter discussed, truth to tell,’ his housekeeper replied. ‘That’s how people are round these parts. Not like in the city where everyone’s after everyone else’s business. No I never heard the matter ever really being discussed. Not as such. Now if there’s anything else you’ll be wanting, you just ring the bell.’

The next time Diane rang, Freddie told her nothing of the mystery in which he seemed bent on involving himself, and which were he to admit it was mostly of his own making since the occupant of The Folly appeared to be of no real interest to any of his staff. The reason Freddie chose not to tell his fiancée was that Diane was possessive enough at the best of times, and the very thought that there was a mysterious single woman living in a romantic white house within the boundaries of Stoke Park would undoubtedly have been enough to get her on the next plane over.

‘God I hate the telephone,’ she said, suddenly halfway through their conversation.

‘Why’s that, Diane? You’ve never hated using it.’

‘I hate it when I’m talking to you because I can’t see what you’re doing. What you’re thinking.’

And that was just as well, Freddie thought, since his thoughts were elsewhere, across the parkland and in a garden which lay circled by beech trees. He talked but he didn’t have an idea what he was saying, but whatever it was

was making Diane laugh which soon brought Freddie back to earth because the one thing Freddie really couldn't stand about Diane was her laugh. That and the way she was forever rearranging his unarrangeable hair. But her laugh was the really bad thing. She didn't laugh breathing out as did most people, she laughed breathing in, sounding consequently as if she was in distress rather than having fun. As he listened to her still laughing away, Freddie really wasn't at all sure he could spend the rest of his life living with someone who made such a terrible sound every time she found something funny.

'I won't be able to call you this time tomorrow, Freddie darling,' she was saying now she'd stopped creaking. 'I'm in court defending this case I told you about. The molestation case? Which looks as if it'll run and run. But I promise I'll try and call you the moment I'm home.'

'Don't,' Freddie said, almost too quickly. 'What I mean is you don't have to call me every day, Diane. In the time I'm going to be here, that'd work out at around two hundred calls and you'd be bored stiff of me by the time I get home.'

'In your dreams. The day you ever bore me Freddie, you sweet man, it'll be in your dreams. Talking of which, how are your dreams?'

'Why should you ask that?' Freddie asked quickly, without beginning to understand why he found himself suddenly on the defensive.

'Because I wanted to know, Freddie, that's why. Have you been having any more of those dreams? About—'

'No, I haven't,' he cut in. 'Since getting here I've been sleeping - and dreaming - like a baby. I haven't had one bad dream.'

'That's great. That's the whole idea of your - your sabbatical. Right? To catch up on some sleep. Unravel the famous sleeve of care. So keep on sleeping well, sweetheart. And pleasant dreams. I love you.'

'Okay. Me too, Diane.'

He couldn't lie. He couldn't tell her he loved her, he could only make it sound as if he did. He couldn't tell Diane he didn't love her any more when he knew he didn't, because he didn't yet know why.

That night as he lies in bed with the curtains wide open and the bright moon shining he thinks about dreaming. He thinks about the dreams he's had, most especially the recurrent one. It's always the same, at least as far as he can remember. It begins in exactly the same way, with him in a vast tunnel where there is no light at either end although voices shout to him from both directions to come their way because their direction is the only safe route out. And every time he turns the voices come from different directions and the shape of the tunnel changes. Then he is in a rowing boat which is moving downstream. He tries to steer it but although it has a rudder it's useless because the boat won't steer, no matter which way and how hard he turns the rudder. In the bottom of the boat is a jar of flour he has just bought and which he must deliver before the boat which is now leaking fills with water and ruins it. The boat moves slowly down the stream, and as it does his fear increases, until right above him a window suddenly appears in the roof of the tunnel through which he can see the night sky. With his hands he tries to paddle the boat back against the stream so that he remains under this window which is now getting smaller and smaller. It is absolutely vital that he stays boat under this window until the shooting star he's been waiting for crosses the sky, but the force of the water is getting too strong and the window is getting higher and higher and smaller and smaller. He tries to call for help because someone is coming through a door which is beginning to open very slowly in the wall beside him, but hard as he tries to shout no sound comes from his mouth. Instead he tries to grab the rudder but it isn't there any more, it's a rattlesnake which recoils from him, sitting up

and hissing. Still trying to call for help but only managing a strange low moaning sound, he crawls down the boat and under the seats which are now endless and occupied by people in life jackets who although they are all sitting up he knows are dead, all of them drowned because of the water coming from their mouths and their ears. The door in the wall then bursts open and someone is coming through it although he can't see who, just as a light has appeared at the end of the tunnel but too late, because the door is opening beside him and it's dark beyond it, darker than anything he has ever seen while the light at the end of the tunnel is getting further away rather than nearer until it is just the merest pinprick which is when he wakes up, making this slow and terrible moan, just as he wakes up now with his arm bent in front of his tightly closed eyes still trying his best to make someone hear him before it's too late.

'No!' he shouts, at last managing to turn the terrible moan into an articulate cry for help, but in his panic he has sent one of his bedside lights flying and knocked his night-time glass of water clean off the table as he sits up in his bed in the pitch dark suddenly and all at once wide awake. The curtains are billowing at the windows while outside a sudden summer storm is bringing the rain down in torrents. For a moment he has no idea where he is. At first he imagines he's home in his apartment but he can't be because nothing is familiar. The windows are in the wrong place, he can see that straightaway as he wipes the streaming sweat off his brow. The ceiling is higher, the shape of the other lamp beside his bed is different, and even the bed isn't his, so where in hell is he?

With his heart still pumping as if it's a piston, Freddie reaches out to switch on the lamp which is still standing and as soon as he does he knows where he is and that he has been dreaming. He is in bed at Stoke Park, the house he has rented for six months and where he has come to rest, and since it is dark but his book is beside him he must have