



Ann Cleeves

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THE DARK WIVES



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Ann
Cleeves

THE DARK
WIVES

MACMILLAN

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This book is dedicated to teens everywhere, and especially to the Dark Wives – uppity young women with minds of their own, struggling to find a place in a difficult world.

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The idea for this book was triggered by an investigative piece about private children's homes on BBC Radio 4's *File on Four*, but the novel is entirely fictitious, and none of the institutions or characters are based on reality.



Chapter One

It's NOVEMBER TODAY. I HATE NOVEMBER. Two years ago, in November, my dad ran off. A year ago, Mam stopped eating and started slipping away. She got the sack from the travel agency in town, and I caught her talking to the TV when it wasn't even switched on. She had the idea that it was talking back. There was just her and me, and I felt I was drowning. I'm only fourteen, so what could I do to help?

I tried to tell Miss at school. I'd always thought she was okay, but in the end, she was only interested that I wasn't wearing the uniform socks and that I hadn't got my homework in on time. When I told her about Mam, she frowned and said I was making excuses. I needed to stick to the rules, whatever was happening at home. If I had real problems, I should talk to pupil welfare.

But pupil welfare is run by Mrs Saltburn, and she hates me, because she takes RE and I told her that I couldn't believe in a God that allows war and famine and anyway, what about the climate emergency?

'Salvation is an academy with a Christian ethos, Chloe. That was made clear before your parents chose it as your place of education.'

I wanted to tell her that I was getting into Wicca, which made far more sense to me, but then I'd have been in detention for the rest of the week. Also, that my parents put Salvation at the top of the list because the only other school in the catchment is Birks Comp, and a year nine kid got stabbed there, and the GCSE results are shite. But then she would have said I was being cheeky and that would have got me detention too.

Now it's November again. Mam's back in hospital, and I'm having to live here: Rosebank Home for the teenage kids nobody wants. I don't blame Mam. She's ill. And Dad's not even in the country. Apparently, he's in Dubai, making a fortune selling fancy apartments to rich people. He's not answering my calls or texts and I'm not even sure I've got the right number for him. Maybe he has a new woman in his life. A new family. Maybe he doesn't need me anymore. So I have tried talking to Miss and to Dad, and I'm not going to bother with Nana and Grandpa. They've always hated Mam and taken Dad's side and when I talk, they don't seem to hear. Nana's like Miss – only bothered about what I'm wearing and what I look like.

BUT NOBODY LISTENS.

That's not fair. Josh listens. But he's only agency staff and he's not here all the time. He listens when I tell him about the pervy guy waiting in his car outside the home – though maybe I was wrong about that – and that Brad Russell is like some sort of gangster in a crap movie, wearing that stupid parka even indoors, and dealing crack, and that I'm scared because there's no lock on my door. I'm not sure if Josh passes on the information though, or if anyone listens to him.

Josh told me to keep this diary to let out my thoughts and feelings, and we go through it when he's working and when he has time. Mostly he works in the evenings and at weekends. Today's Sunday, so he should be here, covering for Jan who's got the weekend off, but with agency staff

you never know. Agency staff cost money, so sometimes Dave has to manage and it's just him and Tracey sleeping in. I don't think Dave minds when it's just the two of them.

Josh was supposed to have a shift tonight, and I thought I saw his car draw up. I was looking out of the window, watching out for him. Usually, I can see the light at the end of the quay where the coal ships used to tie up, and the big container ships heading for the docks, and the ghost ships with no crew lurking on the horizon, but it's misty, with that drizzle that feels like a heavy fog. I can't see anything. It's as if this house is on its own in the world, as if I'm on my own in the world and nobody would care if I died. Sometimes I dream about killing myself, then I think about Josh. It seems to me that he might care.

This place is worse than the bin where Mam's locked up. It's worse than prison.

Miss said I could be someone special when I started at Salvation, and my SATs were good. That was when Dad was still at home, and he came with Mam to parents' evening. She said I could be a poet or a songwriter. Then everything went wrong at home, and I couldn't concentrate, and I couldn't sleep. Miss didn't care about me anymore. Salvation only cares about the swotty kids who can make the school look good. When I got taken into care, I could tell they hoped I'd have to move to a new school, but the home's still in the catchment, and social services said I'd had enough disruption already, so they have to put up with me.

I might go down and meet Josh. We could go through the diary in the kitchen, and then he'll play cards with me if he's not too busy. The others are watching a film in the lounge. Tracey made them pizza and popcorn. But I'd rather play cards with Josh.

I think I could be in love with him.

Chapter Two

DETECTIVE INSPECTOR VERA STANHOPE LOOKED UP from the teenager's scrawl.

'It's got today's date. Chloe must have written it this evening.'

The manager of the children's home was faded, dusty. He had grey hair tied back in a ponytail. He seemed well out of his depth. Vera had seen the same ashamed look in some of her older colleagues' eyes: the people who were desperate to retire, but who couldn't quite make the jump. Because what would be the point of getting up in the morning if there were no work, nothing to get out of bed for? These were the lonely people, the bored ones, the introverts. Vera knew how they felt. She had no desire to retire, not even now when she felt like a failure. Especially now. Work was a kind of penance. They'd have to push her out.

She and David Limbrick, the manager, were standing outside in the corridor looking in at the room. The diary had been on the floor, close to the door. She'd reached in to pick it up with a blue-gloved hand, breaking every rule, but curious, because time was important now and it would take the CSIs a while to get here.

Vera was first on the scene because she'd still been in her office when the 999 call came through. Working late because she couldn't quite face driving into the hills to her empty house, so she'd sat at her desk, even though it was Sunday and the rest of the team had better things to do. Brooding about a dead young woman who'd once been a colleague, and thinking about how pointless her own life had become. Holly might have called it an existential crisis. Vera had heard the term, without understanding what it meant. Now, she had an inkling.

It was midnight and the CSIs were on their way. The pathologist would be there as soon as he could make it. He'd asked if it could wait until the morning, but she'd explained where she was, and the nature of the victim they'd found outside. And that a lass was missing. Now, it was just her and the manager. It seemed that David Limbrick slept in one of the staff rooms if he was on duty overnight, but he'd still been up when this tragedy had happened. When the body had been found, at least. Vera knew they'd be unlikely to get an accurate time of death. Paul Keating, the pathologist, made that clear every time they met. Dave told her he'd been working too. Catching up with things in the office. 'The bosses want up-to-date occupancy figures. It's all they seem to care about.' Moaning. Vera had guessed on first sight that he'd be a moaner.

Now they were both hovering outside the room, the door still open.

'I'll head outside again.' There was a uniformed officer with the body, but Vera wanted to take another look at the scene, despite the damp and the autumn chill. 'I just wanted to see Chloe's room.'

But she didn't move immediately and turned back to Limbrick.

'Anyone else here this evening?'

'Tracey,' he said. 'She was here until ten. She was in the lounge with the kids watching the movie, but she's not sleeping in tonight. It would just have been Josh and me on duty.'

'Tracey's one of the social workers?'

‘Aye.’

‘What time was Josh supposed to get here?’

‘Eight-ish. I heard his car. He was always early.’

‘But you didn’t see him?’

‘Nah, he was just sleeping in. Filling in for another staff member. I assumed he’d gone up to his room, and then that he was in the lounge with the others.’

‘And Chloe? When did you last see her?’

He shrugged.

‘You didn’t notice her leave?’

‘She’s a wanderer that one. We never know where she is.’

The corridor ahead of them was empty, but Vera was aware of a couple of slightly open doors, young eyes peering through, muttered conversations. Muted excitement. Murder could generate excitement. She could understand that. But not here. Not this.

‘Can we do anything with the other kids? Is there somewhere they can go?’

For the first time since the man had opened the main door to her, he seemed to come to life. ‘No! They’re only here because there’s nowhere else for them. They’re troubled. Disturbed.’

‘I don’t mean parents, families. Another home to take them in on a temporary basis. So my chaps can have a clear run.’

He looked at her as if she were mad. ‘You don’t understand. There is nowhere else. The whole system is falling apart.’

She thought he was being melodramatic. She’d contact social services in the morning. There must be some sort of emergency placement. She’d have to cope as best she could until then. But Limbrick was still talking. ‘Most of them have been through foster care. But they’re older, often aggressive. Hard to manage.’

Vera nodded down at the pages of the diary. ‘Even Chloe?’

He shrugged. ‘Yeah. Even her.’ But he looked away and Vera could tell he didn’t mean it, that he thought this hadn’t been the right place for her. At least now that he’d read the girl’s diary.

‘You can leave me to it for now,’ she said. ‘Maybe you could talk to the kids. Tell them I’ll be speaking to them in the morning, but that they should get some sleep.’ A pause. ‘Did Chloe have a special friend here?’

He shook his head. ‘She was a bit of a loner.’

‘Except for Josh.’ Vera looked at the diary she was still holding in her hand. ‘It seems that she got on with *him*.’

Limbrick didn’t answer. He wandered back down the corridor. One of the kids shouted out to him through a half-open door. He gave them a few words, but told them nothing. Vera shot a quick look back into Chloe Spence’s room and made her way outside.

Josh Woodburn was young. He lay on the edge of a rough path through a piece of scrub, close enough to the road for the street lamp outside Rosebank to cast a little light on his body. The PC had his back to Josh, looking out towards the sea and the lights of the town. Vera took out her torch to get a better look. Josh hardly looked old enough to be in a position of responsibility in a place like Rosebank, even if he was only on a temporary contract. He had floppy hair the colour of wheat and long, loose limbs. He was wearing jeans, a university sweatshirt and trainers. His face was turned towards Vera, but she could see the back of his head, the large round hole in the skull where he’d been hit, the blood that clotted and matted in the pale hay-coloured hair.

Oh Chloe, Vera thought. What have you done? And where are you now? And if this wasn't you – and really there's nothing in your diary to suggest that it was – are you still alive?
Because Chloe Spence had disappeared.

Vera stood next to the body and stared back towards Rosebank. She'd spent a bit of time volunteering in a children's home when she was a cadet. In those days, young trainee cops were sent out into the community to get to know their patch. It wouldn't hurt, Vera thought, if police training still included more good works and less sitting at a desk in the uni being talked at. The kids' home had been a big house on the corner of a leafy street. There'd been a garden with bikes and a tyre swing tied on a big tree. She'd been there in November, and they'd built a bonfire, and the house parents had let off fireworks. The children had swung sparklers around their heads, eyes wide and bright. There were potatoes baked in foil and sausages and toffee the kids had made that afternoon. It had been nothing like this place.

To be fair, the kids in that home had been nothing like the Rosebank kids. They were younger. Distressed and traumatized maybe, but easier to handle. You could cuddle a seven-year-old, couldn't you? Distract them with lights and sweets and stories. It would be hard to cuddle a fifteen-year-old lad, who'd punched his grandmother and stolen her pension to buy smack. Who'd just avoided the Young Offenders' Institution because of the tales of abuse he'd suffered. Who was handed over to social services to be cared for instead.

All the same, Vera couldn't see how being in that place was helping them. Inside, it was shabby and grey. It was as if all the light and the life had been sucked from it. Once, it had been a guest house for the workers who'd put up the new battery factory just up the coast. Before that, maybe for families who wanted a cheap holiday on the coast, though the beach here was still black with sea coal. Then it had become a bail hostel. Then a hostel for asylum seekers. And now this. A bleak house on the edge of a former pit village, with threadbare carpets and everywhere small signs of violence: a door almost pulled off its hinges, a sofa with a scorch mark, not quite hidden by a cushion. How could a child feel safe or loved here? Vera knew what it felt like to be unloved, but she'd grown up in the hills, with space and clean air, and couldn't remember ever feeling unsafe.

She said a few words to the officer, reassuring him that someone would be along to relieve him soon, and then reluctantly made her way back inside.

Chapter Three

IT WAS SEVEN IN THE MORNING and just getting light. Vera was sitting in the manager's office, waiting for more troops to arrive. Dr Keating was outside with the body, hidden from the world by a tent, surrounded by police tape. A couple of CSIs were in Chloe's room, the door now firmly shut against prying eyes.

Manager. The word stuck in her throat. The folk in charge weren't house parents now. They were managers. As if they were making widgets, not bringing up children. David Limbrick was with her; he'd been there all night too. The ponytail gave her hope. Once, perhaps, he had been an idealist. He'd become a social worker because he'd cared. The manager of a widget factory wouldn't have a ponytail.

'Tell me about the dead man,' she said, looking out of the window at the pale wash above the horizon. 'Josh Woodburn.'

'He came to us through the agency. It's hard to keep permanent staff. The company took up the references and did the police checks. That always takes for ever.' He glared at her as if the delay was all her fault. 'Josh had only been filling the gap for six weeks or so. He seemed pleasant enough.' He looked up at her. 'I didn't really get to know him. It's all firefighting here. One crisis after another. And most agency staff don't stay long.'

So it's not worth the effort getting to know them?

'And Chloe? Any history of violence?'

'Nothing physical here. Her teachers say she's aggressive at school. Challenging.'

Well, you would be, wouldn't you, Vera thought, if that was the only way to get their attention?

NOBODY LISTENS. The words on the page of the diary scorched into her memory.

'I don't understand why nobody heard anything, saw anything, last night. How did Chloe leave without you knowing?'

'This isn't a prison, Inspector.'

'But you'd want to know where they all are! And it was dark. Not late I know, but surely they're not allowed just to wander off.'

Limbrick shut his eyes. He was exhausted. She thought again that he'd been awake all night too. 'They're supposed to check in with the office, ask permission, but they're not exactly keepers of rules, these kids. This is a big house and there are ways in and out. Probably more ways than I know.'

'It sounds like chaos!'

He looked up at her with his sad grey eyes. 'Most of the time, it is chaos. We're under-staffed and under-resourced. Most of our residents have been through trauma. They need counselling and proper psychological support. But the children and adolescent mental health services are stretched too, and when the kids do get to the top of the waiting list, the process feels more like a

tick-box exercise.’ For the first time he seemed engaged, angry. ‘In the end, most of them will come to you, Inspector. Taking up your time and an expensive prison place.’

She nodded. Now, he seemed brave to her, sticking it out, doing his best.

‘What’s that she says about Wicca? That’s witchcraft, isn’t it?’

He shrugged. ‘She’s got all sorts of weird ideas.’ A pause. ‘Never has her nose out of a book.’

‘Have you any idea where Chloe might be? Friends? Extended family?’

He shook his head. ‘There are grandparents, but apparently they never got on. I phoned last night, but they hadn’t seen her.’

‘She can’t have got far, and we’ve got a watch out for her.’ After all, Vera thought, how far could a fourteen-year-old lass get, when it was dark, and she had no transport?

A uniformed officer was standing outside, guarding the front door. Vera could hear his voice and a mutter of conversation and then the bang of a door, before a big woman pushed her way into the office. She was middle-aged, a peroxide blonde, wearing leggings and a sweatshirt with a tiger’s face on it.

‘What the fuck’s going on outside then?’ The voice deeply local and a bit amused.

‘This is Tracey.’ Dave gave the woman a smile. Tentative, a kind of warning. ‘And this is Detective Inspector Stanhope.’ A pause. ‘Josh Woodburn’s been murdered. A dog-walker found him on the edge of the common last night. And Chloe Spence has gone missing.’

A moment’s silence. ‘Dave, man, I leave you on your own for one night . . .’ She looked at them both. ‘Are you being serious? This is for real?’

‘I’m afraid so.’ Vera had taken to the woman immediately – there was something robust about her, like she’d stand up for the kids in her care – but she was also a potential witness. ‘We’ll need a statement. You were watching a movie with the kids yesterday evening?’

‘Only with the three of them. Chloe didn’t want to join in.’ Tracey glanced at her watch. ‘Look, can this wait until later? I want to get breakfast sorted, make sure they’re out of their beds. Two of them have school to get to, and I don’t like them leaving with empty stomachs.’

‘Sure,’ Vera said. ‘No rush.’ She was liking the big woman even more.

There was sunshine now, so pale you could tell that winter was on its way, and on the drive outside, two cars pulled up. Her sergeant, Joe Ashworth, climbed out of the first and a woman from the second. It took the inspector a moment to recognize her. She got to her feet and left Limbrick’s office to greet the newcomers.

They stood outside the house. Vera was glad of the fresh air, the chill of the breeze from the sea. Rosebank stood on the edge of the town and she could see there were still lights on in the houses just inland. People had forgotten to turn them off when the sun came up. She nodded to Joe and turned to the other woman. Katherine Willmore, former lawyer and now Police and Crime Commissioner. A political appointment, elected by the residents of her patch. ‘Ma’am.’ Vera had time for the woman, but there was a question in the inflection of her voice:

What the shit are you doing here? This is operational. My business not yours.

‘I was in the office early,’ Willmore said. She was another woman who couldn’t sleep. ‘I knew this would be a sensitive case.’ A pause. ‘Private care homes have been in the news lately. There was that TV documentary.’ Another pause and then a confession. ‘I’d like to bring them back into local authority control. It doesn’t seem right to be making a profit from troubled children.’ She looked up and gave a wan smile. ‘Not that it’ll happen, the way things are

financially.’ She looked out over the sand stained with coal dust to the grey sky. ‘More likely to see a herd of pigs flying out there.’

Willmore had a daughter who was a little troubled herself. Vera nodded, but said nothing. She kept away from politics. Instead, she talked Willmore and Joe through the case as she understood it. ‘A dog-walker found the body at about nine-thirty. Woodburn’s car was here – the manager heard it at about eight and assumed he was inside – but nobody saw him. So we can assume time of death at between eight and nine-thirty. We won’t get any closer than that, even after the post-mortem. The others were in the lounge watching a film, apparently. It’s a rambling place, but they can only take four kids. They all have problems apparently. Tricky to handle.’

‘And the missing girl?’

‘Chloe Spence. Fourteen going on fifteen. The youngest resident of Rosebank now. Father left the family and the mam had some sort of nervous breakdown. A year on and the mother’s back in the psychiatric hospital. According to the records, she’d suffered bouts of depression since she was a teenager. Chloe’s an only child and there are no other relatives she’s willing to stay with.’

‘We think she killed Woodburn?’

‘Well, she’s disappeared. Hard to know if she’s the killer or another victim. We need to find her.’

Joe Ashworth was lurking just outside Vera’s field of view, and she could tell he was feeling restive.

‘Go and see how Doc Keating is getting on.’ She gestured towards the gathering around the tent. ‘Then find the manager, Limbrick. He’s in the office just inside the front door. He’ll show you into Chloe’s room.’ She paused for a moment. ‘We need to find the lass.’

‘She’s our prime suspect then,’ he said. It was a statement rather than a question.

Vera didn’t know what to say to that. She was remembering the diary entry. *I think I could be in love with him.* Could the lass have written that and then hit him so hard that his blood and bone spattered the thin grey grass?

‘Billy Cartwright is already in there. Can you chat to Limbrick, once you’ve got an idea of the lie of the land? He’s been up all night and I think we should let him go home as soon as we can. Get him to introduce you to the kids. Tracey, the other worker on duty, is already here getting their breakfast. She’ll be on shift all day and we can get a statement from her when the kids are out of the way.’

Vera didn’t want to go in yet. She needed a few more minutes to enjoy the sunshine. To give her the energy to put on a brave face.

She’d expected Willmore to follow Joe in, but the woman hovered beside her, irritating as a fly in summer.

‘I hear you’ve made an appointment. Holly’s replacement.’

That stab of guilt. *Nobody will replace Holly.*

‘Yes, ma’am.’

‘A local woman?’

‘From Newcastle.’ Brash and loud and as different from the cerebral Holly as it would be possible to be. The new DC would enjoy a night out with the lasses on the Quayside, eyeing up the footballers, getting pissed and rowdy until the make-up smudged and the shoes were discarded. ‘I think she’ll do very well. I’ve had good reports and she seems the sort to be able to look after herself.’

Willmore nodded once more. ‘I’ll leave you to it, then. Keep me informed.’ She walked

briskly towards her car. Vera took a breath and went inside.

Chapter Four

JOE ASHWORTH WAS WORRIED. IT WAS only weeks since Holly, their colleague, had died, and the boss was still grieving. She didn't need this. Not another high-profile murder with political rumblings. Not with Willmore sticking her neb in. He told himself that Vera should have taken some time off after the funeral. He felt sad enough about Holly, but he didn't have such a burden of guilt to carry. He'd tried his best to save her. Joe had been brought up as a Methodist and his dad was a lay preacher. He still had a sliver of faith to see him through the bad times. He thought guilt was like a weight on Vera's shoulders. Physical. It made her seem stooped and old. Never before had he thought of Vera as old.

After checking in with the pathologist in the tent, Joe made his way inside. Limbrick took him to the girl's room and then led him back downstairs into a big kitchen. Joe wondered how anyone could have thought Rosebank was a good name for the place. It conjured up country cottages, chintz and cosiness, but the house was institutional, functional. This room had a peeling laminate floor and plastic chairs around a fake wood table. The walls were pale purple and clashed with the colour of the furniture. It looked as if someone had found a pot of leftover paint to cover stains which weren't quite hidden. A woman was standing by the stove frying sausages, and the smell made Ashworth realize that he'd not had breakfast. There was the background sound of a washing machine. Kids were helping themselves to cereal from catering-size boxes. There was lurid orange juice in a plastic jug. The plates were plastic, though these were teenagers not toddlers.

There were two lads and one girl. She wore leggings and a shapeless black school jersey, black gym shoes. There was something frail and haunted about her. When she reached for the jug of juice, her sleeve fell back, and Joe saw cut marks on her wrist. He wasn't one for flights of fancy, but he thought she'd been born scared. One of the lads, thin and weedy, looking younger than the others, was in a traditional uniform, with a tie and blazer. It was Monday, and in Joe's house the beginning of the week meant clean uniforms, everything newly ironed, smelling fresh. The kids might not stay tidy for long, but they started out looking good. Here, the uniforms were faded as if everything had been stuck in the wash together. Joe could have wept.

The last kid didn't wear uniform at all. He was in a rip-off Newcastle shirt over trackie bottoms. He was the leader. He had fierce, angry eyes, but there was something appealing about him too. An energy. He was good-looking in a romantic rebel kind of way. James Dean for a fresh generation. The sort lasses might love, but parents would hate. He nodded to the adults as they came in, and flashed a quick smile at Joe.

'What's going on then, Dave?' He couldn't quite keep still and was bouncing on the balls of his feet, like a boxer before a bout. 'I need to be in town.'

Joe wondered if he was high, or rattling, desperate for a fix, or maybe he was just the sort of lad who needed more space than this. Joe had been to school with boys like that, boys who couldn't be contained. They'd become runners, athletes, soldiers.

‘Josh is dead,’ Limbrick said. ‘I explained last night. This is DS Ashworth. He wants to talk to you all.’

‘Just a few words,’ Joe said, ‘before you get off. We’ll send someone in to school this morning to take proper statements.’

Vera had wanted the kids out of the way as soon as possible.

‘I’m not at school.’ That quick smile again. ‘No one will have me. And I’m nearly sixteen anyway. I’ll be leaving soon.’

‘Then I can talk to you in a bit, can’t I?’ Joe fixed him with a stare. ‘We’re looking for Chloe. She might be in trouble. Does anyone know where she could be?’

There was a silence. The woman lifted sausages out of the pan and stuck them into sliced bread, put the sandwiches onto a plate and set it in the middle of the table.

The boys took one each. Still, nobody answered. The girl in the over-sized jumper made no move. Joe took a seat next to her. ‘Were you and Chloe friendly?’

‘Not really.’

‘What’s your name?’

‘Mel. Melanie Hunter.’ Her voice was scarcely more than a whisper.

‘Only two lasses in the place, you’d surely have stuck together.’

‘Not really,’ she said again.

Joe waited for some explanation, but none came.

‘Were you at school with her?’

Melanie shook her head. ‘I’m at Birks. She goes to Salvation Academy.’

Joe had heard of Salvation. It had the best exam results in the region. Not selective. Not allowed to be. But choosy. You needed an interview to get in.

‘Any idea where she might be?’

Melanie shrugged and picked at her nails. Joe was a father. His Jess was almost a teenager, and she could be pretty inscrutable. But he had no idea how to get through to this girl, with her blank eyes and flat voice.

He gave up with the lads in the end too. Nobody had heard or seen anything unusual. They were in the common room all evening watching a film. Josh was okay, they said. They didn’t expect him to stay long. Agency workers came and went.

Each bit of information was squeezed from them in grunts between mouthfuls of sausage and oozings of tomato ketchup. Joe couldn’t be sure they hadn’t fixed their story before he arrived.

In the end, he said they could go, and Mel and the weedy lad went out to get the bus to school. The woman followed them. Joe was left with Dave Limbrick and super-cool Brad.

‘Just answer the sergeant’s questions.’ Limbrick sounded exhausted now. ‘Then we’ll leave you alone.’

‘I’ve got to go into town. Now. Appointment with my social worker.’ This time the smile was challenging. He knew he wouldn’t be believed.

‘Answer the questions first.’

Brad shrugged. ‘Sure. What do you want to know?’

‘Tell me about Chloe.’

‘She thinks she’s better than the rest of us.’ A pause. ‘She has something about her. Posho voice, big fancy words and that. Always dressing weird. Who’s even a goth nowadays?’

‘Chloe’s a goth?’

‘Kinda. Black hair and black stuff on her eyes. Looks like a witch. Not when she went to that

fancy school like, but the rest of the time.'

'So you didn't mix much?'

'A bit.' Joe thought he could sense a tinge of regret. Had Brad tried it on? Been rejected? 'I thought we might get on when she first came. She had more about her than some of them. But mostly she hid away in her room. Reading books.' As if that was totally weird.

'Anyone here she was friendly with?'

'Only Woodburn. You could tell she was into him. Big style.' This time there was definitely an edge to his voice. 'I couldn't get it. He was just a tosser. Wet, you know.'

'What time's your appointment?' Limbrick's words were sharp.

'Uh?'

'With the social worker?'

'Oh, now. I'd best get off.'

'I could come in to the session with you,' Limbrick said. 'Check progress.'

'Nah, you're all right.' He gave another, complicit grin, before slinking out of the room.

'What's going on with him?' Joe made no effort to keep the antipathy from his voice.

'Brad's been exploited all his life. First by his father, then a foster carer and now by some thugs with pretensions to set up a county lines gang. He's a petty dealer and a user. Not very bright and completely screwed up. His mother died when he was a kid. He stayed with his grandparents until he stole from them. He's been chucked out of every institution he's been put in.'

'But you've hung on to him?'

'Yeah. You might not believe it, but he's improved since he came here. He can be quite likeable. Funny. He winds the other kids up at times, but he's started to rub along with them.' Limbrick shrugged. 'It's a kind of success.'

Joe thought that didn't sound like any sort of success to him. 'In her diary, Chloe talks about him peddling drugs in the place. Also, about someone pervy hanging around in a car outside the home. Do you know who that might be?'

Limbrick shook his head. 'It could just have been someone waiting to pick up a staff member after their shift.'

'Did Chloe mention it to you?'

There was a pause. At the other end of the room, Tracey was loading the dishwasher. She'd put the radio on low. Radio Two. Some love song.

'When Chloe first came here,' Limbrick said, 'she was demanding, lippy. Her background was different from most of the kids. Perhaps because her mother and the school found her behaviour challenging, she was used to attention. She'd come into the office with stories. Some had a bit of basis in truth, but others were so wild they were unbelievable. Strange conspiracy theories picked up from social media. Fantasies just created in her own head. Maybe she believed the lies she told, but in the end, I couldn't take her seriously.' He looked up at Joe. 'She was lonely. She struggled to make friends here. She was cleverer than most of the kids we get and made fun of them, or got in their faces. She probably lied to them too. After a few weeks, she spent most of her time in her room.'

'You didn't believe there was a guy hanging around in a car outside?' Joe was imagining grooming or the kind of county lines that Brad had been sucked into. The lass had been missing all night, so perhaps someone had picked her up, offered her shelter, an escape from the police.

'I'm not saying that, but I didn't see anyone.'