

CHAPTER THREE

Emily arrived at three, pausing in the gateway as if unsure that she'd come to the right place. Thea was on a rickety garden bench, which had small patches of lichen growing on it to give witness to its extreme age. She sat outside because it was August, and she wanted to watch out for Emily, but it was a chilly vigil, with clouds gathering in the west and a spiteful little breeze blowing.

Along with the Angells' bored dogs, she watched her sister park the shiny new car and emerge in a fluid elegant movement. Emily was superficially like Thea, but four inches taller. Jocelyn, the youngest, was much fairer and heavier, plucking her genes from the Johnstone

grandmother, rather than Maureen's slighter, darker, father, Grandpa Foster, a man they barely remembered, but who was immortalised in Emily, who was said to look exactly like him.

'Don't sit here,' Thea warned. 'It won't take two. Every time I move it threatens to collapse.'

'Hmm,' said Emily. 'The place seems a bit ramshackle.'

'By local standards, it is – definitely,' Thea agreed. 'I quite like it.'

They went in through the front door and Thea instantly saw the house through Emily's eyes. It was dusty; the windows weren't very clean; the rugs and stair carpet had endured spillages and damage that left indelible marks. The curtains at the front window were ragged at the edges where the parrot had climbed up them countless times.

Ignatius was intently aware of a second intruder. 'Lock the doors, Daddy! Lock the doors!' it screeched, with impossible clarity. It was the first time Thea had heard him speak.

'My God!' said Emily faintly. 'I see what you mean. It's terrifying.'

'That's nothing,' said Thea with relish. 'There was a great big *bat* in my bedroom last night.'

'No!'

'I always thought I liked them until then. But it's all true what they say – you get a real horror that it'll tangle itself in your hair. I can't think

why, when they absolutely never do that, at least according to Carl. They move so irrationally, darting and swooping, and you know they can't see you and don't know what you are.'

Emily shuddered. 'I would have run right out and driven home on the spot.'

'Well, I can't do that, can I? Whatever happens, I have to stay here for a fortnight.'

'Well, you're a lot braver than me, that's for sure. And braver than your dog, by the look of it.'

Hepzibah was circling the parrot's cage, eyes fixed on the bird, small squeaks emitting from her. 'Lock the doors,' said the parrot again, on a quieter note, sending the dog into further whining confusion. Distress was clear in every nerve.

Thea laughed. 'Come on, silly. It won't hurt you.' But Hepzie continued her patrol, thoroughly bewildered, but convinced she had some sort of protective role to play. Thea dragged her into the kitchen, where she made tea and engaged her sister in the conversation she had come to conduct. It wasn't long before they ventured onto the main topic – the death of their father and their mother's future. It ebbed and flowed, as they moved from kitchen to living room, and then outside to feed the dogs and ferrets. Thea spent half an hour in the kitchen, forbidding Emily from joining her as she set the pheasants

simmering in a casserole, with carrots and onions and herbs. They were still slightly frozen, but she hoped that a couple of hours in a moderate oven would see them tender and toothsome. Emily called through from the main living room, every few minutes: 'Surely I can do something to help?' and 'I came to talk to you, not sit here twiddling my thumbs.' But hard experience had taught Thea that to invite Emily to share cooking was to consign yourself to a barrage of corrections and scathing comments about your technique. Nobody sliced carrots to Emily's satisfaction, and the idea of her discovering that the birds were not fully defrosted was too terrible to contemplate.

'I'll be right with you,' she promised. 'We can have an hour or more of quality time before I have to get some potatoes on.'

The conversation had already verged on the overwrought at times. Awkwardly, Emily had voiced her sense of disconnection after the funeral, only the day before. 'I've been trying to carry on as normal, especially with Grant going off to sixth form college in a couple of weeks. He needs all sorts of books and clothes, and I can only do it at weekends. I should be sitting him down and making a proper list, not falling apart here.'

'You're not falling apart, don't be silly,' Thea argued. 'It wouldn't be very realistic to think you

could just pretend nothing had happened. What sort of message would that give the boys? They'll be missing Dad as well.'

Waiting for the pheasants to cook, they doggedly forced themselves to stay with the painful subject of bereavement. Emily seemed determined to confront what she saw as an imperfect relationship with her father, dating back to her failure to adopt his values or interests. 'He always wanted me to make better use of my brain,' she said. 'To go into science and do some good in the world.' She sniffed. 'And I could never rid myself of the notion that most of the world's problems are rooted in science. I made him so *angry*.'

'You didn't do it on purpose.'

'Maybe not, but he thought I did. And then you married Carl, who was the embodiment of Dad's ideas. All that ecological stuff – it was wonderful for him. It left me even further out of the magic circle. My husband's a financial consultant, for heaven's sake.'

'Dad didn't mind,' Thea insisted. 'You're projecting too much onto him. He wasn't at all judgmental. He *liked* Bruce and he adored your boys.'

'Not as much as he liked Carl and Jessica. Oh, Thea – I feel so bloody *guilty*. I thought there'd be time to put it all straight and earn his

approval. And now it's too late. It feels so *awful*.'

It made quite a lot of sense to Thea, as she meditated on the family history as she remembered it. 'You just have to go with it, I suppose,' she said vaguely. 'Wait for it all to settle down again.'

Emily twirled a strand of hair around a finger, like a fifteen-year-old. Outside, heavy rain had set in, thundering loudly on the tin roof of the barn. A glance at the clock told Thea it was high time she peeled some potatoes.

The meal was a modest success. 'Could have done with another hour on a slow heat,' said Emily. 'I'd have told you if you asked me. I did pheasant a few weeks ago for a dinner party. The flavour needs to come out with long slow cooking.'

'Thanks. I'll remember that for next time,' said Thea lightly. 'At least it's edible.'

'It's really quite nice,' said Emily graciously. 'Much better than I expected. Though it's a pity there's no wine.' She ate quickly, and in half an hour it was all over, including an apple and coffee.

'I think the Angells are teetotal,' said Thea. 'And it didn't occur to me to bring any booze with me.'

'Just as well, I suppose, since I've got to drive.'

'Look at that rain!' said Thea. 'You'd much

better stay the night, instead of setting off into that. It's getting quite dark.'

'No, I'm not staying the night,' said Emily. 'I can't face the idea of that bat. I don't want to put you off, but I don't like the atmosphere in this house. There's something *dingy* about it. Cobwebs and things going rusty and inches of fluff under the beds. It'll give me asthma if I try to sleep here.' She put a hand to her bronchial area. 'I can feel it already.'

'OK,' said Thea, trying to suppress the disappointment. It didn't seem very fair of her sister to invade like this and then abruptly leave again, with no thought for the effect she was having. Thea had not wanted family business to intrude on the Lower Slaughter job, especially so soon after getting there. Emily's feelings towards their father verged on the critical at times, which Thea found surprisingly upsetting. As far as she was concerned, he'd been perfect, and her sister had no right to jeopardise that comforting belief. After all, Emily herself had been a scratchy and even downright arrogant daughter at times. She'd always been a poor listener, disinclined to take the other person's feelings into account, argumentative and sometimes uncharitable. Thea suspected that if the conversation had lasted much longer, she might have been tempted to say some of this, with ghastly consequences.

So it was with more than a little relief mixed into the simmering resentment that she waved her sister out of sight, standing in the doorway only long enough to watch the car begin to move. The rain was bad enough to raise flickers of anxiety in the breast of anyone who had experienced floods over the past few years. This area, Thea remembered, had suffered severely. She wondered briefly whether the little river running through Lower Slaughter ever misbehaved badly enough to threaten the houses alongside it. It might be interesting to go for a look in the morning. As far as Hawkhill was concerned, it appeared that any run-off water had been efficiently directed into ditches and channels well clear of the house. There was no sign of rivulets or even large puddles in what she could see of the yard.

So she closed the front door, went back into the living room, and tried to settle down on the sagging sofa. But she was soon up again, prowling around the room in search of diversion. The television's remote control didn't work, there was no DVD player, and the only light in the room was a rather dim energy-saving bulb, apparently bought when they first appeared and living up to its promise of lasting for fifty years. There were few books in the house, but she did find a stack of big jigsaws in one corner. Somehow Babs Angell had struck her as too

busy for such fripperies, but when she examined them it was plain that they had all been used. Something about the afternoon she'd spent with Emily, the references to childhood and family life, made jigsaws seem entirely appropriate. She selected one depicting a small flock of sheep in the snow, with a lot of twisty bare tree branches, and resolved to try to finish it before it was time for her to leave Hawkhill.

The light was better in the kitchen, and a radio sat on the windowsill. The view was over the fields and farm buildings at the back. The table could be used for the jigsaw, with plenty of space left over for one person to sit and eat at one end.

There was a play on Radio Four, involving a Victorian governess and the younger son of the house, which kept her pleasantly diverted as she methodically sorted out all the edge pieces. Hours passed. Hepzie was curled on a muddy sheepskin in front of the Rayburn. The parrot was quiet and rain continued to thunder on the roofs outside. She made herself more coffee at one point, and wondered whether she should try phoning her daughter. It was Saturday night – Jessica ought to be out with friends, and Thea preferred not to know if the girl was alone in her flat, swotting for the next test in her police training. The absence of anything resembling a serious boyfriend was beginning to nag at Thea,

however sternly she might reproach herself for it. At Jessica's age, Thea was firmly married and six months pregnant. So was Jocelyn, come to that. Early marriage and motherhood was a pattern in the Johnstone family, and while she had no conscious desire for her daughter to follow suit, there was a subliminal expectation that would not be shaken.

At half past ten, she went upstairs and checked that there was hot water available for a bath. The Rayburn evidently saw to it that this was never going to be a problem. So long as the thing was kept alight, all would be well. With a sigh of anticipation, she went into the bedroom to find her nightshirt and book, preparatory for a long indulgent soak.

The bat was there again! The moment the light went on, flittering wingbeats stirred the air around her head. This time, she was angry. She shut Hepzie out, opened the window, and snatching up a towel, she flapped determinedly at it. It took five minutes to steer it outside, but it was accomplished eventually. Could bats cope with rain, she wondered briefly. Had she consigned it to a miserable death by drowning? Just at that moment, she didn't care if she had. She only knew she never wanted to see it again.

Hepzie scratched and whined at the door throughout the chase. Then, as Thea went to

let her in, the whine turned to a yap, and the dogs outside started barking. Before Thea could go downstairs to investigate, there was a loud banging on the front door, which Thea had locked behind her sister.

Emily was standing there, pale and large-eyed, her mouth oddly tight. She was wearing peculiar shapeless clothes, and her wet hair was straggling around her face instead of neatly tied back as usual. 'Let me in,' she said.

'But – what?' Words failed her, her mind still on the battle with the bat.

'I've just witnessed a murder,' Emily shouted. 'I saw the whole thing. I've been at the police station. It was horrible. They took my clothes and my shoes. I can't face driving home now. Let me in.'

Thea had already let her in. Of course she had. But she found herself wishing that she didn't have to.