

3

The drive home from her mother's was a relief for Sarah; her mother had been difficult, as usual. The space inside her car had become a sanctuary, a place to hide from constantly doing what other people wanted.

She hoped John would be in a better mood and there would be no more disagreements or resentful remarks from her husband. Sarah turned off the main road and headed towards the coast, prolonging her journey home. The arguments of the previous day were still fresh in her mind, and the wrangling with Christine upset her greatly. She remembered how hard it had been to talk to her own mother as a teenager.

It was impossible for her to go home just yet; she would suffer the fallout when she got there, but now was her time, she said to herself, trying to be strong. Sarah drove with the window open, the wind rushing around her face and her hair becoming increasingly dishevelled.

Christine frightened her, her husband frightened her. Christine's strength to fight back made Sarah feel weak. She could never find the right words to retaliate, and her frustration with herself felt worse than any argument.

Christine was growing up and the more conscious she became of herself, the more her confidence grew. Sarah shivered involuntarily at the thought of her impending return home; she knew the feeling she had had yesterday of 'getting through' to Christine would not last.

The familiar coast road passed by unnoticed; it was now only a reflection in the rear-view mirror. She could also see

the reflection of the sun low in the sky and the evening darkness settling over the road ahead.

The approaching dusk reminded Sarah of John's mood, forming shadows in her mind. Their relationship was at an all-time low. He had treated her with indifference for as long as she could remember. She had tried to make their marriage work, but now John made her feel invisible – the housemaid who was always there to cook, clean and submit to sex on those rare nights he fancied it; no romance, no love. That was the worst feeling of all – to lie back and stare at the bedroom ceiling and be invaded by the man who was supposed to love her.

Tears misted her vision as her car headed further along the coast road. Overcome by despair, Sarah pulled over and buried her face in her hands, crying uncontrollably. The release of tension was immediate.

When Sarah restarted the car it seemed to make its own way along the coast road, past the railway embankment, giving way to a view of the beach, then climbing away inland. She turned right at the top of the hill, opposite Coryton Cove, the sharp incline of the road making the car engine labour. Driving slowly, she took breaths to try and regain her composure.

When she pulled up outside the house, John's car was in the drive. The unusual sight brought her out of her self-pitying stupor. He always put his car in the garage as soon as he got home from work. She pulled the handbrake on and turned off the engine, picking up her handbag and a handful of magazines her mother had given her from the passenger seat.

With the car locked, Sarah made her way to the front door and closed it behind her with its usual noisy click.

'Christine, are you there?' Sarah shouted up the stairs. Christine would be found in the safe haven of her locked bedroom (she could never work out why her door was always

locked, just accepted it as a teenage privacy need). If not, she would be out, and for Sarah that would be another spoiled evening, worrying about what she would be getting up to.

'I'm here, Mum,' Christine replied, sounding a little more contented with herself than the day before.

Sarah sighed with relief and went straight into the kitchen; she dumped the magazines in the pedal bin and looked at the memo pad on the wall. It was a routine she had developed over the years to avoid trouble; John could not resist writing down instructions for both Sarah and Christine.

'What does he mean, "Sorry"?' said Sarah, walking back into the hall.

'Christine have you seen your father?' she called up the stairs. 'Christine?' she repeated, the silence unnerving her.

Christine opened her door and appeared at the top of the landing.

'I haven't seen him.'

'Didn't you get him some tea?' Sarah shouted, getting frustrated and more nervous.

'I haven't seen him,' the reply came, in the casual disinterested tone she reserved only for her mother.

'Have you had some tea?' she asked, knowing that Christine would have made sure she was all right. She needed food to survive the long day at school, and the night's homework.

'Yes, thanks,' Christine replied, returning to her room, locking the door behind her by reflex.

Sarah went back into the kitchen still clutching her handbag. She placed it on the worktop and called for John out of the back door; there was no reply. She looked at the garage side door opposite; it was half open, the workbench exposed with all its rubbish.

A feeling of trepidation shot through her; the open door yawned, as if enticing her to come in.

The reflection of the rubbish in the half-glassed panel door played tricks in the dusky half-light, reflecting shapes she had not seen before.

Sarah stepped outside into the passageway between the garage and the house, put her hand on the glass panel of the side door and slowly pushed it open. Her own reflection moving across the glass made her jump.

Sarah's heart was racing. She was not sure what she was looking for, or expected to find, her head buzzing with anticipation. She could not explain this feeling of dread. As she slowly stepped into the blackness of the garage John's voice echoed in her head and she recalled his mood that morning.

Sarah had an overwhelming feeling of stupidity, creeping around for no obvious reason, her own imagination getting the better of her.

Sliding her hand up the wall she found the light switch above the bench and turned it on. In the new brightness she saw the orange rope spanning her eye line, then her husband's body hanging, lifeless, his left foot just touching the concrete floor amidst a pool of urine. Her heart froze at the sight of his contorted blue features.

'Mum? Mum, where are you?' Christine called, a note of urgency in her voice.

'Hang on, I'm just coming,' Sarah replied, unconscious of what she had just said. She turned and switched off the garage light and went into the house, shutting the door behind her.

'What do you want?' she asked, her head spinning, one shake away from unconsciousness.

'Can I go out, please?' Terry said he would help me with my homework.'

'Yes, okay.' The reply came automatically as Sarah leaned back on the kitchen door for support, the vision in the garage flashing in her head.

Christine hastened to the front door without noticing her mother's greying complexion, not giving her the chance to change her mind. The door slammed, and the house fell quiet. Sarah's trembling increased, she was stunned into disbelief at what she had witnessed.

Trying to calm herself, she pushed away from the door with the flat of her hands and stood, shaking, then walked slowly to the hallway and picked up the telephone. Her legs felt weak. She dialled 999, the ringing tone vibrating menacingly in her ear.

'Which service, please?' the voice on the other end asked with alert efficiency.

'Can you send someone please? My husband has killed himself!' Her distant voice came out in barely a whisper.

Sarah was still standing in a trance by the telephone when the door bell rang. It rang a second time before she became aware of the blue light flashing through the front door window.

She opened the door and stood staring at the two police officers, surprised at how young they looked.

'Can we come in?' asked the policewoman, a dark-haired, plain-looking girl with a manner which was somehow reassuring to Sarah.

'Come in,' Sarah said, turning her back to them as she went towards the living room, not really aware of what she was doing.

The policewoman followed her. 'I'm WPC Janet Seymour. Can you tell me what has happened?' she asked Sarah, signalling with an exaggerated circular motion to her male colleague to take a look around.

Sarah sat down on the sofa, her hands clasped together on her knees so tightly her knuckles had gone white.

'He's in the garage,' she said hoarsely, staring at the carpet.

PC Roberts overheard Sarah say 'the garage' as he was

checking out the kitchen, his experienced eye looking for the unnoticeable. He went through to the garage, the smell of engine oil and damp newspapers invading his nostrils, and looked around for a light switch.

PC Roberts went back through the house to the patrol car, picked up his radio mic and requested assistance. He had never seen such a deliberate and methodical suicide. He knew he would never get used to finding dead bodies. They still turned him over inside, even after ten years on the force.

As he described the scene to his control office, he loosened his tie and took some deep breaths in an attempt to regain his composure before the ambulance and support team arrived.