

## CHAPTER ONE

Edward hoards his mother's letters, not opening them straight away, but sometimes savouring what might be. He stacks them upright, and every morning when he opens his drawer for a neatly rolled pair of socks they tilt towards him in greeting. He laughs to himself, knowing how frustrated Mrs Ingram will be when she finds a letter still sealed. He could take them to work or lock them in his suitcase, but he knows that if she reads them, they will have between them an unspoken language of common knowledge.

He wishes he didn't set such store by his mother's letters and that, after his father's death, he could have distanced himself from her totally. Usually she writes in intricate detail, painting pictures of her everyday life and of her garden, but the one he has opened today is a request. She wants him to accompany her to a funeral; a whole day in her company. He isn't sure he can manage that.

From the wardrobe, Edward takes a jacket hanger of lightly varnished wood. He pokes gently with the end of the hook at Mrs Ingram's cat, asleep on the bed. She ignores him. He drops the hanger onto the bed and turns away, beginning to peel back the left lapel of his jacket, slowly levering it over his lowered shoulder until it drops from his arm then, using his free hand, he pulls at the other sleeve until the jacket falls onto the bed. He sits down next to the cat and knobbles her jaw with his knuckle. He is distracted by the light from the window, where it illuminates the hidden water marks on the lining of his jacket. The cat purrs, stretches, claws at the jacket.

'No you don't!' He snatches his jacket away and, holding the hanger aloft, drapes it around the varnished wood. The hanger, which is perfectly symmetrical, does not fit. This is a jacket that has been crafted and moulded to fit his twisted body.

Under his mattress Edward has a set of pink cardboard patterns, drawn and cut for him by his Uncle Ruben.

'This, my lad, is a special formula just for you. Hold on to these patterns and you can always get a jacket made to fit. No off-the-peg rubbish for my nephew.'

He had draped his tape over every part of Edward's body, taking a measurement of every dimension.

'Is it accurate, Uncle Ruben? Your tape looks a bit bandaged.'

Uncle Ruben had smiled, shown his brown, crooked teeth. 'Keep cutting it with these blooming things,' he'd said, waving an enormous pair of black handled shears. 'But never worry, my lad, your Uncle Ruben makes compensations. It'll fit you like a glove. You'll see.'

Edward remembers being pinned and pulled in every direction. The sight of Uncle Ruben manipulating the shape of his back into the jacket, steaming, moulding, pulling, and the warm comforting smell of wool, mixed with the scent of old fish heads carelessly thrown under the bench; pickled herrings from Uncle Ruben's favourite lunch.

As he hangs his jacket in the shade of the wardrobe, Edward fingers the leather buttons on the cuff. Neither he nor his mother have ever informed Uncle Ruben that he had left home and so, once a year on his birthday, a letter arrives for him at his mother's house. She slips it unopened into his birthday card. Mrs Ingram doesn't know that he gets letters from Uncle Ruben, post-marked New York. He always takes these letters to work and stores them in his desk drawer under lock and key.

Edward has never written back. He considers his uncle's letters a peace offering, something owed to him. All through his childhood he'd said, 'You're my favourite nephew. The person I treasure most in all the world.' And then, when Edward asked for his help, he'd announced that he was off to find his fortune in America.

'Never mind, lad,' he'd said. 'Don't worry. Things have a way of working out.'

He'd laughed then, slapped Edward on the shoulder and asked him if he was going to miss his favourite uncle. Edward pointed out to him that he was the only uncle he'd ever had.

## CHAPTER TWO

Angela gets off the bus in the centre of town. She looks up at the town hall clock: half an hour until she starts work. She enters the Central Library and wanders without thought, dancing her fingers along the spines, absorbing the grandeur; a cathedral of books.

She pauses at the Art and Oversize Book section. Pulling a large volume on Degas from the shelf, she flicks through the pages from front to back, looking for inspiration. She strokes a picture of a woman drying herself, a moment of great intimacy captured by the artist. She slaps the book shut and runs her hand along the spines again until... Egon Schiele. His work has a visual truth, a style she envies. The models are jagged, thin, distorted images. She studies his use of the black crayon outline, colours carelessly spilt across black lines.

She scans the text: *Schiele set about dismantling conventional idealized images. A picture of a baby, screwed up and ugly, stares back at her. The artist was determined to show that his task was not to show the splendour of humanity but its pitiful wretchedness.* There is something in this that she is seeking, and yet, it is not quite this, she doesn't want to turn beauty into wretchedness... more... well..., she scans further down the page, *Schiele despaired of his uncultivated teachers and fought against their constraints.*

She smiles to herself, thinking back to the conversation she'd had earlier when her tutor asked if she'd thought any more about her dissertation. Why was he so against her doing life studies, for Christ's sake? Just because it wasn't the in thing to do. What did she care? But she does. She can still feel the iciness of self doubt at his words, still remember how he drew heavily on his cigarette and then, in that pretentious way of his, threw it half-finished onto the step, grinding it with his moccasin, all the time building up the dramatic effect.

'And what medium will Madam be using for this innovative idea of hers?'

She remembers the sarcastic edge in his voice. She'd begun to get angry at this point. 'Charcoal, actually.'

'And to think,' he'd muttered, 'you're so talented and you're going to throw it all away.' He moved up one step, became level with her. 'You know how good you are. You don't need me to tell you that. But to get on these days you have to create a concept, something really off the wall, not just life drawings, or painting. It's no longer enough. Can't you see that?'

She wasn't sure of his motivation. Who was he trying to help? He was a talented artist himself. Couldn't he see that she too wanted to hone her skill, express herself through her drawing? She'd had enough of toeing the line, three long years of it.

As if he'd read her thoughts, he'd said, 'Just toe the line for a bit longer, eh? Get your degree. No, get a first, you'll walk it. Then you can do what you want.'

She laughs to herself, slotting the book back into its space, remembering her parting shot: 'My art's not about passing exams.' And how, all the way into town on the bus, she wished she'd bitten her tongue. She wants a first more than anything. She wants to go on to study further. She wants to go to London, to the college that had first offered her a place to do a degree. Out of hundreds of applicants she'd been offered one of only ten places. But she'd had to tell them she couldn't go, explain her personal circumstances. They'd written, told her how disappointed they were, what a rare talent she had, and to apply for an MA course with them once she'd finished her degree. She can still feel the glow of this promise in her chest.

She glances down at the books on the bottom shelf and sees a fat volume on the life and works of Toulouse-Lautrec. She pulls it out with both hands and opens it on a table.

The centre is a collection of glossy plates, but that's not what attracts her. She is fascinated by the photographs of the man himself. Dwarf-like, he has the appearance of neither man nor child. His full upper and thin bottom lip lend him a duck-like appearance, while his shoes appear to curl up at the toes, like those handed down from an elder brother.

She sketches his outline on her pad. He dresses cleverly in a three-quarter-length coat so she cannot quite gauge whether it is his legs or his torso that are too short. A tall top hat only adds to the incongruity. She

sketches him again as he might appear nude, giving him heavy hips and short legs, a stance she finds strangely appealing.

The Town Hall clock strikes twelve. She leaves the book open on the table and makes her way to the main doors, humming quietly to herself. She skips down the stone steps and hurries along the street to Henry's; a restaurant on a busy corner. As she works the tables, she notices for the first time how, from the inside, the large windows of old-fashioned glass distort the figures of passers-by.

## CHAPTER THREE

Edward watches the crows circling the fine black lines of leafless trees etched against the pewter sky. He hears the first thud of earth on wood and stares down at the coffin. The brass nameplate is already tarnished by the wet soil. He shivers, wishing he hadn't come.

On the journey over he'd asked his mother how they were related to the dead woman. The train was pulling away from Huddersfield station. He'd waited for an answer, watching the station clock grow smaller and smaller. 'She was a distant relative. Far too complicated to explain,' was the only reply. He'd forgotten how his mother coveted secrets. He tried again, 'So her name was Claudette Mason?'

He received a slight nod of the head, and noted that she was wearing her pewter pearls, the diamante clasp resting on the prominent vertebrae at the back of her neck as she turned to look out of the window. He persisted, 'You ask me to take a day off work and come to a funeral with you, but I'm not to be furnished with any of the particulars?'

She turned then, she must have heard the pique in his voice, 'I appreciate you coming, thank you.' She spoke with a measured politeness, 'I didn't want to come on my own.'

He tries to keep the sarcasm out of his voice, 'Unusual for you, Mother.'

'I didn't know her that well. We wrote mostly. She was an interesting woman.'

'And we were related?'

'Yes, but I don't remember how. It's not important anyway.' She leans back in her seat, closing her eyes against the sun.

Edward smiles to himself. Surely at forty-nine he should have learnt how to handle his mother.

Edward digs his stick firmly into the mud and studies the faces of the other mourners. Across the grave is a girl in her early twenties. Her hair is dyed a garish purple and is scraped into a short ponytail at one side. Her skin, by stark contrast, has the luminous quality of white jade. She has her arm around the shoulders of an elderly woman who is dabbing her cheeks with a screwed up tissue. The girl, a frown furrowing her brow, is staring straight across the grave at his mother, who is unaware of the girl's scrutiny.

Edward can feel his mother's claw-like grip tighten on the inner crease of his elbow as they move away from the graveside. It occurs to him that, almost without him noticing, she has become frail. The closeness of her bothers him. He can smell her scent – Lily of the Valley. Fumbling for his handkerchief, he disengages his arm and moves aside to blow his nose. He hears a gasp and, turning, sees his mother, as if in slow motion, fold to the ground. Before he can react, Mr Cole the solicitor is there, grasping her elbows from behind, easing her gently to her feet.

'Mother! Are you all right?' His words sound polite, distant.

She examines the side of her camel coat, now streaked in mud. 'Yes, no thanks to you.'

'Maybe you should get a stick, Mother.'

'I don't think so.'

The solicitor interrupts, 'Now, are you sure you're all right?' He takes his handkerchief out of his pocket, 'Would you like me to wipe your coat down?'

Edward turns away towards the car. Let him look after her.

Rachel closes her eyes and listens to the soft purr of the limousine as it makes its way beyond the cemetery gates. Suddenly she feels so very tired. The fall has shaken her more than she cares to admit. All she wants to do now is go home and sit with her cat in the chair overlooking the garden. At this time of day the sun will be stealing into the back room. The cat will be sitting there now. She smiles to herself, realising how little she, like the cat, wants from life nowadays, but how differently she would do it if she had another chance. How she had envied

Claudette her life with its veneer of culture, the paintings and books that mapped the history of her life. She gazes out of the car window and watches the sun shaft through a break in the clouds. It glances off the flat surface of a distant reservoir. Under that thin layer, had their lives turned out to be so very different?