

## Prologue

Le Chant du Mistral, Provence, 1976

She paused half way along the landing, pressed her hand to the wall to steady herself, and took a couple of long, slow breaths. The air had been heavy all day, the stones of the house and pathways dazzling in the unrelenting sunshine, a haze hovering just above ground level. Even now, with darkness long fallen, the old farmhouse was sticky and oppressive: too hot; airless. The nausea faded and she eased silently forward again, opened a door and slipped through.

The shutters were still closed and it was too dark to see. Switching on the small table lamp by the side of her bed, she blinked at the sudden light. The sickness built again and her skin prickled with sweat. It was hard to know which emotion was making her feel so bad: anger, guilt, grief and fear were all twisting and churning the acid in her stomach. This had once been a house of light and now it was a place of shadow; it was tainted and so was she. But she had done what she needed to do; let that be an end to it. There was nothing left for her here. Nothing.

She crossed to the washbasin, drank a little cold water then splashed some over her face and patted it dry with a towel, wincing as she caught the cut under her left eye. In the mirror the damage was obvious: her cheek was swollen and puffy, her eye socket stained dusky purple and blue.

A few minutes later she let herself out of the front door. The sky had now clouded over though, if anything, the atmosphere was more humid than ever. The tiny beam of her torch barely cut a trace before her but she would have known the way blindfold and she turned left to skirt round the east wing of the house.

A flash of lightning split the sky, followed by a slow rumble of thunder which echoed back off the pine trees behind then rolled down and along the valley. Someone called her name and she looked round in alarm as the tall figure of a man appeared at the edge of the terrace, illuminated suddenly by another flash of lightning. Fear had her rooted to the spot and she felt rather than saw him moving towards her as more thunder crashed overhead. Why was he not in bed and asleep like everyone else, safely shut away? The first sluicing drops of rain began to pelt the earth and hammered on the stones around her. Feeling her hair flatten and the cold water quickly soak through it and stream down her face, she began to run, away towards the woods, and kept running, not daring to stop to see if she was being followed.

## Chapter 1

London, England, 2011

The letter was waiting in the post box for her when she got home from work. Terri saw the unfamiliar stamp and the almost illegible postmark but barely registered them, holding it in her mouth as she climbed the stairs to the first floor, fumbling for the key in her bag. She was distracted, her thoughts too full of Oliver. He'd been waiting across the street again, standing half-hidden behind the buddleia which arched over the pavement from the garden opposite. It was more than two months since she'd finished with him and still he was stalking her. Sometimes he followed her from work; more usually he was waiting here outside her flat, watching, jealously checking to see that she was alone. Occasionally he didn't turn up till later in the evening, a still, menacing presence. He rarely spoke; it was a war of attrition.

It was nearly seven o'clock on a dull Friday in March. Rain had threatened all afternoon and it had recently started to drizzle. The streetlights were on, casting a queasy orange glow through the windows. There was the distant pervasive throb of traffic from the London streets and the occasional blare of a car horn. Terri drew the curtains across and banged the lights on, claiming her space, dispelling the gloom. She walked into the kitchenette, filled the kettle and put it to boil, kicked her shoes off and picked them up to take into the bedroom. Only then did she remember the letter, abandoned on the cupboard by the door. She dropped the shoes and picked it up, running a finger quickly under the flap, ripping it open. It contained a single printed sheet:

*Dear Ms Challoner,*

*Following your recent enquiry I am prepared to offer you the post of curator for my Retrospective, a six-month appointment commencing April 4th. The advertised salary includes accommodation. I reserve the right to give two weeks' notice if you prove unsuitable. I will expect you to arrive the preceding Saturday, 2<sup>nd</sup> April.*

*Yours,*

*Peter Stedding.*

The letter had been dated four days previously with an address at the top and two phone numbers at the bottom, one labelled 'office', the other 'home'. The signature was hand-written, a bold flourish of slanting letters and loops. Terri stared at it, automatically turned the sheet over to check there was nothing on the back, then reread it, frowning.

She had seen Peter Stedding's advertisement for a curator at Ferfylde's, the commercial gallery where she worked, where an A4 sheet of paper had been pinned on the noticeboard with the bare details of the post and a request for email enquiries accompanied by a CV. It had been a source of much amusement among the staff at the gallery. Peter Stedding was a famous artist and portraitist but he was also notorious for his short temper and petulant behaviour and had long since fallen foul of the art establishment. It was generally considered to be the job from hell. Even so, in a moment's desperation and without telling anyone at the gallery, Terri had sent off her CV, not expecting to hear any more about it. And now this letter had come with its arrogant phrasing and casual assumption that she would take the job.

The kettle boiled and she dropped the letter, made a mug of tea and went to shower and change. By the time she left the flat an hour later, heading up the road to meet up with her

friend Sophie, Oliver had gone. She kept looking for him but he was nowhere to be seen and she tried to put him out of her mind.

Sophie, always talkative, had a new man in her life and all evening she glowed with the pent-up anticipation and excitement of a fresh romance. Her entire conversation revolved around Stuart: how much they had in common; how easy he was to be with and how they shared the same sense of humour. Terri was happy for her friend but cynically hoped that Stuart might live up to at least half of Sophie's expectations. In her experience, men rarely did.

Sophie didn't stop talking until they'd finished eating and sat cradling drinks. Taking a mouthful of white wine, she stared across at Terri as if noticing her properly for the first time.

'You're quiet,' she remarked accusingly.

'Couldn't get a word in.' Terri ran a finger through the condensation on her glass of soda.

'Yeah, I know. I've been talking too much.' Frowning, Sophie studied Terri's face. 'Still... what's up?'

'Nothing.'

'Oh come on Terri. Don't do that inscrutable thing with me. I've known you too long.'

Terri shrugged. 'I've got something on my mind. A decision.'

'Sounds intriguing.'

'Not really. You remember that job I told you about?'

'The one in Provence?'

'He's offered it to me.'

'But that's good isn't it? Why do you look as though you've lost a winning lottery ticket? I thought you were bored stiff at Ferfylde's, sick of selling 'drawing room art'? And this guy paints portraits, right?'

'Yes, brilliant portraits: very traditional and yet oddly modern too. But he'll be really difficult to work with.'

'You can't be serious. You can stand up for yourself. And with a summer in Provence thrown in? You'd be daft not to take it.' Sophie hesitated. 'Anyway it's be a fresh start, wouldn't it, now you've finished with Oliver? And with your father, you know...' Her voice trailed away awkwardly.

Terri's mobile chirruped. She pulled it out of her bag, glanced at the screen and quickly dropped it back.

Sophie grinned, glancing towards the phone. 'Unless you've got a new bloke you're not telling me about.'

Back at the flat Terri reluctantly read Oliver's text: *Why r u ignoring me?* He sent her several messages a day, often repeats: *I need u* or *Theres someone else isnt there?* or *I wont let u leave me.* He didn't actually do anything but she couldn't escape him either. And his past violence was imprinted on her memory - she imagined it always would be - though she hadn't told anyone about it, not even Sophie. Humiliated and insidiously brainwashed by Oliver's insistence that it was all her own fault, she'd been left with a niggling, corrosive sense of guilt. She couldn't talk about it any more than she could admit to how much his stalking frightened her - she who always gave the impression of being so confident, so much in control.

She picked up the job offer again. Her contract at Ferfylde's was nearly finished and, though she'd been offered an extension, she had no desire to stay. Ironically twelve months previously she had turned down the offer of a job in Paris to work at the gallery and be near Oliver in London. On the scale of bad decisions that must rate as fifteen out of ten.

Chewing her lip, she read the letter through again, unsure what to do. She couldn't afford to make another mistake or her professional life was going to go nowhere fast. Even with all the cutbacks, she might find something else if she stayed in London. But this post was only for six months and Peter Stedding, whatever his reputation, was a brilliant artist. If she could set

up a good exhibition for him, it might restart her stagnating career. She frowned, staring at Peter Stedding's flamboyant signature. It struck her as odd that the self-styled 'grand master' of portraiture had offered her the job with no interview and without taking up her references. He could barely have had time to read her CV before sending the letter. And working for him directly rather than the gallery - well, it wasn't the usual way.

She threw the paper down and went to bed.

Still lying awake an hour later, her thoughts twisting in circles, she heard the phone start to ring in the sitting room. The luminous numbers on her bedside clock read 00:40. Oliver had done this countless times, waiting till she was in bed and the lights out before ringing her home line. She got up without putting the light on, walked through to the living room and stared at the phone still trilling in its socket on the wall. She didn't dare answer it. She had done that before, had tried to tell him to stop harassing her - had finally lost all control the one time and ended up screaming at him to leave her alone - but he never spoke; there was just a heavy silence. Besides, she had come to realise that even her negative responses only encouraged him. She lived in dread that the day would inevitably come when he would turn up at her door.

She crossed to the window and eased the curtain away a fraction, looking out across the road, feeling the familiar heavy beat of her heart in her chest. Not visible, still he was out there somewhere. Becoming aware that her hand was shaking on the curtain she pulled it away and clenched it into a ball, trying to control it, cross with herself for her weakness. She never used to be like this; she had allowed Oliver to get inside her head and destroy all rational thought. She turned away and, in the dim glow of orange light, saw the abandoned job offer tossed aside on the cupboard top.

It was a chance to get away and to get her life back on track. She would take it.

\*

#### Le Chant du Mistral, Provence

Angela Stedding watched her husband struggle to cut the piece of beef with his fork but said nothing. If she offered to help, he'd tell her she was fussing. If she'd made a meal which he would have found easier to manage, he'd ask why she was giving him baby food. It was lunchtime on the first Saturday in April. Corinne, the *bonne*, cooked Peter's lunches in the week; Angela usually did it at weekends. It had seemed like a romantic thing to do when she had first started the routine all those years ago but now it was a tedious chore, a habit which seemed to bring neither of them any real pleasure. Would Peter care if she stopped doing it? She doubted it. He appeared to like Corinne for some reason - or at least he tolerated her - and the French woman would surely agree to take on the task; she regularly worked extra hours to earn a little more money.

Angela continued to eat her salad, ignoring her husband's grunts of exertion. He'd get frustrated eventually no doubt and lose his temper. For a little over four weeks now he'd had his left arm in plaster from his elbow to his knuckles, the result of a fall. Though the fingers and thumb were free, he was unable to use the hand in any practical way and was obliged to eat all his meals with either a fork or a spoon. Given his advancing years, there was something faintly admirable about his fierce independence, his determination not to let the accident slow him up, and he had complained little about the pain he must have felt, just the inconvenience. But it certainly hadn't improved his temper. Fortunately he generally reserved the worst of it for the studio.

'Oh, for God's sake. Damn and blast this bloody hand.' His patience finally snapping, Peter dropped the fork with a clatter onto the plate and swore again, more colourfully this time. 'I'll starve if I have to go on like this.'

‘Peter, please.’

‘What? Oh, mm. Sorry.’ Tight-lipped, glaring at the plaster on his wrist, he appeared not remotely repentant.

‘About this girl you’ve invited to stay with us.’

‘Who? Oh her. What about her?’ He picked up the salt cellar, sprinkled more salt over the remaining potatoes on his plate, grabbed the fork again and returned to fumbling about with his food.

‘You didn’t give me much warning,’ she complained.

‘Only just decided really. I nearly called it off. Then I thought I might as well take a look at her, see if she might be of any use.’

Angela ate another mouthful of food then laid her knife and fork down on the plate, pushing it away. She dabbed the corners of her mouth on her napkin, folded it and put it on the table. There was the distant ringing of the house phone. She wondered where she’d left it, thought of getting up to go and look but then the ringing stopped and she assumed her daughter had answered it.

‘So who is she exactly?’ she pressed.

‘The curator? I’ve told you already: Terri Challoner. Odd name. Short for Theresa I suppose.’

Angela tutted impatiently. ‘I know her name, Peter, but...’ She shrugged. ‘...I don’t know...how old is she?’

‘Mid-thirties.’ He forked the last piece of meat into his mouth, chewed and swallowed.

‘And...?’

He puffed out his lips in that offhand French way she so disliked. ‘She’s got a good CV. Involved in some decent exhibitions. Specialises in portraiture mainly but she’s done other work too, I believe, ranging...’

‘Peter, please don’t tell me her résumé. You know it means nothing to me. Is she English? Or perhaps American?’ Angela had a soft spot for people from the States. If the girl was American it might make her more appealing.

‘English I think.’ He finished eating, put the fork down and pushed the plate away. ‘Yes, English.’

‘Do you want dessert? Tea then? No?’ She sighed. Even after all this time, she couldn’t get used to him drinking water with his meals. Another of his French habits. ‘We’re going to have this woman in the house for six months; I’d like to know something about her. You’re usually so protective of your privacy, I’m surprised you’ve done this.’

He frowned at her as if that issue had not previously crossed his mind. She wondered if he was going senile; his sister certainly was and she was six years younger.

‘She’s here to do a job, Angela,’ he said. ‘That’s all. Don’t make a fuss about her. Anyway, you’re putting her in the annexe aren’t you?’

‘Yes, but it’s very small and it’s still attached to the house. We can’t expect her to stay in her room for six months like a monk or something.’

‘A nun more like.’ Peter unexpectedly grinned which suddenly made him look much younger. It occurred to her that he was still remarkably handsome in a craggy sort of way, a thought which obscurely made her more irritated.

‘Well she can’t do all her cooking with a microwave. I’m going to have to let her use the kitchen sometimes.’

‘Are you? Well...’ He waved a dismissive right hand. ‘...as you wish, my dear.’

As *I* wish, thought Angela. Hardly. She toyed with suggesting that Terri could eat with him each lunch-time but knew that would go down badly. In any case it seemed rather strange

to have a member of staff regularly installed at the family table. She fixed him with a wary gaze.

‘I’m still not sure it was wise to offer her accommodation.’

He hesitated, frowning, and began to look rattled as if the full implication of his decision had only just sunk in. ‘I did think it through, Angela,’ he said, irascibly. ‘She’d be more likely to talk if she stayed in the village and you know I won’t have that. It’ll be easier to keep an eye on her here, you know, control her. Anyway, as I said: she’s come to do a job. End of story.’ He stabbed at the table with an emphatic index finger. ‘Just make it clear to her where she can go and where she can’t. I’ll leave that to you.’ His tone softened; he almost smiled. ‘The house is your domain after all, dear: your rules.’

That’s only partly true, thought Angela, though she suspected that in the unfathomable workings of Peter’s mind he might genuinely believe it. But Peter had his own rules, rules which were never even voiced, they just existed, as if they were part of the very fabric of the house and the air which they breathed.

‘She’s going to be late,’ said a husky voice behind her.

Angela turned quickly in her chair. A white-haired woman wearing blue dungarees had appeared silently at the kitchen door. She was standing flicking an artist’s brush back and forth across the gnarled index finger of her left hand. Her frizzy hair fell to shoulder length and a splodge of red paint was smeared across her left cheek.

‘What *are* you talking about, Celia?’ Angela demanded.

‘Terri is going to be late. There’s some problem with her flight.’

‘How do you know?’

Celia wandered across to the island separating the long pine table from the kitchen proper and took an apple from the bowl of fruit. She bore a striking resemblance to her brother: tall and rangy with the same icy, pale blue-grey eyes. She could also be similarly evasive and irritating. Now she was polishing the apple on her less than clean dungarees. Angela’s lip curled in disgust.

‘She’s just rung from Gatwick,’ Celia replied, after closely examining the apple. ‘She’s not sure what time she’ll arrive. Sometime this evening probably.’

‘You answered the phone?’

‘Someone had to.’

‘I thought Lindsey had.’

‘She’s just left for work.’

‘Oh? She didn’t come to say goodbye.’

‘Well she’s a big girl now,’ said Celia, and bit into the apple.

Angela’s eyes narrowed and she glanced towards Peter who was staring out of the window as if the conversation were not taking place. ‘I’ve asked you before not to answer the phone in the house,’ she snapped at Celia. ‘What did you say to her?’

Peter glanced shiftily between the two women, pushed his chair back and eased himself to his feet. ‘I’m just going to rest for a few minutes,’ he said, heading past Celia towards the door and pausing briefly as if he’d just remembered something. ‘I’ve got something particular I need to finish Angela. I’ll be working late tonight.’

Celia watched her brother out of the room and turned back towards Angela who was now on her feet, facing her. ‘I wished her *bon voyage*, of course,’ said Celia. She smiled blandly, took another bite of the apple and strolled out of the room.

Angela sighed, looked heavenwards and cleared the table. She had made plans for the evening and now she would have to shelve them to sort out this Challoner woman. So Peter would be working late. That was no surprise; he always was. No doubt he was now upstairs, stretched out on the bed for his routine siesta.

She loaded the dishes into the dishwasher, straightened up and leaned against the kitchen unit, her thoughts returning to Terri Challoner. Exactly what position was the woman going to have in their household for the next six months? Angela felt a growing unease. It wasn't that it was unusual for Peter not to tell her things, far from it – he was a secretive man - but still there was something odd about this whole situation.

Out of the window to the front she saw Celia pushing that ridiculous pram across the terrace, the apple now apparently finished. She'd probably thrown the core into one of the huge flower pots and Sammy would complain.

\*

Night had long since fallen by the time Terri drove up the last winding track, shuttered on either side by the dark trunks of pine trees, drew the unfamiliar hire car into a gritty parking area and turned off the engine. She relaxed back in the seat and stretched her neck. It had been a tedious journey from Marseille airport. Peter Stedding's estate lay in an obscure spot, a little outside the village of Ste. Marguerite des Pins in the foothills of the Luberon mountains. Twice she had lost her way. The directions Peter's secretary had given her over the phone had been brief and of limited help.

She peered out into the darkness. A security light had triggered high up on the corner of the wall above a run of garages to her left. Ahead of her the scrubby ground rose steeply from behind a low retaining wall and to her right she could see a curving run of steps rise between bushes. The house was out of sight. It was called Le Chant du Mistral: The Song of the Wind. Just at the moment it sounded more romantic than it looked. She exhaled a slow, nerve-quelling breath, got out into the squally rain and walked round to open the boot. The sound of a footstep on gravel made her look round sharply. A man had materialised at her shoulder.

'*B'soir M'dame,*' he muttered in a low voice. He was olive-skinned and towered above her, lank and wiry, a neat, grizzled moustache on his upper lip and a large, thick cap pulled forward on his head. '*M'dame Challoner?*'

'Yes. *Oui?*' She hesitated; her French was rusty. '*Je...*'

But the man had gone. He'd pulled her suitcase out of the boot and was walking away with it. She grabbed the rest of her belongings and hurried after him up steps and along a path to a house which rose, dark and imposing against the blacker outline of the woods behind. There was a square of light in a window to her right, another somewhere upstairs then a lamp clicked on above the front door as they approached. Her mute companion opened the door and walked straight in, dropped her suitcase on the floor, touched a bony finger to his cap and walked out again, closing the door silently behind him.

Terri glanced round. She stood in a deep dark hallway with a terracotta tiled floor and a sweeping staircase to the left and rear. To her immediate left was a closed door. To her right an open door spilt a broad wedge of light across the floor. In the well of the staircase, its curved form picked out by the dim glow of a lamp from the upstairs landing, stood a life-size bronze of a kneeling naked woman, turning sideways and reaching out one suppliant hand. In the half-light it was an eerie, disconcerting piece.

'Hello-o?' she called out.

The house was still; no-one appeared. Terri dumped her flight bag and walked cautiously through the door to her right.

'Hello?' she said again.

Now she was in a cosy sitting room where three sofas circled a glass coffee table before a marble fireplace. Two large table lamps suffused the room with warm yellowy light. A handful of pictures hung on the walls and there were two bookcases filled with a mixture of old books. A sleek television and a DVD player stood in the corner of the room. There was no sign of life.

Terri glanced along the bookshelves curiously. The titles were a mixture of French and English, a few hardbacks but mostly yellowed paperbacks of varying ages.

Spotting a full length portrait hanging at the rear of the room, she forgot the books and moved towards it, instantly magnetised. A young, dark-haired woman stood in an olive grove. She had a clear, straight gaze, a teasing smile and wore a red check, halter-necked dress, fifties-style, her long hair tied back in a ponytail. It was an arresting image - a modern 'Mona Lisa' - and had been signed simply: P S. Of course: Peter Stedding always signed his work that way. Terri stood, open-mouthed.

'You must be Terri,' said a fluting voice behind her.

Terri perceptibly jumped and turned.

The woman standing in the doorway had strawberry-blonde hair and a slim, shapely figure. She was lightly made-up and wrapped in a shiny satin peignoir.

'I thought I heard a noise.' She came forward, smiling. 'I'm so sorry to have kept you waiting.'

'It's fine - I've only been here a minute.'

'I told Sammy to let me know when you'd arrived.'

'Was that the man who brought me in? He didn't say and he's just left.'

'Well, he's a man of few words and rather impatient, I'm afraid. He's Algerian. Does the gardening. He lives above the garages and when a car arrives a bell rings in his apartment.' The smile broadened and she offered a soft hand. 'I'm Angela, Peter's wife. It's a relief to see you here. I was starting to get worried, darling, imagining all sorts of horrors.' Two striking green eyes were fixed on Terri's face with a look of mild reproach.

'I'm sorry I'm late. The plane was delayed for hours and I'm afraid I drove rather slowly - I'm not used to driving on the right.'

Terri struggled not to stare. Angela was not what she had expected: Peter was seventy-seven; Angela could be little more than fifty. And the woman with the gravelly voice she had spoken to on the phone had sounded much older. Terri had assumed she was Mrs Stedding.

'I believe you rang and spoke to Celia earlier,' Angela said, as if reading her thoughts. 'She's Peter's sister. I hope she didn't say anything to trouble you?' She raised neat arched brows.

Terri remembered Celia's voice clearly, speaking in an overly familiar way: *Do you know anything about the family? No? Are you sure? Well maybe it's just as well.* It had been a strange conversation but this didn't feel like the right moment to say so.

'No,' she replied now to Angela's enquiring expression. 'Why do you ask?'

'Oh, sometimes she says odd things which can be unnerving if you don't know her. She lives in the old pigeon house and doesn't come into the main house very often.' Angela's tone suggested this was a good thing. 'But you're wet darling. Is it raining? Let's get your bags and take you to your room so you can get settled in.'

Carrying the flight bag from the hall, Angela led the way across the sitting room to the facing door, took a left along a dimly lit corridor, navigated another door and another passage, and then she was in a doorway, flicking a light switch on.

'Van Gogh. This is your room.'

Terri paused, looking at the hand-painted nameplate on the door. Around the artist's name was a tiny pastiche of an olive orchard, cleverly cribbed from one of his paintings. Given the reputation of the man who owned the house, it seemed a surprising touch of whimsy. She followed Angela in and dragged the suitcase to a halt. To her immediate left was a bedroom and bathroom. Beyond was a tiny living room with an armchair and television and patio doors to the side. Against the back wall stood a cupboard with a kettle and the smallest microwave oven Terri had ever seen.

‘The keys are in the doors,’ said Angela. ‘The second one on the main ring opens the back door.’ She glanced round critically. ‘I did ask Corinne to freshen it up. She’s our *bonne*. You’ll see her on Monday. I hope you’ve got everything you need. There’s tea and coffee...and whitener I think.’ She waved an elegant hand vaguely towards the cupboard and turned back to Terri with a warm smile. ‘Do let me know if you’re short of anything. Did you want something to eat?’

‘No, I’m fine, thanks. But perhaps your husband was expecting to see me this evening...?’

Terri left the question hanging and Angela hesitated, then smiled a little too carefully.

‘Peter’s in the studio, working. He won’t want to see you tonight. Now for your breakfast, go back to the hall and through the door opposite. That’s the kitchen. I’ll show you round in the morning and we can talk about how this is going to work.’

‘Thank you.’

Angela turned to go and Terri followed her to the door.

‘You know that portrait in the sitting room,’ she said. ‘It’s a remarkable picture. Who is it?’

Angela gave a brief, tight laugh. ‘Oh it’s no good asking me about Peter’s paintings, darling. I don’t know anything about his work. Sleep well, won’t you.’

She left. Terri locked the door and turned away, surprised.

‘What an odd thing to say,’ she muttered to herself.

She crossed to stand in front of the patio doors but all she could see was her own pale, pinched reflection in the glass. Flicking the curtains across, she heard a slow, muted howl well up from the rear of the house, drop pitch then climb again before finally dying away. After some rasping, creaking groans, it started again. ‘It’s the wind in the trees,’ she said out loud, and almost laughed at the panic in her own voice. So that was the reason for the name: *Le Chant du Mistral*; it sounded more like a scream than a song.

She made herself a mug of tea, pulled a folder out of her flight bag and took them both across to the armchair. The folder contained a copy of the contract she’d signed and a sheaf of articles about Peter Stedding printed from the internet. They charted his training in the great art studios of Florence, his portraits of royalty, politicians and movie stars, and his admission to the Royal Academy at just twenty-eight. Then he’d become increasingly controversial, complaining abusively about the current state of art education, scuffling and rowing with photographers and journalists. One grainy photograph showed him in front of a major London gallery, setting fire to a pile of ‘modern’ paintings in protest, mouthing angrily towards the camera. The stories dried up after that and he’d become a virtual recluse, painting less celebrated personalities and teaching the few he thought worthy of his talents.

Terri stared at the chilling photograph, then let her gaze wander dejectedly round the clinically furnished room while the wind continued to howl outside. Every sense told her that this was a mistake. She was filled with a mixture of self-pity and self-loathing: she’d let Oliver drive her to this.