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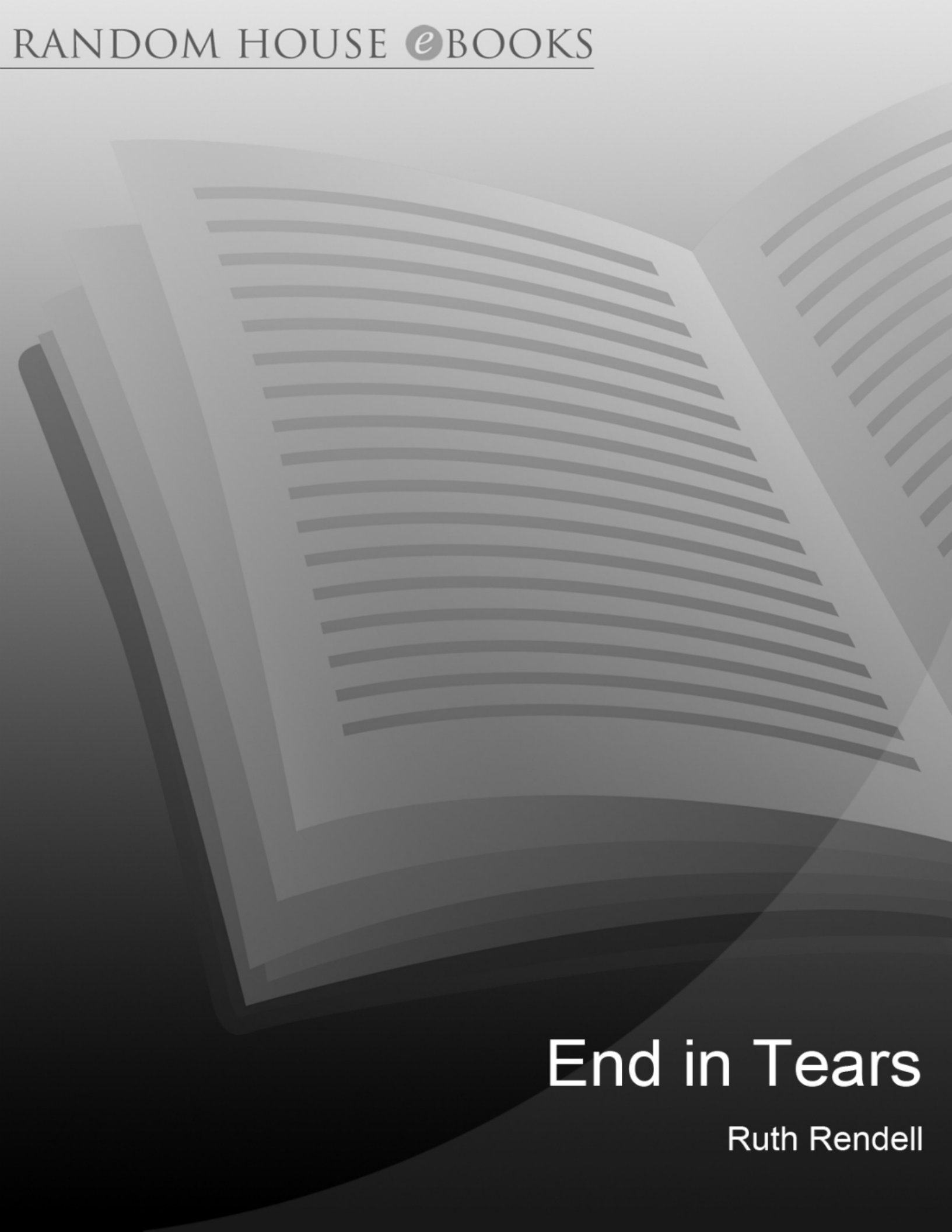

End in Tears

Ruth Rendell

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About the Book

A father’s worst nightmare. It’s first light and George Marshalson’s daughter hasn’t returned home. He doesn’t yet know that she never will – that her body lies prone just yards from the family house. Or that he will himself make the shocking discovery.

Chief Inspector Wexford has never known a case of a father finding the murdered body of his daughter. He has daughters of his own but can barely imagine himself in Mr Marshalson’s position.

Tasked with picking through the pieces of a shattered family, Wexford unearths some surprising secrets about the dead teenager’s lifestyle. And when a second girl is found murdered – a victim unquestionably linked to the first – Wexford has to put his own family problems aside to tackle what will become the most disturbing and emotional case of his career.

About the Author

Ruth Rendell was an exceptional crime writer, and will be remembered as a legend in her own lifetime. Her ground-breaking debut novel, *From Doon With Death*, was first published in 1964 and introduced readers to her enduring and popular detective, Inspector Reginald Wexford.

With worldwide sales of approximately 20 million copies, Rendell was a regular *Sunday Times* bestseller. Her sixty bestselling novels include police procedurals, some of which have been successfully adapted for TV, stand-alone psychological mysteries, and a third strand of crime novels under the pseudonym Barbara Vine.

Rendell won numerous awards, including the *Sunday Times* Literary Award in 1990. In 2013 she was awarded the Crime Writers' Association Cartier Diamond Dagger for sustained excellence in crime writing. In 1996 she was awarded the CBE, and in 1997 became a Life Peer.

Ruth Rendell died in May 2015.

By Ruth Rendell

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End in Tears

Ruth Rendell

arrow books

Chapter 1

WHEN HE LIFTED it off the seat the backpack felt heavier than when he had first put it into the car. He lowered it on to the soft ferny ground. Then he got back into the driving seat to move the car deep into a cave made by hawthorn bushes and brambles, and the hop vines which climbed over everything in this wood. It was late June and the vegetation very dense and luxuriant.

Getting out again and standing back to take a good look, he could barely see the car. Probably he only saw it because he knew it was there. No one else would notice it. He squatted down, hoisted the backpack up on to his shoulders and slowly stood up to his full height. The movement reminded him of something and it was a moment before he realised what it was: lifting up his little son to sit on his shoulders. A hundred years ago, it seemed. The backpack was lighter than the boy but felt heavier to him.

He was afraid that if he stood upright the pack would jerk him backwards and break his spine. Of course it wouldn't. It just felt that way. All the same, he wouldn't stand upright, wouldn't even try it. Instead, he stooped, bending almost double. It wasn't far. He could walk like this the two hundred yards to the bridge. Anyone seeing him from a distance in this half-light would have thought him a humpbacked man.

There was no one to see. The twisty country lane wound round Yorstone Wood and over the bridge. He could have brought the car right up to the bridge but that way it would have been seen, so he had driven off the lane along a ride and then through a clearing to find the hop-grown cave. In the distance he thought he heard a car, then something

heavier with a diesel engine. They would be on the road below, Brimhurst Lane that ran from Myfleet to Brimhurst Prideaux, passing under Yorstone Bridge ahead of him. It wasn't far now but it seemed like miles. If his legs gave way he wouldn't be able to get up again. Would it be easier to drag the backpack? What, then, if he met someone? Dragging something looks much more suspicious than carrying it. He pressed his shoulders back a little and, surprisingly, that was better. There was no one to meet. He could see the lane through the trees and the little stone bridge no one had reinforced with steel or replaced with a brightly painted wooden structure.

Its parapets were low, too low for safety, according to the local paper. The paper was always on about this bridge, and the dangers of the lane and the low parapets. He walked out on to the bridge, squatted down and let the backpack slip off his shoulders to the ground. He undid the flaps and then the zip. Inside, now revealed, was a lump of concrete, very roughly spherical, a bit bigger than a soccer ball. A pair of gloves was also inside the pack. To be on the safe side, he put them on. Though it would never come to anyone examining his hands, it would be stupid to scrape or bruise them.

What light remained was fading fast and with the coming of the dark it grew cooler. His watch told him that it was nine fifteen. Not long now. He lifted up the lump of concrete in his gloved hands, thought of balancing it on the parapet in readiness, then thought again. It wasn't beyond the bounds of possibility that someone would come along the path he had used and cross the bridge. Wait for the call, he thought. It won't be long now.

No traffic had passed along the road below since he had come on to the bridge but a car came now, going towards Brimhurst Prideaux, most probably all the way to Kingsmarkham. He closed his hand over the mobile in his pocket, worried because it hadn't rung. Then it rang.

‘Yes?’

‘She’s left. You want the number again?’

‘I’ve got it. A silver Honda.’

‘Right.’

‘A silver Honda. Should be along in four minutes.’

He heard the line close. It was dark now. A car passed under the bridge, heading towards Brimhurst St Mary and Myfleet. The road dipped where the bridge passed over it and then twisted to the left, almost a right-angled bend. There were tall trees on the corner with thick ancient trunks and a black and white arrow sign opposite, pointing traffic to the left. A minute had passed.

He moved across to the other side of the bridge, dragging the backpack behind him, and there he bent down, heaved up the lump of concrete, his arms straining, and set it on the parapet. Just as well it wasn’t far to lift it. Another minute gone. A white van with headlights on at full beam came from the Myfleet direction, a car following it, to pass, just behind him, a motorbike coming from Kingsmarkham. He was momentarily blinded by the headlights, held in them, which made him curse. No one should see him. The silver Honda with the number he had memorised would be along soon, very soon. The third minute passed. A fourth.

He hated anticlimaxes. The silver Honda could have taken another route. It was all very well to say it never did but you could never say that, not when it came to the way people behaved. He was facing the way it would come, towards Myfleet. It would pass under the bridge but before it reached the left-hand bend . . . He could see lights in the distance. The lights appeared and disappeared as a hedge or a tree trunk cut them from his view, and appeared again. Two sets of lights, not one car but two, both of them silver, quite close together. One was the Honda but he couldn’t tell which, not from here, not in the dark, but he could read the number or the last three digits.

As soon as he had given a great push to the lump on the parapet and felt it drop, he knew he had aimed at the wrong car. The crash was huge, like a bomb. The first car, the one he had hit, ploughed into a tree trunk, its bonnet burst open, its windscreen gone, half its roof caved in. It seemed to have split and exploded. The car behind, undamaged until this point, crashed into its rear and its boot lid sprang open. That was the silver Honda which had been his quarry. As its driver got out of it, screaming, her hands up in the air, he knew he had failed.

He waited no longer but picked up the backpack and moved, looking back once to see the leading car burst into flames. In the brilliant light which illuminated everything he saw for the first time the woman he had tried to kill.

Chapter 2

GEORGE MARSHALSON HAD slept badly. He always did when she was out. Going to bed soon after she had left the house, he had slept for an hour or two, then woken and lain awake, no longer comforted by the presence of Diana next to him. It was August and the night was warm, humid and sticky in spite of the wide-open windows. He lay listening to the sounds of the night, the trickle of the sluggish river, a bird, its name unknown, giving its eerie wail.

Pressing the button on the clock which lit up its display panel, he saw that it was still only eleven forty-one. The bathroom summoned him, reminding him with a twinge that, as with most men of his age, his prostate gland was no longer in perfect working order. He parted the floor-length curtains an inch and felt a breath of air on his face. The sky was cloudless and the moon had risen. Weeks of heat had dried the foliage on the trees that arched above the lane but now only their abundance could be seen, their heavy luxuriance, hanging utterly still in the warm air. He thought how wonderful it would be if something had happened to send her home early. That wretched club closed, for instance, or even a police raid, though he hardly supposed Amber did things to attract police attention – or did she? You never knew with the young these days. Still, it would be wonderful to close these curtains, part them again and see her walking down the lane . . .

There had been nights when he had gone out into the lane to look for her. A fruitless business, too stupid to confess to anyone. Even Diana had never known. He had gone out and walked up to the corner – two or three hundred yards? –

looked up and down the road that ran from Myfleet to Kingsmarkham, then walked back. There was no point in it, there never had been, but it was what anxious parents or lovers did. Even if he considered doing it tonight, now was too early. She would be inside that club, an underground place he thought it was, with her friends doing whatever they did. He dropped the curtains and stood looking at Diana. She slept silently, one hand up against her cheek. Youth came back to her while she slept, as it is said to come back to the newly dead. I wonder if she's got someone, he thought, 'someone else', as they say. It suddenly seemed obscene to him to share a bed with a man when you had some other lover. But perhaps she hadn't, probably she hadn't. She was just indifferent to him, as he was to her. In any case, he didn't care. On the rare occasions when he thought about it, he realised he didn't really care much about anyone or anything except Amber.

He fell into a restless sleep. A sound woke him. A car in the lane? That boy might have brought her home. He usually dropped her at the corner but he might have brought her home. Once more he lit up the dial on the clock. One fifty-six. This was the sort of time she came home. She was usually very quiet about it, as much to avoid waking the child as disturbing him and Diana. Perhaps she *was* home. Perhaps the sound he had heard was the front door closing. He lay there and listened. Silence. Then that bird, whatever it was, let out its sad cry. Two o'clock, half past, ten to three . . . He got up and went out on to the landing. If she had come home she would close her bedroom door. It was wide open.

The chaotic untidiness, the unmade bed, the clothes scattered, tossed about, abandoned, confronted him, the offence they usually gave him softened by the moonlit dark. She wasn't home. Three was very late and it was after three now. He went downstairs, barefoot across the wide wood-floored hall, the only cool surface in the place, telling

himself he would find her in the living room, in the kitchen, eating something, drinking that sparkling water they all poured down all the time. She wasn't there. He thought, what's the use of going back to bed, I'll never sleep. But what was he to do if he didn't go back? There was nothing to do in the night because that time was set aside for sleep. As he climbed the stairs a cry came to him that wasn't from that bird but from the baby. If it had been left to George he would have let the baby cry, though he had never let Amber cry. He went into the bedroom and saw Diana sitting on the side of the bed, stark naked. She slept like that. She always had. Of course he had liked it when they first knew each other, when they were first married. Now he thought it . . . unseemly. At his age and, come to that, at hers. She stood up without speaking to him, threw on the blue silk robe she had taken off at bedtime and went to see to the baby.

It took her about ten minutes to calm him. When she came back he had the light on and was sitting up in bed.

'She hasn't come in,' she said.

'I know.'

'You're going to have to put your foot down, aren't you? You're going to have to tell her this sort of behaviour is wholly unacceptable. If she wants to live under our roof and enjoy the advantages of living here, she'll have to be in by midnight at the latest. She's only just eighteen, for God's sake.'

'She's going, isn't she, in November?'

She made no answer. She'll be relieved, he thought. He turned off the light and in the renewed darkness heard the blue silk slide off her naked body. The smooth warm skin of her thigh brushed against him. It made him shiver in the heat.

The moon had gone, the dawn not yet come. He lay wakeful for an hour, then got up, went to the bathroom and put on his clothes. Old men's clothes, Amber said they were, flannel trousers, a shirt with a collar and cuffs, socks and

lace-up brogues, but he didn’t know what else to wear. Probably he had slept a little after Diana came back to bed. It was said that you slept, you dozed, even if you were sure you hadn’t. While he had drifted off into that fitful sleep she might have come in. He stood waiting by the bedroom window, giving it five minutes, ten, before going out on to the landing, postponing the joy of seeing her door closed at last or the horror of finding it still open.

It was open.

He thought now, putting his long-held fear into words, something must have happened to her. The thing that happens to eighteen-year-old girls out alone at night. It was ten to five and growing light. The sky was pale and glowing, of that colour that has no name and no description unless it is to be like a pearl. Outside the air, which for hours had been heavy and close, felt fresh and cool. He thought, I will walk down to the corner, I will walk along the road, miles if necessary, until I find her. And if I don’t, at least I won’t be at home in that bed beside that woman, hearing that baby cry.

The only houses in Mill Lane were his own and, a hundred yards from it, on the other side, a terrace of three small villas. Why they had been built there a hundred and fifty years ago, to house whom, no one seemed to know. Outside the middle one a car stood parked by the grass verge. Briefly, George wondered why John Brooks left his car there overnight when there was room for it on his driveway. The thought was fleeting, carrying him back inevitably to Amber who had been assisted by Brooks in her efforts to use Diana’s computer. Why not ask Diana herself? They had always disliked each other, those two, from the first. How could anyone dislike his little Amber?

But where was she? What had become of her? Walking on the Jewel Terrace side, he came to the end of Mill Lane and looked up and down the Myfleet Road. It was long and straight at this point, a single carriageway with fields and

woods on either side of it, cats' eyes down its centre but no traffic signs or road markings apart from the signpost 'To Brimhurst St John', which pointed down Mill Lane. Walking along that road was pointless. He would do better to go back and fetch the car. Or he could phone that boy, that Ben Miller. Of course, it was outrageous to phone anyone at five in the morning and Miller wasn't Amber's boyfriend, she had no boyfriend, but he cared very little about that. Oh, the relief if she were at the Millers' in Myfleet – except that she wouldn't be. Why would she be?

He turned round and began to walk back on the other side. She might have stopped over with one of her Kingsmarkham friends, Lara or . . . was she called Megan? Or Samantha or Chris. He was clinging to straws and he knew it. He felt them float away from him downstream. The sun was coming up, already bringing a touch of heat. He stepped on to the grass verge, preferring its soft feel underfoot, looked to the left of him into the shade of the trees and saw something white gleaming there, half hidden by the tall attenuated weeds. A hammer knocked at his heart and a tide of terror tore through him. For a moment he couldn't move, only stand there with blindness enclosing his eyes. He took a step towards the white thing. Trying to see was the most painful thing he had ever done but he had to do it, he had to look. He saw her outflung hand, that stupid white watch with the Gollum face, and he fell forward. In a faint, perhaps, he didn't know, or just because lying across her body was the only place to be.

How long he lay there he was never sure. He wanted to die. He thought that if he willed it hard enough he would die and they would be found together. It wasn't so. The delivery man bringing newspapers to his house and Jewel Terrace left his van at the corner and, walking down the lane, found him and her. When he refused to move, the delivery man phoned the police and waited for them to come.

Chapter 3

THE WOMAN WHO emerged from the house as they came up the drive had a child of about a year in her arms. Wexford and Detective Sergeant Hannah Goldsmith introduced themselves and the woman said, ‘He’s asleep. Our doctor has him under sedation.’

‘I’d like to talk to you,’ Wexford said. ‘You are Mrs Marshalson?’

She nodded. Wexford had never before known a case of a father finding the murdered body of his daughter, never thought to see a bereaved parent prone over his child’s corpse. He had daughters of his own but he could barely imagine himself in George Marshalson’s position.

Once the man had been persuaded to go home, had been taken home, the pathologist had come. The photographers had come, the scene-of-crime officer, the whole panoply of those who attend a murder scene. For his part Wexford had needed to register only that she was very young, still in her teens, very good-looking, and that death had come through a violent blow to the head with a brick or piece of masonry.

He questioned the paper man who had found him and her, then he and Hannah had walked down the lane towards Clifton, the Marshalsons’ house. Already the heat they were so used to that it had begun to feel normal was closing in. You could almost feel the temperature rising. The air was as still and heavy as at noon. Mill Lane was overhung with densely foliaged trees through the branches of which shafts of glare penetrated.

Clifton’s front garden was flowerless, its shrubs wilting and its lawns yellow. The front door of the house opened

and the woman came out before they were in talking distance. Politically correct to a degree Wexford thought ridiculous, Hannah said to him in the kindly and forbearing tone she often used when speaking to him, ‘That will be his partner.’

‘His wife, most likely.’

Hannah gave him the sort of look she kept for a middle-aged man who still called the woman he had married his wife. They followed Mrs Marshalson into the house. The child, a little boy, looked heavy to carry and she set him down. Not yet able to walk, he crawled rapidly across the polished wood floor, saying, ‘Mama, Mama.’

Diana Marshalson took no notice of him. ‘Come in here. I don’t know what I can tell you. When he came back he was speechless. He’s absolutely broken.’ Their expressions must have told her the misapprehension both were under. ‘Oh, I’m not her mother. I’m George’s second wife.’

Wexford had learnt to detect signs of satisfaction on DS Goldsmith’s face and in what she would have called her body language. He saw them now, the approving set of the mouth, the relaxation of her usually tense shoulders. That would have been brought about by Diana Marshalson’s revealing she was the dead girl’s stepmother. Hannah liked complex family arrangements. In her world they signified freedom of choice and self-assertiveness. A bunch of children, thought Wexford, each with a different father and some with different mothers, all living under one roof with four or five unrelated adults would be her ideal.

They went into a spacious living room, its french windows wide open. He had already learnt that the Marshalsons were interior designers, based at Marshalson’s Studio, Design and Restoration, in the Kingsbrook Centre of Kingsmarkham, but he would have known without being told. Such people’s homes are always unmistakable, beautiful, the taste displayed impeccable, the ornaments just right and not too numerous, the colours exactly what one would have chosen

if one possessed the gift for it, and at the same time the reverse of cosy, not the kind of place in which one would feel like curling up with a book and a glass of wine. Wexford sat down on a dark-grey sofa, Hannah on a pale-grey armchair, Diana Marshalson in another, which looked as if it had started life in a palace in Mandalay. Carved faces of angry gods glowered from its high arched back.

'What made your husband go out into the lane first thing this morning, Mrs Marshalson? What time was it exactly?'

'I don't know,' she said. 'I was asleep. He worried terribly when she was out at night. I suppose he realised she hadn't come in.'

'He went out to look for her?' Hannah sounded incredulous.

'I suppose so. He must have known – well, either that she wouldn't be there or that something awful had happened. But I don't know. He went out. I woke up when the child cried. That was at six thirty.' She listened as if for just such a cry. 'I must go and check on George. Do you mind waiting a minute? I'll be back with you as soon as I can.'

As she went out the little boy came in, still on all fours, but managing to pull himself up by holding on to the edge of an inlaid table that looked as if made of ebony and some pale blond wood. He was a handsome boy, olive-skinned but with red cheeks, his hair dark and curly, clustering in those rings only seen in very young children.

'Hello,' said Wexford. 'What's your name? Let me guess. James? Jack? The most popular name of the moment is Archie, they tell me.'

'He's too young to know what you're saying, guv.'

Resisting the temptation to tell her he knew that, he'd had two of his own and four grandchildren, he said mildly that small children like people to talk to them, they like the sound and the attention. It doesn't much matter what you say. Hannah achieved a minimal shrug, a favourite gesture of hers. Diana Marshalson, he thought, looked young

enough to be this child's mother but only just. Maybe forty-five or forty-six, a second wife who had perhaps never been married before and wanted a baby before it was too late. He rather admired her looks. Tall, handsome, dark-haired women with full figures were his type. His own wife was such a one.

She came back. 'He's fast asleep. It's the best thing for him, though I dread what it will be like when he wakes. He'll have to wake some time. He adored Amber. She was only just eighteen. What happened?'

'Early days to say,' said Hannah. 'She's dead. She was attacked. Really, that's all we know.'

The little boy tried to climb on to Diana Marshalson's lap. To Wexford it seemed that she hauled him up wearily and without much enthusiasm. 'Amber went out last evening? What time would that have been and where did she go?'

Amber's stepmother was choosing her words carefully. 'She went clubbing. To a place called Bling-Bling in Kingsmarkham. Between eight thirty and nine, I'd say. It sounds awful, I know, but they all do it. The friend who brought her home would have dropped her at the end of Mill Lane. It's happened before, she went to the club regularly and she was always all right.' The child caught hold of the pearl string she was wearing and began tugging at it. 'No, Brand, no, please.' She prised his fingers apart. 'Amber was waiting for her A level results. She'd just left school. Look, my husband's asleep but I think I should be with him. Sitting with him, you know. In case he wakes. I can't leave him alone any longer.'

'We'd just like . . .' Hannah began but Wexford stopped her.

'We will come back later in the day, Mrs Marshalson. Then perhaps you or your husband can give us the name of the friend and a few more details about Amber herself. We'll leave you now.'

Diana Marshalson stayed just long enough to open the door for them, the little boy seated on her hip.

‘We could have got the friend’s name, you know, guv,’ said Hannah. ‘It’s not like she was the woman’s mother.’

Although he knew it was accepted practice in police forces all over the country, Wexford very much disliked being called ‘guv’. He didn’t expect ‘sir’ these days but he would almost rather she had called him by his given name than that awful abbreviation. When she first joined his team he had gently asked her not to do it but it was as if he hadn’t spoken. If she had been in any way disrespectful he would have had reason to reprove her but she hadn’t, she never was. He was sure she liked, even admired, him – apart, that is, from his old-fashioned speech patterns and terminology.

Now she repeated what she had said because he hadn’t replied. ‘She may have been very attached to the girl,’ he said. ‘We don’t yet know how long she had been her stepmother. Maybe from Amber’s early childhood.’

Returning to the crime scene, Hannah said no more. It irked her that Wexford used the word ‘girl’. Amber was a woman, she was eighteen. He would have to learn correct terms, she thought, or the rapidly changing world would simply leave him behind. Only the other day she had heard him talk about ‘people’ when he meant ‘community’.

The body had gone. There were still several uniformed officers standing on the grass, half a dozen cars filling the entrance to the lane and the scene-of-crime officer stretching blue and white crime tape round the place where Amber Marshalson had lain. DS Karen Malahyde was standing next to a woman of about forty wearing jeans and a white T-shirt.

‘This is Miss Burton, sir. She lives in one of those houses opposite. She was out last night and came home about midnight.’

‘Lydia Burton,’ the woman said. ‘I live at number three Jewel Terrace. I was out with a friend. He brought me home in his car and after he’d gone I took my dog for a walk. Not for long, you know. But you have to walk them or they make a fuss.’

She was pretty rather than beautiful, with healthy pink skin and curly fair hair, her face without make-up but for mascara on her long eyelashes. This and the dangling silver dog-face earrings she wore gave a frivolous note to her austerity.

‘Oh, yes, of course,’ she said in answer to his question as to whether she had known Amber Marshalson. ‘I’m the head teacher of Brimhurst Primary School. Amber was there for two or three years when her father first came to Brimhurst.’

‘You saw her last night?’

‘I only wish I had.’

‘What happened?’

‘I’m afraid I’m not a very observant person.’

Hannah Goldsmith disliked hearing people, women especially, belittle themselves. A sign of low self-esteem perhaps. It was surely by now a well-known fact that everyone was as valuable as everyone else. All had skills and gifts, and each was uniquely her (or just possibly his) own person. ‘You took your dog out at – what? Twelve thirty?’

‘I suppose so. About that. It was very dark down the lane because of the trees and I hadn’t brought a torch. There was a bit of a moon and I walked the other way, up to the Myfleet road, and went along perhaps two hundred yards.’ Metres, thought Hannah, metres. Why did it take people so long to learn? ‘When I was coming back – back to the corner of Mill Lane, I mean – I saw a man. He was standing among the trees, in there.’ Lydia Burton pointed into the woodland where Amber Marshalson’s body had been found. ‘It gave me quite a shock. He had his back to me. I don’t think he

saw me. I crossed the road. I was anxious to get home – I mean, seeing him there made me want to get home.'

'Can you describe this man, Miss Burton?'

Hannah shook her head impatiently. Why couldn't Wexford remember to say 'Ms'? 'I didn't see his face. He was wearing a hood. I mean, he was wearing a fleece with a hood. Well, mostly it's the young that wear them. I don't think he was that young. He wasn't a boy.'

'Tall or short? Fat or thin? How old?'

'Tallish,' she said. 'Quite thin, I think. I wish I'd taken more notice. But people always say that, I expect, don't they? I don't think he was that young, though I couldn't say how I know. Forty, I think. At least forty.'

'A pity you can't be more precise,' said Hannah. 'You didn't see Amber? No, I suppose not. Do you know if she often went clubbing?'

Wexford wished Hannah could bring herself to sound less censorious. She was a beautiful woman in any man's eyes, tall, slender, with the face of an El Greco saint and raven's-wing hair, but he wondered if she had ever been clubbing or possibly been up after eleven p.m. except in the course of duty.

'I really don't know,' Lydia Burton said. 'I was never close to Amber. We just said hi when we saw each other.' Wexford asked her who lived in the other houses in Jewel Terrace. 'The elderly man at number one is Mr Nash, then Mr and Mrs Brooks at number two, they're called John and Gwenda.'

They watched her let herself into the first house in the terrace, a neat cottage as each of them was, red brick with a slate roof. Her front garden was a small square lawn surrounded by lavender bushes, Mr Nash's a plantation of huge sunflowers, ten feet tall, their sun-shaped faces turned skywards, the Brookses' stone paving within a rectangle of closely trimmed box hedges. The morning was already very hot with that heat which is peculiarly English, the air heavy with humidity, the sun scalding where it touched. Hannah

Goldsmith looked to Wexford as unruffled as ever, her pale smooth skin as white as in winter, not a hair out of place.

'You can start on Jewel Terrace, Hannah,' he said. 'Before the occupants go to work. Take Balbir with you.'

They made a beautiful couple, he thought, as Hannah and DC Bhattacharya crossed the road, the woman so slender, her hair streaming down her back like a dark waterfall, and the tall very upright man, impossibly thin, his cropped hair making hers look brown, his own was so pitch-black. Their profiles were somewhat alike, regular, classical, utterly Caucasian. They might have been brother and sister, offspring perhaps of a father from Iran and a mother from Iberia. Thinking how this area had changed in the short time since the Simisola case, when there had been no more than twelve people from ethnic minorities, he walked with Karen Malahyde back to his car where Donaldson waited at the wheel.

'Going to be a hot day, Jim.'

Donaldson said, 'Yes, sir,' in a stony way, treating this deeply banal remark with the contempt it deserved.

'You know, I don't think I've ever been here before. To Brimhurst, I mean.'

'It's not the sort of place you come to unless you know someone. All there is is the village hall and the church, and that's been locked up since the vicar went. The shop closed ten years ago.'

'How do you know all this?'

'My mum lives here,' said Donaldson. 'People like it because it's quiet. Nothing ever happens – well, not till this.'

'No. Can you turn up the air-conditioning?'

Post-mortems held no attractions for him but he attended them, looking the other way as much as he could. Detective Inspector Burden was less squeamish than he and fascinated by forensics. They sat and watched or, in Wexford's case, pretended to watch, while the pathologist

opened Amber Marshalson's body and examined the dreadful damage to her head where she had been struck by some heavy object. He had asked the time of death and been told between midnight and three in the morning. More precisely than that she wouldn't commit herself.

'A brick was the weapon, I should think,' said Carina Laxton, 'but of course you won't take my word for that.'

'Certainly not,' said Burden who disliked her. Apart from her name and her lack of a thyroid cartilage, he had said to Wexford, she might as well be a man, and perhaps she once had been. You never knew these days. She had no breasts, no hips, her hair was crew-cut and no scrap of make-up had ever settled on her virgin face. He had, however, to admit that she was good at her job, less sharp-tongued and plain rude than Mavrikian and her attitude a far cry from the pomposities of Sir Hilary Tremlett.

'She died from that blow to the head, as I don't need to tell you,' she now said. 'It's not of course my place' – this said with an old-fashioned primness barely concealing arrogance – 'to identify the weapon. No doubt you will need the services of a plinthologist.'

'A *what*?'

'A brick expert.' Carina enunciated the words slowly and with great care in case he had difficulty understanding plain English.

'No doubt,' said Burden.

'Because a brick is not just a brick, you know.' Once she had left this to sink in, Carina said, 'There was no sexual assault. It'll all be in the report. She'd had a child, as I expect you know.'

'I didn't know,' said Wexford, astonished. 'She was only eighteen.'

'What's that supposed to mean, Reg?' Carina Laxton shook her head at him and pursed her lips. 'If she'd been twelve, that might have been cause for comment. Just.'

Brand, he thought. I wonder. Is he Amber's child, not Diana's? And is it Brand as in Ibsen or Brand as in Brandon? He said to Burden, 'Come up to my office, Mike, and later on we can go back to Mill Lane and see the Marshalsons together.'

They worked as a team whenever they could and particularly when Wexford felt that another hour or two in the company of Hannah Goldsmith might make him say things he would regret. They got on, he and Mike. If they couldn't quite say everything that came into their heads to each other, they got as near to doing this as two people ever can. He liked Mike better than anyone he knew after his own wife, children and grandchildren – and perhaps not exactly after them. For those seven people he loved and no one knew better than he that liking and loving are two different things. Even the Catholic Church at its most stringent had never attempted adjuring the faithful to *like* each other.

Up in his office with the new grey carpet, which was the gift of the grateful council-tax payers of Kingsmarkham, and the two yellow armchairs which were not but his own property, Burden took his characteristic perch on a corner of the rosewood desk. This large piece of furniture also belonged to Wexford, who kept it there along with the armchairs to show to the local media when they came nosing around, looking for evidence of police profligacy and corruption. Burden, always a sharp dresser, had lately taken to the kind of clothes known in the trade as 'smart casual'. The beautiful suits had gone to the back of the wardrobe or, in the case of the older ones, to the charity shop, and the detective inspector appeared in jeans and suede jacket over a white open-necked shirt. One of the things that came into Wexford's head which he couldn't say aloud was that his friend was just a fraction too old for jeans. Still, it was only a fraction and Burden was thin enough to wear them with elegance.

He had laid out on his desk the things that had been found in the pockets of Amber Marshalson's jacket. This white cotton garment, heavily stained with blood, had gone to the lab, as had her pink miniskirt, black camisole and bra, and pink and black thong. The contents of her pockets lay on the dark-red leather top of the desk.

'They don't have handbags any more,' said Wexford.

Burden was looking at a front-door key on a Gollum-faced ring to match her watch, a tube made of transparent plastic holding some bright pink substance, presumably a kind of lipstick, the packet with two cigarettes in it, the half-melted chocolate, still wrapped in foil, and the condom. Still a bit of a prude, he let his eyes linger on this last object and his mouth tightened.

'Better have one than not, surely,' said Wexford.

'That depends on how you intend to spend your evening. Wasn't she carrying any money?'

Wexford opened a drawer and brought out a transparent plastic bag with notes inside. Quite a lot of notes and all of them fifties.

'It still has to be checked for prints,' he said. 'There's a thousand pounds in there. It was loose in her right-hand jacket pocket along with the key and that tube of what, I believe, is lip gloss. The contraceptive, the cigarettes and the sweet were in the other pocket.'

'Where did she get hold of a thousand pounds?'

'That we shall have to discover,' said Wexford.

Chapter 4

THE CAR TURNED into Mill Lane. Along the grass verge uniformed policemen – jacketless and without caps – were searching the ditch and the field on the other side of the hedge for the weapon. Crime tape, stretched along the pavement edge, isolated the area. On the opposite side of the road an old man stood among the sunflowers, leaning on a stick, staring at the searchers.

‘It’s been so dry for so long,’ Wexford said. ‘The killer could have parked a car anywhere along that verge without leaving a mark.’

The house called Clifton seemed to lie among its trees and shrubs peculiarly still and passive. It had that look of resting, of shutting down, buildings have at times of great heat. Alert expectancy would be for the bitter cold of deep winter. Windows were wide open but no one was to be seen. Though it was early evening, they got out of the car’s cool interior to be met by a wall of heat.

‘It feels like stepping out of the aircraft when you go away on holiday to Greece,’ said Wexford. ‘You can’t believe it, it feels so good. In the middle of the night, as likely as not. But we hardly ever have warm nights here. Why don’t we?’

‘Search me. Something to do with the Gulf Stream, I expect. Most weather things are.’

‘The Gulf Stream makes things warm, not cold.’

This time there was no one to meet them. Wexford rang the doorbell and Diana Marshalson opened the door. Again the little boy was with her, managing to stand if he clutched at the side of her loose trousers.