

# ONE

**A**nd I think it's very important for a writer to have a secure emotional base at home. In the solitude behind one's desk one travels a roller-coaster of ideas and impressions, so it's good when one returns from the wilder shores of the imagination, to be able to settle back into a reality in which one feels grounded. And I am fortunate to have found that emotional grounding with my wife – not my first wife; many of us make mistakes when we are young and foolish (SMALL CHUCKLE) – but the right wife. In my case, Persephone.'

The speaker's words prompted an only-just-audible sigh of satisfaction in Fethering Library. His audience, mostly female and mature, felt comforted by avowals of marital love. Particularly when they came from a writer as eminent as that evening's guest, Burton St Clair. They knew, from their reading of the *Daily Mail*, how often fame and fortune triggered promiscuity. It was nice to be in the company of someone who hadn't been spoiled by success.

He stood in front of a display sent to the library by the publicity department of his publishers. There was a large posed photograph of the author looking soulful, along with a blown-up image of his bestselling book, *Stray Leaves in Autumn*. On a table beside him were stacked piles of the recently published paperback edition.

Jude was as pleased as the rest of the audience to hear the writer's words. Burton St Clair had not always been so emotionally secure. Nor indeed had he always been Burton St Clair. Jude had known him some twenty years before when he was called Al (short for Albert) Sinclair, still living in Morden with his first wife, an actress called Megan. And if marrying her had been the 'mistake' he had made when he was 'young and foolish', Jude reckoned that, during the marriage, Burton's irrepressible habit of trying to get into bed with every other woman he met had possibly been another mistake.

She had not been surprised when she heard, through mutual friends, that Al and his wife had split up after four years. Soon after they got married, Megan had gone through one of those moments in the sun which happen in actresses' careers. A supporting role in one television series had led to a starring role in another, and for a couple of years Megan Georgeson (her maiden and professional name) was everywhere on the box.

Though Al Sinclair claimed to be delighted by his wife's success, it was not an easy burden for someone as egotistical as he was. After a few experiences of accompanying her to premieres and awards ceremonies as the 'token spouse', increasingly he let her do that kind of stuff on her own. He was sick of being seated next to show-business successes and being asked the question, 'And what do you do?' To reply that he was a writer risked being asked the supplementary question, 'Do you write anything I would have heard of?' And since his first novel had yet to be published, the answer to that had to be 'No'. It was not an admission Al Sinclair enjoyed making. And he compensated for his sidelining in the marriage by various and continuing infidelities.

Megan Georgeson, dark-haired, petite and with 'surprisingly blue eyes', was often described as 'waiflike' or having 'a fragile beauty'. Unfortunately, she was equally fragile and needy in her private life. It had only been a matter of time before she found out about one – or more – of her husband's betrayals. And to someone as sensitive as Megan, such a revelation would have been a severe body blow, which the marriage could not survive.

Still, Jude was by nature a generous woman and prepared to take at face value that evening's assertion that Burton had found emotional stability with his new wife. From Jude's point of view, that was good news. It meant that, if she and Burton were ever again alone together, she wouldn't have to face the tedious necessity of deterring his wandering hands.

And she tried to banish from her mind the unworthy thought that, as again she had heard through mutual friends, this new marriage to Persephone was very new indeed. Less than six months old. There was always the possibility that Burton's old

behaviours might reassert themselves. But, for the moment, she was prepared to give him the benefit of the doubt.

Time changed people, she knew, occasionally for the better. And it had been a long time since she, Burton and Megan had spent much time together.

The event was taking place in Fethering Library. Though the radiators were turned up to full, the place still felt draughty. The Edwardians who had designed its gothic dimensions must have been a hardier breed than their twenty-first century descendants, pampered from birth by central heating. Outside it was a bitterly cold January evening. A pitiless wind from the Channel assaulted the seafront of Fethering, which still called itself a village, though it had the dimensions of a small town. And the sudden rainbursts of the day, undecided whether they should be falling as snow, had compromised by turning to face-scouring sleet.

Jude had been lucky. Nothing had fallen from the sky during her half-mile walk from Woodside Cottage to the library. Optimistic by nature, she hadn't bothered to take an umbrella and, as outerwear, put on one of her favourite patchwork jackets, confident that brisk movement would keep her warm.

The route had taken her along the seafront. She had seen very few people. In the winter, when darkness fell, most of the denizens of Fethering scuttled inside and closed their curtains. As she passed by, from one of the seaside shelters, which afforded little protection because most of the glass panes in its metal structure had been smashed, she heard sounds of dispirited carousing. She could see the blurred outlines of three or four figures inside. Bored teenagers, she assumed, for whom there was not much entertainment beyond drink and drugs in a West Sussex seaside village.

Or maybe the people in the shelter could be described as – a term that was anathema to the righteous locals – ‘vagrants’. The use of the word implied the unspoken qualifying adjective ‘foreign’. The appearance of such people in the genteel environs of Fethering had been the cause of much apocalyptic brooding in the village’s only pub, the Crown & Anchor. And had even prompted a couple of letters to the *Fethering Observer*. There was dark talk of ‘slippery slopes’ and ‘uncontrolled immigration’.

There's a nasty substratum of racism very close to the genteel surface of the English country village. Poles, Bulgarians and Romanians are never quite welcome in the world of cricket pavilions, warm beer and roses round the door.

Jude was pretty cold by the time she reached the library and, feeling the chill once she stepped inside, wished she'd put on a more substantial top layer.

As she looked around the fine, though rather grubby, Edwardian interior, Jude felt a pang of guilt. To her shame, Fethering Library was not somewhere she visited very often. Though vaguely aware of headlines in the *Observer* about threats of the library's closure, she still tended to resort to the seductive simplicity of buying books from Amazon. She justified this to herself on the grounds that most of the books she bought, in the Mind, Body and Spirit category, were essential to her work as a healer and needed to be permanently available for reference on her shelves at Woodside Cottage. Also, she justified to herself, buying a book was putting money directly into the pocket of the author, which had to be a good thing.

But she still knew she ought to have given more support to her local library.

Her next-door neighbour Carole used to be equally absent from the place, but that had changed with the appearance of her granddaughter, Lily. As the little girl grew, her parents Stephen and Gaby – like all middle-class parents – were very keen for her to develop a love of books, and enrolled her in their local library in Fulham. So, for the precious days when Carole looked after her granddaughter in her home, High Tor, it made sense to get the little girl a ticket for Fethering Library. In order to effect this, Carole had had to get an adult ticket for herself. From then on, visits to the library could provide the focus for a major excursion, which would always end up with an ice cream or a millionaire shortbread – depending on the time of year – at the Seaview Café on Fethering Beach. (Carole would have preferred to take Lily to the rather more genteel Polly's Cake Shop, but that had closed, to be replaced by a Starbucks. And there was no way Carole Seddon was going to take her granddaughter into one of *those*.)

Jude had asked her neighbour whether she wanted to come

along with her to hear Burton St Clair's talk, but had received the predictably frosty response that Carole had better things to do with her time than 'listening to some writer moaning on about what hell it is being a writer.' Carole Seddon was wary of anything that might involve pretension or 'showing off', so treated everything to do with the creative arts with considerable suspicion. She was not a Philistine but found, now she lived in Fethering, that books and television supplied her cultural needs.

There had been a time, in the early days of her marriage to David, when the two of them had seen a lot of London theatre and cinema, but such excursions had been curtailed by the arrival of Stephen. And then things had started to go wrong between husband and wife; wrong to the extent that they put more effort into avoiding each other than arranging mutual cultural visits. And, after the divorce, Carole Seddon never again picked up the habit of theatre- and cinema-going. Not that she ever talked about such things. Even Jude, the nearest Carole had to a close friend, had never been told much about her neighbour's life before she'd moved to Fethering full time.

The relationship between Carole and Jude was a complex but enduring one. Brought together by geography when Jude moved into Woodside Cottage, next door to Carole's home High Tor, they had got off to a slow start.

Carole Seddon had always kept her life very circumscribed. She both resented and envied her new neighbour's more laid-back approach. Much more fragile than her brusque external manner might suggest, Carole was constantly anticipating disasters and very resistant to sharing her feelings with anyone. For her any activity, social or work-related, required a great deal of anguished planning. Jude was more spontaneous and, though she had not led a life free of suffering, was ready to live in the minute and embrace any opportunity which was offered. She regarded life as a rich gift. Carole thought of it more as an imposition.

Their backgrounds too couldn't have been more different. Carole had retired early – been retired early, some might say – from working as a civil servant at the Home Office. Whereas Jude, having had a portfolio of careers including model, actress and restaurateur, had ended up working as a healer. This was a

calling which Carole, though she no longer expressed the opinion quite so often to her neighbour, still regarded as ‘New Age mumbo-jumbo’. Illness, for her, was something that should be either snapped-out-of or dealt with by prescription medicine; she didn’t think the mind had anything to do with it.

Yet somehow the relationship between the two women survived, and even mellowed. They didn’t live in each other’s pockets, but they saw a lot of each other. They had even gone on holiday together to Turkey. And, apart from someone out there getting murdered and Carole nearly getting murdered, that had gone pretty well.

But the experiment hadn’t led to further mutual holidays. As her granddaughters, Lily and Chloe, grew older, Carole’s vacations now involved entertaining them for a few days on the South Coast. Jude spent her downtime in more varied ways, and her holidays were often connected with her work. For instance, the previous summer she had spent a blissful week at a Mindfulness Workshop in Périgord. Carole’s views on such activities were entirely predictable.

Yet the chalk and cheese somehow blended. And perhaps the strongest bond between Carole and Jude was their mutual passion for solving crimes.

Burton St Clair was fluent, Jude had to give him that. His presentation was clever too. It was clearly a routine he’d done many times before, but he didn’t let it sound rehearsed. He stumbled over his words occasionally and every now and then went off at a tangent, as if suddenly recalling an anecdote from deep within his memory. Jude, who had sat over many a dinner table with Megan, listening to Al Sinclair before he was published, had heard most of the material before, but could not prevent herself from admiring the way he made it sound new-minted.

He certainly held the literary ladies of Fethering in the palm of his hand. They had already been predisposed towards him. Probably every one of them had read his breakthrough novel, *Stray Leaves in Autumn*, whose paperback cover was so prominently displayed on the screen behind him. Why that book had caught the *zeitgeist* in the way it had, nobody could tell. His

previous eight novels had received respectable but less than ecstatic reviews, and less than respectable sales. Burton St Clair's future had appeared to be that of many other midlist authors, dutifully published by the same publishers for some years, until the inevitable moment of fate arrived. Some new broom appointed to the editorial department took a long hard look at the sales figures of his books and unceremoniously dumped him.

Burton St Clair would have coped with that. During his 'undiscovered years', he had got very good at moaning about what hell it is being a writer. Being dropped by his publisher would just have confirmed his view that the entire world was conspiring against him. Burton's shoulders were home to more chips than McDonald's.

But he was coping much more easily with being a success. Like many writers, he had spent a great deal of the unproductive times behind his desk imagining the answers he would supply when interviewed in a variety of arts programmes. So, when there was sufficient interest in *Stray Leaves in Autumn* for him actually to be interviewed on arts programmes, his replies were well rehearsed.

Quite why that particular book had taken off when the others hadn't remained a mystery. His new-broom editor, who had been about to drop him from her list, asserted that it was a vindication of the publishing house's 'long tradition of nurturing exceptional talents.' Burton himself claimed that, though no reader would ever recognize the author's 'self' in the novel, it was the book in which he had 'invested' most of himself.

It was the view of Jude, who had of course read the book, that if there was any explanation of its sudden success, it was because *Stray Leaves in Autumn* was, at its most basic, an old-fashioned romance. In spite of some stylistic embellishments and the mandatory juggling of timeframes that qualified it as 'literary fiction', the book could easily have been shortlisted for an award from the Romantic Novelists' Association.

Her own, private view was that *Stray Leaves in Autumn* was rather mawkish. While she could recognize the skill of the writing and structure, she found it horribly soft in the middle. She just hoped that, in the course of the evening ahead, Burton

wouldn't ask directly for her opinion of his novel. Jude had never been very good at lying.

*Stray Leaves in Autumn* chronicled the travails of a film director – clever that, not a writer, so that no one could ever imagine that the central character was actually the author. His name was Tony, which sounded nothing like Burton, and long ago he'd been at Oxford University (totally unlike Burton, who'd been to Cambridge). Mind you, both men, real and fictional, were fifty-three years old.

At the beginning of the book, Tony is in the doldrums. His career had never really taken off. He is creatively sterile and still in mourning for his wife, Maureen, who had died two years previously after a long battle with breast cancer. Tony's prospects – and the possibility of happiness returning to his life – revive when he meets Celia, a former wild child from the fringes of the music industry who, now a divorcée in her fifties, has written a so-far-unpublished novel, which she is convinced would make a great movie. She is also convinced that the right person to direct it is Tony.

Experienced readers of romance would by this point in the book have realized that he and Celia were not only the right people to bond creatively, but also the right people to bond emotionally. Tony, however, proves remarkably unaware of this blindingly obvious fact, so it is not until the couple – and the development of their film – have endured a sequence of setbacks and tribulations that he eventually recognizes true love. This revelation happens, needless to say, at the premiere of the movie, which of course goes on to be an international success.

Though Burton St Clair would never have admitted it, Jude reckoned it was by serendipity rather than calculation that he'd managed to press so many relevant buttons in *Stray Leaves in Autumn*. Popular entertainment had taken a surprisingly long time to recognize the increase in average age of the first world's population. It kept its focus on attracting new, younger audiences rather than catering for the growing numbers of the robust ageing.

When a couple of successful movies and television series featuring mature central characters woke the entertainment moguls up to this self-evident fact, suddenly you couldn't move



for late-flowering lust: in movies, on television and in bookshops. The publication of *Stray Leaves in Autumn* fortunately coincided with this wave of geriatric romance. Rather than fulfilling his own fantasies (like most middle-aged male authors) and making the object of his hero's affections a much younger woman, Burton had been shrewd to focus Tony's interest on someone of his own age. And the fact that his novel was just an old-fashioned romance with a happy ending had been disguised by enough tricks of post-modernism and magical realism for the *literati* not to feel they were demeaning themselves by reading it.

Thinking about Burton's past had distracted Jude from listening to what he was pontificating about. She gave herself a mental rap over the knuckles and concentrated, to hear him saying, ' . . . and obviously writing a book is an activity during which the author is constantly having to make moral judgements. And I am always aware of the ethical implications when I kill someone.'

## TWO

**T**he suggestion of murder got a predictable little *frisson* of indrawn breaths from the ladies of Fethering. Burton St Clair held the pause after his statement. It was clearly an effect that he had honed over many years of repetition. Then, with a wry smile, he picked up. 'I should say at this point that I never have actually killed anyone in real life, but as an author one frequently is in the godlike position of deciding whether a character should live or die. And that's a responsibility that one has to take seriously. I'm not in the business, as a *crime writer* might be—' he spoke the words with appropriate contempt – 'of killing people simply for the convenience of my plots. If a character in one of my books dies, I can assure you I have considered the termination of their life very seriously. He or she does not *deserve* to die – far from it in many cases – but they *need* to die to obey the artistic and emotional demands of

the book that I am writing. I would be failing in my duty as a novelist if I did not kill them.

‘I must say it’s very interesting how much debate killing a character generates on social media.’

Di Thompson, the senior librarian, had made much in her introduction of the large number of followers Burton St Clair had on Facebook and Twitter. Looking at the average age of that evening’s audience, Jude wondered how many of those present would have encountered him there. But, even as she had the thought, she realized she might be guilty of unthinking prejudice. Apparently quite a lot of people considerably older than she was were much involved in social media.

‘For instance,’ Burton continued, ‘a lot of my followers have criticized me for killing off Clinton, Celia’s fading rock-star husband in *Stray Leaves in Autumn*. He was a character who clearly struck a chord with many people. Struck a chord with me too. Needless to say. All of my characters strike a chord with me. If they didn’t, I couldn’t immerse myself so deeply in their lives during that agonizing time which covers the nativity of a work of fiction. I loved Clinton, but the dynamics of my story left me in no doubt that I had to sacrifice him to the greater good of my novel.’

There was an impressed stillness while the audience took in this act of creative magnanimity.

‘And now . . .’ the author broke the silence, nonchalantly picking up a copy of his novel, ‘before I open up to questions from you, I would like to conclude with a reading from *Stray Leaves in Autumn*. And I think I dare mention to you now – you’ll be the first people to know this – that all the Ts are not quite crossed and the Is dotted, but there is a *strong* interest from Hollywood in developing the book for a movie. Early days, of course, a lot can go wrong, but there’s talk of Meryl Streep being interested in playing the part of Celia. And, as for Tony . . . well, there is *talk* . . . no, no, I don’t want to tempt providence here. Let’s just say there is a male actor being talked of who has an even greater profile than Meryl Streep. But . . .’ he raised a finger to his lips ‘. . . keep it to yourselves, eh?’ Knowing full well that they wouldn’t.

Burton St Clair’s reading, like the rest of his performance,

sounded almost offhand, but again was the product of meticulous preparation.

He concluded on a funny line and, as he bowed his head, the audience's laughter melted into enthusiastic applause. While this was going on he poured more water into the glass he'd occasionally drunk from during his talk and took a long swig.

'Right,' said Burton with a self-depreciatingly boyish grin. 'Any questions?'

Jude wasn't to know, but when he'd started on his literary career, this cue had always been greeted with very English awkwardness, silence, and a lot of people concentrating on their shoes. Every author doing a library talk had experienced that aching hiatus. And it was frequently only ended by a member of staff from the library hosting the evening coming in with her own carefully prepared fall-back question.

But that was no longer the case. The Fethering librarian who had introduced Burton St Clair, Di Thompson, did not anticipate any such awkwardness. With dark hair cut so short she looked almost like a recent cancer patient, she sat serenely at the back of the audience, pleased with how well the evening she had set up was going. She knew that, since the mass explosion of book clubs, many of which were organized by librarians, such reticence about asking questions had long gone. Audiences at author events were well used to expressing their literary views, and question-asking hands shot up as soon as they were given the opportunity.

The hand which got in ahead of the others belonged to a thin, shaven-headed man in his fifties, who wore a safari jacket and combat trousers in a different camouflage pattern, above black Doc Martens. On being given the nod by the visiting author, he asked in a voice which combined lethargy and insolence in equal measure, 'Can you tell me why the photograph behind you is twenty years younger than you are?'

The expression on Burton St Clair's face suggested he was piqued. Since the publication of *Stray Leaves in Autumn* he'd become accustomed to wallowing in a warm bath of praise, so this very positive rudeness brought him up short. What's more, Jude recalled, he had always been extremely vain about his looks. When the photograph blown up behind him had been

taken, Burton had had more hair, and it had been shot in such a way as to hide what deficiency there was. Since that time, more of the precious follicles had given up the ghost, and the overhead lighting of Fethering Library only accentuated the thinness on top of his cranium.

The author's preparedness for public speaking did not include a ready supply of lines to deal with hecklers, so all he said was, 'Oh, very amusing. Do we actually have any *serious* questions?'

Of the raised hands, he selected one belonging to a well-groomed woman – no, she would have thought of herself as a 'lady' – in her sixties. And with her question, normal fawning was mercifully restored.

'Mr St Clair . . .' she began.

'Call me "Burton", please.'

'Very well . . . Burton, one thing I can't help noticing in *Stray Leaves in Autumn* . . . and I've come across the same thing in your earlier books . . .' The author's good humour was instantly restored – a reader who'd read his *previous* books was clearly a serious fan '. . . is that you do have a very deep understanding of women characters, you seem to be able to get inside the female brain. Is this something that you've had to work on very hard, or is it something that just came naturally?'

'I'm very glad you asked me that question.' And he was. It gave him an unrivalled opportunity to demonstrate what an unusually sensitive man he was; to show, in fact, his feminine side. 'The thing is,' he went on, 'I do actually *like* women . . . and I'm not sure that that's a universal masculine characteristic.' His words prompted sympathetic nods and sighs of regret from his listeners. He then elaborated at some length about how much more empathetic he found female than male company. Burton St Clair drew around himself the mantle of The Perfect Man – caring, appreciative of women's contributions to life, aware of the shortcomings of his own gender, and yet safely and loyally married. The Fethering audience could not get enough of him, though Jude found herself adding liberal loads of salt to every word he spoke. She had known Al Sinclair too long to be totally taken in by Burton St Clair.

Eventually his disquisition on the natural rapport he felt with women came to an end, and he looked around for another question.

The raised hand he selected belonged to a man in his sixties, dressed in a light tweed jacket and expensively faded pinkish trousers. He had about him the ease of having been to the right schools and university.

‘I was interested, Burton, in what you said about crime fiction . . .’

‘Ah.’ The author smiled. ‘I’m not really here this evening to talk about crime fiction.’

‘Perhaps not, but your comments on the subject . . .’ the questioner looked down at some notes he had made ‘. . . when you said you were not in the business “as a *crime writer* might be – of killing people simply for the convenience of my plots”.’

‘And I stand by that. Though plot is a significant ingredient in any kind of story-telling, in literary fiction it does not have the primacy that it does in crime fiction.’

‘Are you talking here about Golden Age crime fiction or more contemporary stuff?’

‘Does it make much difference?’ asked Burton St Clair loftily.

‘Oh, so you’re saying all crime fiction is an inferior genre?’

‘I’m not saying “inferior”,’ said Burton, though he clearly was. ‘I’m sure there’s some very fine writing in the crime world, but I just feel that, for me, the crime novel would not offer sufficient space to explore the ideas that I need to pursue in my own work.’

‘Hm,’ said the man with the pink trousers. ‘There is of course quite a history of *literary novelists* . . .’ The way he spoke the words implied a level of pretension within the breed ‘. . . sneering at the works of—’

‘I’m not sneering. Far be it from me to—’

‘John Banville, for instance,’ his interlocutor went on implacably, ‘is well known for writing his crime novels as Benjamin Black and referring to them as “cheap fiction”, when compared to his literary novels. And the CV of Booker Prize-winning Julian Barnes doesn’t draw attention to the Duffy novels he published under the name of Dan Kavan—’

‘I don’t think any of this is really relevant to this evening’s discussion.’

‘Oh, but it is,’ the questioner persisted. His manner was not aggressive, it was infinitely reasonable. He argued with the skill

of an experienced debater, someone who had always dealt with words. ‘We’re here to talk about your work and I am particularly interested in the books published – self-published – under the name of Seth Marston which—’

Burton St Clair was clearly rattled now. ‘I’m going to have to cut you off there,’ he interrupted.

‘Are you saying you don’t know the works of Seth Marston?’

‘I’ve never heard the name. We’re here this evening to talk about my novel *Stray Leaves in Autumn*.’ The author appealed to his audience. ‘Do we have another question *on that subject*?’

The woman whose raised hand was favoured this time was inordinately tall and expensively blonde, dressed in a slightly fussy pink jacket over an extremely fussy cream blouse. ‘I don’t think we should leave the subject of mystery fiction.’ Her voice had the relaxed refinement of an East Coast American intellectual. ‘The gentleman who spoke before mentioned the Golden Age, and that is a topic on which I have done considerable research, and indeed on which I teach a college course. I’m very interested in the relationship between classic mystery fiction and its so-called “literary” counterparts. I wondered if you, as a—’

‘I’m sorry to interrupt you there,’ said Burton St Clair, who clearly wasn’t sorry at all, ‘but without wishing to sound egotistical, I thought this evening we were meant to be talking about *my* books rather than those of the Golden Age, however *classic* they may be.’ Quickly, before the American could come back at him, he pleaded, ‘Now do we have another *relevant* question?’

One of his worshipful company of ladies came to the rescue. ‘From my reading of *Stray Leaves in Autumn*, I get the impression that you believe some level of adversity actually strengthens the bonds of love. Is that true?’

‘Oh yes, certainly. And it’s very perceptive of you to pick up on that. Shakespeare tells us “the course of true love never did run smooth”, and I think that there, as in many other areas of life, experience – and not always happy experience – can intensify the emotional reaction to . . .’

And Burton St Clair was off again, laying bare the depths of his sincerity to the good people of Fethering.

Jude was less convinced by his oratory than most of them. She remembered Megan telling her that, in his years as an aspiring but rejected writer, Al Sinclair had scraped up enough money to have three crime novels vanity-published. She didn't know that they'd been written under the name of Seth Marston, but it wouldn't have surprised her. It would have been in character for Burton St Clair to have lied about his early history as a writer.

## THREE

**T**ickets for the Burton St Clair Author evening had cost five pounds, but that included a glass of wine. So as soon as she had finished her speech of thanks to the author, Di Thompson busied herself and her helpers with moving the furniture to make room for the less formal part of the evening. There was limited space in Fethering Library and the drink-dispensing table could not be set up until the chairs had been folded away.

Most of the audience stood patiently while this process took place. A few public-spirited souls helped with the chair-folding. Maybe they were just being helpful, or perhaps volunteers had been delegated to the task. There was a purpose-built trolley with prongs on to which the chairs had to be hung. Jude noticed that the man in pink trousers was one of those doing his duty. The more infirm audience members stayed resolutely in place. They were not going to risk losing their chairs.

One elderly woman, in a trouser suit from a different era, was doughtily helping, however. Though it looked as if she needed the chair she was moving to support her frail body. Jude moved forward to assist.

'It's all right,' said the woman in a reedy but cultured voice. 'I can manage.'

'Well, if you're sure . . .'

'Oh yes. I've been moving chairs at this library since long before you moved here, Jude.'