# Every Secret Thing

EMMA COLE

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EMMA COLE is the thriller-writing alias of Canadian novelist Susanna Kearsley. A former museum curator, she brings her own passion for research and travel to bear in her books, weaving history with modern-day intrigue in a way that, in the words of one reviewer, 'tells the story of the past and illuminates the present'. As Susanna Kearsley, she has written several novels of suspense, including *Mariana*, which won the prestigious Catherine Cookson Literary Prize.

*www.emmacole.ca*

**By the same author writing as**
**Susanna Kearsley**

*Mariana*
*The Splendour Falls*
*The Shadowy Horses*
*Named of the Dragon*
*Season of Storms*

*This book is for Euan, who wouldn't*
*give up, and my grandparents,*
*Mary and Harry and Edith and Ab,*
*who were young, and are never forgotten.*

*Speech after long silence; it is right,*
*…Unfriendly lamplight hid under its shade,*
*The curtains drawn upon unfriendly night,*

W. B. YEATS, 'AFTER LONG SILENCE'

# Beforehand

I've been told, by people more experienced at writing, that the hardest part of telling any story is the search for its beginning, and its end. I might add that it's harder still when telling a true story, because truth does not allow for tidy endings.

The beginning was a problem in itself, in that this story started long before my birth. In many ways, it isn't even properly my story; yet I chose, at last, to start where I came into it, and let the tales of those who came before me weave their way into the narrative.

Not everyone who spoke to me survived. And there were stories I learnt later, that were placed throughout the book as random flashbacks, for the sake of keeping everything in order. But for the most part, what I wrote was nothing more than a chronology of strange, confusing days, and what I saw, and what I lived, and what was told to me.

The ending didn't come till I was nearly done revising my first draft.

It came, not in the form of inspiration, but by messenger, with flowers, for my birthday.

The dog heard the knock at the door before I did – he usually does – and I opened the door with a hand on his collar. Without the dog there at my side, I would never have opened my door to a stranger. Not even a smiling young man holding flowers.

But the flowers were roses. Tea roses. And when I saw them I knew straight away who'd sent them. It was, after all, my birthday, and although he was out of the country I knew that he wouldn't have let the day pass without some sign to show he'd remembered.

With the roses came a box – not large, just the size of a bottle of wine, and about the same weight. It was wrapped twice: the first time in tidy brown paper, and under that, prettier tissue, with ribbons.

I sat down to open it, carefully working the knots. The box itself was very plain, and lined with wads of newspaper – Italian, from the look of it. I thought, at first, he'd sent a statuette, some kind of sculpture. It felt heavy in my hand. But then I turned it, and the paper fell away, and I could see exactly what it was.

Time stopped. At least, it seemed to stop. And then, in that peculiar way it sometimes has, it shifted, and it took me with it, back to that first morning on the grey steps of St Paul's, in London.

But that won't mean anything to you, yet – you won't understand, unless I make a better start, and tell the story through from the beginning.

I first met Andrew Deacon on the morning of the day he died.

It bothered me, afterwards, how little I remembered him. Someone who changes your life the way Deacon changed mine should, by rights, be remembered, imprinted indelibly onto your brain, and I found it disturbing that though I had talked to him, shaken his hand, I could not with closed eyes shape his image; that through everything that followed he remained as

insubstantial as a shadow at my shoulder, the impression of a man and nothing more.

How much of that was my fault and how much could be put down to Deacon himself I never would know. His life had depended for so long on his being average, on not being seen, that even if I'd studied him properly, really looked hard at him, it might not have made any difference. I wish I had tried. But that morning in September I saw only one more grey old man in overcoat and hat, and I was busy.

# Chapter One

**England**

*I saw the world and yet I was not seen;*
*My thread is cut and yet it is not spun,*
*And now I live, and now my life is done.*

CHIDIOCK TICHBORNE, 'ELEGY'

## Wednesday, September 13

'Do you have the time?' the voice asked, at my shoulder.

I hadn't been aware of the older man sitting beside me, but when I glanced up he was there. Mentally I registered the overcoat and hat; assessed the voice, an English voice, politely middle class. I glanced at the time display ticking at the bottom of my laptop's screen.

'It's ten to ten.'

'Thank you.' He didn't comment on my accent. Some people did when they were making conversation, but this man said nothing. He had taken a seat a respectable two feet away, leaning forward with elbows on knees, gazing down at the taxis and cars passing by. 'Here for the trial, are you?' he asked.

How he'd managed to deduce that I didn't know – I wouldn't have thought that my occupation was that obvious, but then maybe he'd simply been reading over my shoulder. I gave a vague dismissive nod, not wanting to encourage him. The fact that I'd resumed my typing didn't put him off.

'A most interesting case, don't you think? He doesn't look the type, but then they don't, always.'

*Oh, please*, I thought, *not now*, but it was too late – I could sense him settling in and getting comfortable, preparing for a chat.

At any other time that wouldn't have annoyed me. I found the trial interesting myself, and didn't mind discussing it. After all, it wasn't very often we Canadians had something so sensational to follow involving one of our own – in this case a Winnipeg dentist who was, the Crown argued, a serial murderer, having spent fifteen years here in England methodically killing off strangers and assuming their identities, like a hermit crab fitting itself into one abandoned shell after another, discarding them once they'd outlived their usefulness. The case was a hard one to prove, and we journalists were often found debating in the pub around the corner at the end of each day's testimony.

But this morning I didn't have time to debate. This morning the jury, having been out two full days, was widely expected to come back with its verdict, and I, like my colleagues, was sticking as close as I could to the Old Bailey, waiting for word.

It was a good morning for waiting outdoors. Late September in London had always been one of my favourite times of the year, when the sun that so often stayed hidden in summer could suddenly break through for days at a stretch, bringing just enough warmth to soften the edge of the chill morning air.

I liked London. Liked working in London. My very first foreign assignment, in fact, had been here, and I'd fallen in love with the city – the tangible history, the bustle, the pulse of the river, the endless arterial flow of its traffic through streets that smelt sharply of diesel exhaust. I hadn't been here in eight months, and I'd missed it. This current assignment, on that count, had come as a welcome surprise.

Ordinarily I wasn't sent to cover trials – I was only a business reporter – but I'd been covering the latest Bombardier deal in Paris, conveniently close, from my editor's viewpoint. She'd

known that I wouldn't say no, even though it would mean another week living out of my suitcase. And I hadn't said no. I knew full well whatever success I enjoyed at my newspaper came from not letting my editor down.

Which was why I was sitting here now, on the broad steps of St Paul's Cathedral, my third morning coffee grown cold on the hard stone beside me, bent over my laptop at work on two alternate articles, one for each verdict the jury might reach, so that when they did finally return I could fire the appropriate article off without delay. I was nearly finished now. A few more lines to go; a few more phrases to be tightened…

The old man beside me went on in his mild voice, 'I should imagine it's a fascinating job you have, observing other people's lives. Telling their stories.' He paused, but I didn't get the sense that he was waiting for me to contribute anything. He was still looking out at the street, not at me. 'I have a story I could tell you, if you're interested. Not anything like this' – he nodded at my laptop, in a reference to the trial – 'but there's a murder in it, just the same.'

'Oh, yes?' I said vaguely, my mind working to come up with a more common word for 'hubris'.

'An old murder, but one still deserving of justice.'

I didn't say anything that time, just made a faint sound.

'But you're busy,' he told me, and started to stand in that cautiously creaking way old men do. 'I'm staying in town the night – ring my hotel if you like, we'll have dinner. My card,' he said, handing it down. His hand stayed outstretched, so I shook it politely, dismissively. Two steps below me he stopped and turned. 'Oh, and do say hello to your grandmother for me. I hope that she's well?'

I looked up at that. Frowning faintly I said, in a slow voice, 'She's very well, thank you.'

'I thought that she might be.' He smiled. Turned away. Then he paused for an instant and briefly turned back. 'You have her eyes, you know.' He'd very clearly meant that as a compliment, but even as that registered he'd started moving off again.

Bewildered, I lowered my gaze to the card he had given me. *Andrew Deacon*, it read, and below that an address in Hampshire that he'd neatly crossed out with a stroke of his pen to write, in its place, *The Fielding Hotel, Covent Garden*, with a phone number. Now how on earth, I wondered, did this man know my grandmother? More to the point, how had he known who I was?

I looked up and called: 'Mr Deacon!'

In spite of his slowness to stand he had moved with surprising speed for someone his age, and had already reached the street, too far away to hear me. He was looking down…he didn't see the car.

It all happened so very quickly. For all the times I would replay that scene in the strange days that came afterwards, the details would never grow clearer or easier to distinguish. There was the car, of course, but I only saw that for an instant – it came on fast and by the time I'd fully realised what had happened it had gone again, without so much as slowing down, just blending with the normal rush of traffic.

Nobody else seemed to take any notice.

The old man might have been a ghost, I thought, invisible to everyone but me…and I was frozen to my step in shock, unable to be any help. The clock kept ticking on across my laptop's screen but time seemed not to move at all, until at last the first

car stopped, and then another, and the kerb and sidewalk swelled with people, bending, peering, murmuring.

I saw a woman kneel to check the old man's pulse. I held my breath.

And then she slowly stood, and faced the others, and I saw her shake her head.

'Look, Kate, I know you've been upset by this, but keep it in perspective. After all,' said Margot, setting a glass of white wine on the table in front of me before sliding into the booth with her own drink in hand, 'it's not as if you knew the man.'

She spoke in a tone I'd become very used to in the three years we'd known each other. Margot liked nothing better than giving advice. It was usually good advice – Margot had been in the business much longer than me. She was tougher, more worldly and, although at forty-four she was nearly twenty years my senior, she remained much more likely to grab male attention whenever we went out together. She was doing it now, on a Wednesday, in mid-afternoon, in this pub where we'd taken to meeting for drinks and a post-trial talk.

She wasn't working this trial. Margot worked for her newspaper's foreign desk, and a London trial wasn't foreign news to her. But she was idling here right now between assignments, and she liked to act, with me, as something of a mentor.

She was watching me.

I moved my glass in aimless little squares across the tabletop. 'But he knew me. He knew exactly who I was. He even knew my grandmother.'

'Did he?' This altered things. Her eyes grew faintly

interested. 'How curious. What else, exactly, did he say to you, this…?'

'Deacon. Andrew Deacon.' It seemed suddenly important to remember that, the dead man's name. I'd remembered little else. I'd been trying all day to recall what he'd looked like, without success. I had his voice – some version of it – in my memory, but I couldn't form the face. Each time I thought I caught a glimmer of a feature it would melt like sand beneath a running wave. I frowned, and turned my mind back. 'Well, he said he had a story he could tell me…'

'Oh, yes?' Margot's tone had dried. She, too, like me, had run the gauntlet of those people who, on learning we wrote for a living, backed us into a corner at parties and held us there, trapped, while they went on about their great 'scoop', their great story – 'I'll tell you, you write it, and we'll split the profits…'

I shook my head. 'It wasn't like that, really. He was very sweet.'

'And what was his story?'

'Something about a murder.' How had he phrased it? I tried to remember. '"An old murder, but one still deserving of justice."'

'And where did your grandmother come in?'

'As he was leaving. He asked how she was doing.'

'Ah. He called her by name, did he?'

'No…' He hadn't, had he? 'No, but then I only have the one,' I said. 'There's only Grandma Murray. And besides, he told me that I had her eyes. I do.'

'So one assumes he knew her fairly well?'

I couldn't give an answer then…not then…just as I couldn't

tell her how the man had come to know who I was; how he'd known where he could find me.

'Maybe,' Margot theorised, 'if this chap and your grandmother were friends, she might have told him you were here.'

'My Grandma Murray? Not a chance. She doesn't give out information like that, not to anyone. The Spanish Inquisition would have trouble finding out where I was staying.'

Margot smiled. She'd never actually met my grandmother, but she'd heard all my stories. 'Still, I rather think that once you've had a chance to speak with her, you'll find that's what she's done. It's the only logical explanation.' She took a drink. 'How is she doing now, your grandmother? How's she adjusting to having you home again?'

'Fine, I guess. I thought she might have second thoughts, but actually we're getting on OK. And it was crazy paying all that rent for that great big apartment when I wasn't ever there.'

I knew that Margot thought that it was crazier to give up my own place, to live with family. It was something she'd have never done. But then, in her case, I could understand. I'd met *her* family. They were nuts.

She said, 'So, you're heading back when? At the weekend?'

I shook my head. 'Not until Tuesday. My editor wants me to do a few follow-up interviews. Talk to the victims' families, the lawyers, you know. And anyway, I'm booked for Friday night. I'm going down to Kent.'

'And what's in Kent?'

'Patrick's parents are throwing a party.'

The sisterly advising look was back. 'Now, Kate, I thought that wasn't serious. I've told you my opinion of your Mr Damien-Pryce.'

'It isn't and you have,' I said. 'Repeatedly.'

'Then why…?'

'The party,' I informed her, 'is for Patrick's Aunt Venetia.'

'Ah.' She nodded understanding then, and even smiled approval. 'Sorry. My misunderstanding. I thought you'd gone off the rails, for a moment. But I'll permit you to see Patrick if you're using him to meet Venetia Radburn.'

That had, actually, been my main objective since I'd first run into Patrick Damien-Pryce last week at the Old Bailey, or, more properly, since he'd run into *me*, so deliberately by chance that I'd suspected from the outset chance had not had much to do with it.

To be honest, I'd grown weary of his obvious pursuit. Some women would have found it flattering, I knew. The man was gorgeous. And intelligent. And witty. And urbane, in a way that few men were these days – at least, men under fifty. His clothes always fit to perfection; he knew the right places to go, and the people who worked there knew *him*, and I was beginning to think he could walk through a windstorm without it disturbing his hair.

'Rising young star in the criminal courts,' was how Margot had summarised him, when I'd asked. 'Took silk at an early age; has the right pedigree. Very ambitious. His being a lawyer is only a prelude to politics, I should think.'

Politics would suit him. He was slick – that was the only word that fit him – and I'd never trusted men like that.

I would have tried much harder to discourage him, if Margot hadn't also said that Patrick was related to Venetia Radburn, grand old dame of British politics, who even in retirement was regularly entertained by heads of state when travelling.

I'd have given a lot to be introduced to the woman, so the prospect of spending the whole of Friday evening eating dinner with her in return for letting myself be chased round the table a few times by her good-looking great-nephew seemed – to me, at least – to be a bargain.

'Just mind you keep your wits about you,' Margot told me now, her voice not managing to hide her amusement. 'People like the Damien-Pryces are bound to have a pile in the country' – which was British-speak, I knew, for 'giant house' – 'and I've seen first-hand how property affects you. You go all wobbly,' she accused me, 'in great houses.'

'I do not.'

'You do. I was with you at Blenheim, remember? Last year.'

'That's different. Blenheim is a palace.'

'I'm only saying. Certain settings,' she informed me, 'seem to make you lose your proper sense of judgement.'

A male voice above my shoulder asked, 'Which settings would those be, then?' and Patrick himself, pint in hand, slid confidently into the booth beside me, his long body as always looking too cramped in the small space.

'Sorry, that's classified,' I said, immune to the strength of his smile.

Margot, less welcoming, told him he looked out of sorts.

'Yes, well, I was late to court this morning. The police had traffic stopped in Cannon Street, for some inestimable reason…'

I said, 'There was an accident. A hit-and-run. A man was killed.'

'Kate was there,' Margot said; then, dryly, 'She's been traumatised. That's why I've got her drinking.'

'Ah.' He glanced at my wineglass. It wasn't like me to drink wine at this time of the day, but I didn't imagine that Patrick had noticed. Men like Patrick didn't notice things like that unless they somehow stood to benefit. 'So you were an actual witness?'

'Some witness.' I sobered. 'I wasn't any help to the police. I couldn't really tell them anything. Couldn't even give them a description of the car. It didn't stop,' I said again, as I'd said earlier to Margot.

And again she told me, 'Kate, it was an accident. There wasn't anything you could have done.' Above her drink, she said to Patrick, 'You might tell her she needn't take it all so much to heart. I mean, he might have known her grandmother, but still, that doesn't mean—'

'He knew your grandmother?' asked Patrick.

'Look,' I told them both, 'I'd really rather not discuss it. Can we change the subject, please?'

There was a pause, and then, 'So,' Margot said to Patrick, 'Kate tells me you're taking her down into Kent at the weekend.'

'I am.'

'Your Aunt Venetia's birthday, is it? How old would she be, now?'

'No one knows,' he said. 'I should think she'd be close to the Colonel's age, maybe mid-eighties, but you'll never make her admit to that.'

The Colonel, I knew, was his father. Why Patrick called him the Colonel and not Father was a thing I wasn't sure of. It might have been a nickname of affection, or a sign of emotional distance between the two men – I hadn't been able to figure out

which from the few times that Patrick had mentioned his family. I had, though, been able to glean that his father was considerably older than his mother, and that somewhere – on his mother's side, I thought – there was a fair amount of money.

He turned to me. 'You've got the map I gave you, right? You won't get lost?'

'I won't get lost.'

'Because if you're worried at all about finding your way you could drive down with me. Take the train back.'

He just never gave up, I thought. Ten to one I'd get down there and find there *were* no trains back up to London. Amused, I told him, 'That's all right. I'd rather have the car. What time is dinner?'

'Eight. But you should aim to get there earlier, to spend a bit of time. I ought to be there myself around six, give or take. We could go for a walk round the gardens…you know, feed the ducks, that sort of thing.'

'They have ducks?' Margot asked.

'And a handful of swans.'

'It sounds lovely,' she said. Then, in casual tones, 'Big place, is it?'

'Big enough. It used to be a priory, in Tudor times, and everybody after that saw fit to add a piece. My mother complains there are too many bedrooms and not enough baths.'

Margot sent me a knowing look, meant to remind me of my alleged weakness for opulent houses. I chose to ignore her, and Patrick, being self-absorbed, missed the exchange altogether.

'I can't stop,' he said, draining his pint. His breath smelt of ale as he leant in to kiss my cheek. 'Want to do dinner tonight?'

'Can't.'

'Tomorrow?'

'I'm busy all day.'

'Right, we'll leave it till Friday, then.'

Watching him stand, I asked, 'What should I wear?'

'Wear whatever you like,' he said. And then, halfway to the door, he turned back to call over his shoulder, 'Oh, and don't forget something to sleep in. I'm partial to black negligées,' in carrying tones that turned heads in the pub, bringing all-knowing smirks to the eyes of the journalists sitting around us.

'You want to watch out,' Margot told me. 'You'll end up a headline yourself.'

She was teasing, of course. She couldn't possibly have known just how prophetic those few words would end up being, in a very few days' time.

I walked through Covent Garden on the way to my hotel. I did it every evening; but tonight, instead of turning at the market, I went straight on past the Opera House and crossed the narrow street to enter Broad Court, a brick-paved pedestrian passageway running from Bow Street to Drury Lane.

The Fielding Hotel was a small, charismatic place, halfway along the short stretch of Broad Court. An old building, with vines on the front and a dimly cramped entry that gave, on the right, to a cosy front bar, and on the left, to a hole-in-the-wall-type reception desk. Everything smelt vaguely dusty, and charming. An African grey parrot, caged near the door of the bar, eyed me warily as I stepped in to the entryway.

The desk clerk, a well-dressed young woman, became wary, too, when I said that I worked for a newspaper. It was always a gamble, I knew, introducing myself as a journalist – some

people talked, others didn't. This woman seemed far more concerned with protecting a hotel guest's privacy. Admirable, really, if not very helpful to me.

'Mr Deacon,' she said, 'was a regular guest, yes. We'll miss him.'

'Did he stay here often?'

'Whenever he was in London.'

A diplomat's answer, I thought. I pressed forward. 'Was he here alone?'

'Yes.' A little indignant.

'I just meant…I wondered if there was a friend, or maybe someone from his family, staying with him.'

'No.'

'Did he have a family?'

'I don't know.' She didn't know much, as it happened, or else she simply didn't want to say. Even when I showed her the card Andrew Deacon had given me, she wouldn't confirm or deny the home address by checking the register. 'Sorry,' she said, 'but guest records are private.'

Aware that I'd run up against a wall, I gave up trying. Thanked her. Turned. Then, struck by one last thought, turned back.

'What sort of man was he?'

'Sorry?' she asked.

'I mean, did you like him?'

*That* question she answered. 'We all did. He was sweet. He always stopped to say good morning; always saved a bit of breakfast toast with jam for Smokey,' she said, pointing to the parrot. 'We all liked him very much.'

I said, 'I see.' And then, although there seemed no point in it,

I handed her *my* card. 'In case you think of something else…'

She read my name. 'You're Katherine Murray?'

There was something in her tone that gave me hope. 'Yes. Why?'

'You're staying at the Cheshire Arms?'

'Yes.'

'I've been ringing you all afternoon,' she said, relaxing. 'I *am* sorry. If I'd known that you were you…' Her eyes met mine, companionable. 'We found a note,' she told me, 'in his room, when we were cleaning it. Your name; the name of your hotel. He had today's date written underneath. We thought perhaps he had made plans to meet with you today…that you might not have heard…that you might want to know.'

It surprised me that he'd known the name of my hotel, but I tried not to show it. 'Thank you. That was very thoughtful.'

'But you knew.'

'I did, yes. I was…I was with him, when it happened.'

'Oh, I see.' The desk clerk eyed me a long moment, and then asked a question in her turn: 'He didn't suffer, did he?'

Her face remained impassively professional, but her eyes told me my answer was important.

'No, it was very quick. I'm sure he didn't suffer.'

'Good.' And bending to her work, she said again, as though it were his epitaph, 'We all liked Mr Deacon.'

There was an old man eating on his own, two tables over in the dining room of my hotel. I found that my attention, all through supper, travelled back to him, because of that – because he was an old man, quiet, someone I might easily have overlooked. And because it had occurred to me that Andrew Deacon could

have sat there last night, or the night before, and I might not have noticed him, either.

I could, for all I knew, have met him, spoken to him somewhere…at a dinner function – I had been to two since I'd arrived here – or a party, or the library. Perhaps our paths had crossed, and I had simply not remembered.

I was good with names and faces, when it suited me. I noticed people like Venetia Radburn, people who were newsworthy – but with ordinary people of a certain age, my vision seemed to narrow.

That bothered me more than it should have, perhaps. No one likes facing up to their shortcomings, me least of all, and I didn't like admitting I was something of an ageist.

Old people were invisible to me, I thought, unless they were of use to me.

The waiter broke my train of thought by reaching past my shoulder to retrieve my empty plate, and looking up to thank him I observed with vague surprise that I was now the only person in this section of the dining room. The old man who'd been sitting at the second table over had now gone, his place already cleared and set for the next person, as though no one had been there.

I'd told the truth to Margot when I'd said my Grandma Murray didn't part with information. It was something of a joke among my co-workers, who knew by now it was a waste of time to ask her anything. 'She always comes back with this "need to know" argument,' one of my friends had once told me. 'It's like phoning the Pentagon.'

Grandma's defence was that if I had wanted somebody to

know something – how old I was, or what flight I was on – I'd have told them. She kept her own life just as private.

So I couldn't believe she'd have told anybody the name of my hotel in London. Not even an old friend…assuming, of course, Andrew Deacon had been an old friend.

There was only one way that I knew to find out.

It was nearly eleven o'clock when I settled myself on the bed in my room. In Toronto right now it would only be suppertime. Grandma would be in the kitchen, I thought, only steps from the phone. I was right. She picked up on the second ring, her voice as sure as ever. 'Hello?'

That voice turned me into a child, as it always did; took me straight back to the clean-smelling rooms of the old brick house on Barton Ave., to the little back room with its rose-patterned wallpaper where I had slept as a child, and where I would sleep when I went home next Tuesday.

I'd never known my other grandmother – she'd died young, as my own mother had – and although both my grandfathers had lived to see my birth, the only one that I had any memory of was Grandpa Murray, who, together with my grandmother, had raised me while my father had gone off to do his corporate work in India, the Middle East, South Africa, wherever he was sent.

Grandpa Murray I remembered as a gentle man, a tall man with a presence that was comforting. He smoked a pipe, and often took me walking in the neighbourhood. He knew the ways to whistle like a bird and even once, to my amazement, coaxed a squirrel from its tree to take a walnut from his hand. But these were childhood memories only. He had died when I was ten. And five years after that, my father, in Bahrain, had had

his third and final heart attack. Since then, the only family that I'd had was, 'Grandma,' I said. 'Hi. How are you?'

'Katie! Nice to hear your voice. They were just talking about your trial, on the evening news. You're finished, then, are you?'

'Nearly. I have a few follow-up interviews, still, with the families…'

'I'm sure the guilty verdict will have come as a relief to them. They've had to wait so long,' she said, 'for justice.'

'Yes.' I hesitated. 'Grandma…'

'It's a shame that no one stopped him sooner. I'd imagine the police would have made more of an effort to catch him if he had been killing young women instead of old men.'

She was probably right, I thought. 'Grandma…'

'Yes, Katie?'

'I was wondering,' I started off, then stopped and simply said, straight out, 'I met someone today who said he knew you.'

'Really? There in London? Who was that?'

'A man named Andrew Deacon.'

She was silent for so long that for a minute I thought our connection might have been broken…until I heard the quiet creaking of the chair springs as she sat. Her voice was different. 'Deacon?'

'Yes. He said to say hello to you. He asked me how you were.' Feeling as though I had stepped onto less than firm footing, I edged my way forward with caution. 'I kind of wondered, Grandma…that is, he just seemed to know so much about me – who I was, and what I did – I wondered if you'd maybe been talking to him recently, and had mentioned that I was in London, because—'

'No,' her voice drifted in, not as strong as before, as though

part of her had moved a long way off. 'I haven't talked to Deacon now for many years,' she said. 'Not since…' The words trailed off. Another pause. And then, 'How is he?'

'Actually, Grandma,' I said, as I worked one finger through the coiled ringlet of the telephone cord, wishing that I could delay the inevitable, 'actually, he…that is, there was an accident this morning, just after he and I spoke, and I'm afraid…' I stopped, and tried again. 'It was a hit-and-run, you see. A car came out of nowhere, and it hit him, and he's…well, he's dead.'

She took a moment to absorb this. 'Dead?'

'I'm sorry. Yes.'

The silence stretched so long this time I had to finally speak to reassure myself I hadn't killed her, too, from shock. 'Grandma?'

She took a breath that shook a bit. And then she did a thing she'd never done. She said, 'Forgive me, Katie,' very softly, and she set down the receiver.