

THE BLEAK

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CHAPTER ONE

THE NINTH RULE of private detection states that you should never take on a client you think might be nuts.

I wasn't entirely convinced this was the case with the woman who'd called me that morning, but I was certainly tending that way.

As I walked towards Chatwins, the best bakery in the North West, looking forward to a latte and a slice of Victoria sponge in their tea-room, I warned myself against being a soft touch. She'd asked me to carry a folded newspaper in my left hand and told me I should call her Barbara, though I doubted that was her real name. A certain amount of paranoia in the people you deal with in this job is acceptable, but you can take things too far.

Nevertheless, here I was on a cold Monday lunchtime in

Crewe, my leather jacket pulled up around my ears and a copy of *The Guardian* stuffed under my left arm. If nothing else I wanted to see what she looked like. She'd sounded as though she'd been talking to me from a cupboard with her hand over the mouthpiece and her eyes wide and staring. My kind of client.

I crossed the street and was about to open the bakery's door when another customer opened it from the inside and slipped out, holding it ajar. I went through gratefully and was murmuring a word of thanks when she said, 'Costa Coffee, fifteen minutes.'

I had the presence of mind to nod and then continue inside without looking at her. I knew she was slim and dark-haired, a little taller than the average. She'd kept her face turned away from me so I got nothing else except a whiff of floral perfume.

Once inside I joined the queue for bread and bought a brown loaf. Most of the customers were older women and I felt as though they'd all seen the playlet at the door and weren't fooled.

I stood for a moment and looked through the plate glass windows at the passing pedestrians. None of them looked sinister, or even vaguely naughty. When my fifteen minutes were up I went out into the wind again and crossed the pedestrianised town centre, ignoring the siren call of Marks and Spencer's Food Hall and clutching both the bread and the newspaper like any ordinary shopper, a hard act for me to pull off.

She was sitting at the furthest table from the door in Costa Coffee's murky rear section. She watched me come in and picked up her coffee mug so that my provisions didn't knock it over. Her eyes moved past me to watch the door as I pulled out a chair.

She was somewhere in her late twenties or perhaps just thirty, with straight black hair pulled into a severe knot at the back of her head. Her face was oval, her skin nearly as white as the coffee mug she held between her fingers. She was dressed for the office—a simple black skirt and a cream blouse underneath a maroon jacket that had some kind of complicated lapel thing going on. Her lips were rather large but matched the fullness of her round eyes. It wasn't a hardship to sit opposite her.

I said, 'Barbara.'

'What? Oh, yes. I gave you that name, didn't I? I forgot. My mother's name.'

'But not yours.'

'Are you mad? Of course not. Why would I give you my real name when I don't know you?'

'You're the one who called me. It's not like I've been hunting you down.'

She looked away as though gathering herself, going over options.

She said, 'Are you any good at this?'

'Irritating women? It's my speciality. I can get you references, if you'd like.'

'This being-a-private-detective business. Sam Dyke Investigations, or whatever your Yellow Pages ad says. I have no idea what you do, or whether you can help me. Well, actually, it's not me. Well, it is in a way ...'

I held up a hand.

'First, why are we meeting here and not in my warm and cosy office? What are you frightened of?'

'I'm not *frightened* ... not exactly. But I wanted to meet you in public, out in the open.'

'So now we're in the open you're worried someone will see us. Unless there's something on my shoulder that you

can't take your eyes off.'

She raised those large round eyes—which I'd noticed by now were a kind of bluey-green—back to my face.

'I don't know what the hell I'm doing. Things seem to be going crazy around me. Around my boss. That's why I'm here.'

I leaned back in my chair and summoned up some preconceptions and prejudices: secretary, boss. Young secretary, very attractive. Perhaps an older boss who decides to notice her ...

She headed me off.

'It's not what you think.'

'What do I think?'

'That I'm having an affair or something grubby like that. It's not.'

'Okay, so what is it?'

'Are you going to have a drink?'

'Should I? Will I need one?'

'It might look less suspicious.'

'Of course, coffee always lessens the look of guilt I wear on a daily basis.'

Nevertheless I stood up and fetched a *latte grande*, then sat facing her again.

I said, 'So tell me. What's going on? And what do you think I can do about it?'

She took one more sip of her coffee, sticking out her tongue to lick a feather of froth from the mug's rim.

'Do you know Midwinter? The company?'

I shook my head. She nodded, as though she hadn't expected me to know.

'It's a kind of research laboratory out near Alderley Edge. Only about two hundred of us work there. Very private. Not secret as such, not working for the government

or anything like that. More like environmental research, though there are teams working on different projects too.'

'Scientists, white coats, petri dishes and retorts.'

'Exactly, though I'm not sure what a retort is. My boss would know. Nathan. Doctor Nathan Mustow.'

'So he's one of the scientists?'

'Definitely. Very bright man. I'm his assistant, on the admin side. He's part of a team of people working on something to do with bioaerosols ...'

I raised my other hand. I needed the exercise.

'Is there going to be a test on all this?'

'I'm sorry. I don't understand it all either. Nathan told me once that bioaerosols are basically living organisms caught up in moisture in the air. They can be harmless like pollen or a bit nastier, like viruses and spores. His group study how they're carried and when they're active and so on. He's been all over the world doing research. I've written up papers for him.'

'So he's a big cheese in the world of bugs.'

'If you want to belittle him, yes.'

'I'm sorry, I get carried away with my own wit sometimes. So what's the problem? Why have you come to see me?'

Her shoulders slumped and she stared down at the table. Then she lifted her head, and those eyes, and there was fear and sorrow and hesitation all compounded into one forlorn expression.

'I have no idea what I'm doing here. I ... I just feel I need to do something. I've worked for him for nearly two years and I think I know him quite well.'

'And?'

'And he's falling apart.'