

CHAPTER ONE

The Homecoming

2009.

The tall, skinny young man stopped outside the gate of number 35, which he had been aiming for since he came into Seldon Road. By doing a spot of mental arithmetic he had counted the detached and semi-detached houses and fixed on the dark-green painted house, a tacked-on-to, half-timbered building from the Thirties.

He stopped and looked at the front garden. Now he knew he had come to the right place – knew from some memory, or the memory of a picture perhaps. In the centre of the small plot – the real garden was out the back he somehow knew – stood seven or eight rose bushes, in their winter bareness, and around them was a narrow,

neat path of lawn, while bordering the road was a well-clipped hedge.

Very well cared for. A tidy, garden-proud person lived here. One first, new piece of knowledge. Perhaps he remembered it because the house owner was disinclined to change anything. Too busy? Or perhaps just hopeful that . . .

He shook himself back into consciousness of his situation. He had been here several minutes. He looked around. He caught no one looking at him, but one of the curtains had moved. An old neighbour, perhaps, who remembered when it had happened. Or was that dark event of the past part of the folk memory of the neighbourhood, passed on from the old to each new resident?

He put his hand down and clicked the latch of the gate. It was only a few steps to the front door. He couldn't say he remembered it, but when he looked down at the bottom panel it said something to him. He mustn't arouse comment or suspicion by standing there for too long. He rang the bell, which sounded soullessly and electronically through the house.

No footsteps came.

He looked at the lock. An old-fashioned one, a sturdy-key job. He resisted the inclination to look round again to see if he was watched. That could have someone ringing the police. He tried

the handle of the door. It swung open, as if of its own accord, inviting him in. He crossed the threshold.

The beanpole boy shut the door carefully, as if in a dream. He looked around him. The hall was fairly newly decorated, he guessed. A rather indeterminate blue, as if a strong colour would have been too adventurous, a pastel one too old-fashioned. He thought that the woman of the house – that was how he had begun to think of her – was chivvied into having the hall done when it was far gone into shabbiness or decay, but had not put her heart into it.

He passed into the living room. The television was new: one of those widescreen jobs, just like his mother had had. The rug in front of the fireplace was also new – indefinite flowers against unidentifiable leaves. He looked up at the pictures. Photos of present-day young children in colour – children laughing at the photographer, children playing on a sunny beach. A reproduction of a Landseer sheepdog, and an urban landscape by night, with a woman walking beside a wall. They said little to him.

Of course, he didn't recognise them. A boy of three, as he had been, would have to bend backwards to see them, or lie on the floor, and then they would probably be too distant.

He passed back into the hall, then through

to the kitchen. He was hit by an overwhelming smell. Two smells. He recognised one of them – it was caramelised sugar. Toffee. The other was of a cake – some kind of curranty bun.

He was so rapt in the past that he jumped when the handle of the kitchen door was pulled down. Through the frosted glass he could only see a shape, but he thought it was a woman's, and was glad.

‘What are you doing in my kitchen?’

There was only a slight quaver in the voice. He said the first thing that came into his head.

‘I thought you wouldn't mind.’

She looked at him and he looked at her. He would have guessed she was about sixty, but he knew she was several years younger. Her grey hair was pinned back, her face was lined with plenteous wrinkles, her mouth was set as if in a stern, unforgiving line, perhaps to conquer misfortune.

‘You're not—?’

‘I'm Kit now. Christopher.’

‘But before?’

‘I was Peter before.’

The colour drained from her face. ‘You're alive!’

It was as if they were thinking of what they should do. The young man's bewilderment was

natural and total, but the woman took some time before she did the right thing, the inevitable thing.

‘Come here,’ she said. And she took him in her arms, he letting out little sobs of pleasure and relief, and she following suit. She only came up to his chest, and when she pushed him away she gave a little laugh.

‘It was a lot easier to hold you when you were a baby!’

He laughed too, and wiped his eyes.

‘I remember your hugs, or I think I do . . . It’s difficult to say, but I do remember when I had my new . . . my new mother,’ he said firmly, as if he had taken a resolution, ‘when she hugged me she had make-up on, and at first I didn’t like the smell and took a long time getting used to it.’

‘I never did go in much for make-up.’

‘Eventually I came quite to like it, but I soon got to the age when you don’t like being hugged by your mother, not when there are other people around.’

The woman’s face showed conflicting emotions – jealousy that another woman had enjoyed his childish hugs, pleasure that he had compared those hugs unfavourably with hers, controlled rage that she had been denied all the pleasures of seeing this one of her children grow up.

‘You remembered the hugs, then?’

‘I do now. I suppose I’d forgotten them for a long time. Some memories have been coming back to me in the last few weeks since I learnt who I was. I remembered mostly your legs.’

‘My legs?’

‘Because I was down at their level. You wore sandals all the time – at least during the summer, I suppose.’

‘During that last summer, before . . .’ She couldn’t say it. ‘It was such a hot one,’ she lamely concluded.

‘I remember Dad’s legs too, with the slippers on his feet. He never put them on properly, and trod the backs down with his heels.’

‘You remember quite a lot,’ she said shyly.

‘Yes. Or maybe I’d just put the images at the back of my mind, and they were waiting for me . . . waiting for now, I suppose.’

‘Yes. For now.’

‘Is my bedroom the same as it used to be?’

‘You remember it, then?’

‘Yes.’ He stood with his hands nursing his chin. ‘The walls were green, with cut-out pictures pasted on them. I don’t remember what they were, but I think Donald Duck was one. And when I saw *Pinocchio* on television once I recognised the nose. And there was a little rocking chair . . . Or was that in my other home?’

She walked into the hall, then turned and put out her hand. He came to her and put his hand in hers. It was like being taken to a secret garden, or into a magic wardrobe. Neither said anything, and when they came to the landing his mother dropped his hand and let him choose the door to go through. He did it without hesitation. It was like passing an exam, but a pleasant one. The room hit him hard: it was as if it had been preserved in aspic. The green walls were exactly as when he had last seen them, and so were the pictures pasted on. Now he recognised Noddy, and the seven dwarfs – and there was Donald Duck and Pinocchio. He turned and looked at his mother, he smiling shyly, she with new, sparkling eyes.

‘There’s the rocking chair,’ she said, with a break in her voice.

He walked over and rocked it, and then he found his mother suddenly in his arms again, sobbing and laughing.

‘You’ve come home,’ she said. And he said, perhaps too quickly: ‘Yes, I’ve come home.’

He had known this was what his mother would feel, but he knew it would be some time before he could really share the emotion. Now he had acknowledged it rather than felt it. A stiffening of her body suggested she was acknowledging that too.

‘It’s just as I saw it last time,’ he murmured.

‘I kept it like that, specially.’

‘The last time must have been when we went to . . . where was it?’

‘Trepalu. It was at Trepalu it happened.’

‘That’s Sicily, isn’t it?’

‘Yes. I had to force myself to go back once. It was hideous. The memories were so bitter.’

The boy nodded, then resumed his scrutiny of the room.

‘It’s like my childhood is here,’ he said. ‘My early childhood.’

‘Yes. You weren’t allowed much of one,’ said his mother. Kit, or Peter, looked at her uncomprehending, then shook his head.

‘Oh, I had a childhood after the one here,’ he said. ‘A happy one too. Only it was very different.’

‘Yes, I see,’ said his mother, vowing to be more careful.

‘You’ve got to understand that my new mother and father were good to me. They saw me as a late gift.’ The woman obviously suppressed a tart comment, perhaps that Kit had been in the nature of a purchase rather than a gift to his second pair of parents. ‘I’m going to have to think what to call you,’ the young man said. “‘Mother” I don’t much care for. I’ve always used it for the mother who raised me, so it would be confusing. I’m not

keen on “Ma” or “Mum”, though they’re less confusing. What is your Christian name?’

‘Isla. It’s a Scottish name, you know.’

‘Oh, I know. I come from Scotland, remember.’

She looked at him, astonished.

‘But I can’t remember! I never knew.’ Kit shook his head in self-reproach.

‘Of course you didn’t know. But somehow I thought that you did . . . I was brought up in Glasgow, and I’m going to university at St Andrews now. Perhaps I thought that my accent would give me away.’

‘It’s very slight. Isla is really a river. It’s odd, isn’t it? Like calling a boy “Thames” or “Tyne”. We’re going to have to find out about each other, aren’t we? Come downstairs again. We’ll have something to eat.’

‘I’d like that. Something light.’

When they got down Isla took him into the dining room, the smaller of the two downstairs rooms, with a sturdy table, and photographs again.

‘What would you like? Scrambled eggs? Pasta and cheese? An omelette?’

‘Macaroni cheese sounds good. I can’t manage spaghetti.’

‘Use a spoon in your left hand,’ said his mother promptly, ‘and wind up a forkful against

it. The Italians don't need a spoon but they're born to it and we're not. Not yet anyway.'

Left to himself Kit looked around him. The room was not unlike the living room but less used, less lived in. There were photographs on the bookcase, and in the middle of the table. Kit guessed his mother never used the room when she was on her own. One of the snaps showed a couple of about thirty, another a smart-looking woman in her late twenties, then there were several of children, a fair girl and a dark boy.

None of him.

Until, going to the window to look out, he found one on the window ledge, almost hidden by the curtains. He felt sure it was him. There were some of him at an early age in the photo album at home in Scotland, and they were very similar. Here his childish image looked out at the photographer from a beach (Trepalu?) with a complete confidence and love. He wondered how long it had been before he had felt the same confidence in his new family, the Philipsons.

But it was natural to assume there had been problems of adjustment. No child could experience a complete change of parentage and retain the same confidence that he'd had before. And it was natural, too, that Isla should keep any photograph she had of him in an inconspicuous place. To catch sight of it, to be reminded of

her loss, would be to have a daily dose of pain.

The telephone rang and he hastily put the photograph down, as if he didn't want to be caught looking at it. But the phone was in the hall, and he heard Isla say: 'Oh, Micky – I was hoping you'd ring . . . But you'll have to make time, Micky . . . Just ten minutes, I don't need any more. I've got something for you here . . . Why should I need a reason for getting a surprise for you? Anyway it's Becky's birthday soon . . . Well, three days, three weeks, what does it matter? You can't collect it, but you must come and inspect it . . . All right, ten minutes will do. I'll see you at a quarter to two.'

Kit heard her bustle back to the kitchen, and then there wafted into the dining room a warmth and a smell that had cheese and Italy combined, and made the house suddenly seem home-like.

'We'll eat before Micky comes,' his mother said, bustling back. 'He's not interested in food. I say he'd never eat at all if his wife didn't force it down him. He wouldn't thank me for saving any for him.'

'It smells glorious.'

She gestured him to a chair, and began filling two large pasta dishes.

'I hope you don't mind me calling you "it" to Micky; I want you to be a total surprise. He'll be expecting a big parcel with pink bows on it for

Becky. That's his daughter, the only girl – she's a real love – more charm than she knows what to do with.'

'And Micky is—'

'Oh Lord! You don't remember? I am sorry. Micky is your elder brother. He was seven when you were born. We all spoilt you because you were a late arrival – unexpected, like.'

'I think you'd better tell me what family I've got,' said Kit, suddenly nervous. His mother paused in her eating, blaming herself for neglecting such an obvious duty.

'Two brothers. Micky is twenty-nine, Dan is nineteen. One sister, Maria, is thirty. They all live here in the Leeds area. Dan is in Australia at the moment – seems to be enjoying it, so we won't be seeing him for a while. Micky lives in Pudsey. I've had to help him a bit: he started a family early, got married in a bit of a hurry. Maria lives in Ilkley, married to a man well older than herself, but they're very happy and have a lovely house.'

Kit suspected a submerged disapproval of her daughter, for marrying age in order to get money.

'What about my dad?' he asked.

'Oh, he's very sick. Won't last long. He's in a home.'

There were several questions to be asked, but Kit took a lightning decision not to ask them. Her answer had been brusque.

‘Well, that brings me up to date,’ he said.

‘And it’s time to tell me about you. Then I won’t make any embarrassing mistakes. Why not start with your name?’

‘My name is Kit or Christopher Philipson. I’m an only child – you could have guessed that, I suppose: that must have been the reason for . . . you know.’

‘Yes.’ The monosyllable showed an element of steel had entered the voice.

‘Anyway, my parents were Genevieve and Jürgen. My mother was a part-time teacher in the Glasgow University Fine Arts Department. She’d been a full lecturer before I . . . came along. She went back to part-time work when I’d got settled. She never put it like that to me. She’d have said “old enough”. She always spoke as if I’d been born to her.’

His mother’s lips were pursed.

‘But surely she must have had a story ready for friends and neighbours? They would have known she hadn’t been pregnant.’

‘Eventually – not long before she died – she told me I’d been adopted. I expect she’d told them the same. The simpler the better, and the more likely to be accepted without comment.’

‘I suppose so. What about your d—your other dad? What did he do?’

‘He was a journalist – rather a high-up one.

Worked in the offices of one of the Glasgow dailies, and ended up deputy editor. Very nicely off – the house was plenty big enough for us three and the au pair of the moment.’

‘Oh . . . there was an au pair?’

He ignored undercurrents.

‘Yes, right up to my mother’s death. The au pair was really just a foreign maid by then.’ He cast her a sharp look. ‘They never foisted me off on her. She was just someone around when they were not.’

‘Oh yes, I’m sure. They wouldn’t have foisted you off when they presumably had . . . wanted you so much.’

‘That’s right. I really did always feel wanted. Anyway, there was a grandmother early on – my mother’s mother – she died when I was about seven or eight. My father’s birth father was sometimes mentioned, but it was never suggested that we went to see him or he should come and stay with us. I suspect he must have lived abroad.’

‘Why do you think that?’

‘He – my father – came to Britain in one of those trains from Germany.’

‘The Kindertransport?’

‘That’s right. That was in 1939, and he was not much more than a baby, brought by his sister, my aunt Hilda. He was three.’

‘Your age.’

‘Yes . . . Jürgen and Hilda were taken in by the Philipsons in Hampstead, stayed with them after the war, and took their name. I remember the Philipson grandparents a little, but by then they were very old. Jürgen’s real father was Austrian or German, I forget which. He got out of Vienna during the war but I don’t know any more about him, and nothing about his wife, my grandmother.’

‘I see . . . Can’t you eat any more?’

Kit pushed his pasta away and smiled.

‘I’m afraid I’m too excited. It was lovely.’

‘Well, we’ll clear the plates away, and I’ll put coffee on . . . Oh, there’s Micky now. Don’t get up. I don’t want him to see you through the window. You stand out.’

She hurried back to the kitchen. Kit stood up when he heard the front door open, as if he wanted to use his height to counter any elder-brother assertions by Micky. I must be Peter now, he said to himself. As he was saying it, the door was opened and a plump young man – fleshy anyway, in spite of his proclaimed lack of relish for eating – was ushered in. His face was artless, and he was dressed in white overalls with traces of several colours of paint. He turned round, back to the door.

‘You didn’t tell me you had a visitor, Mum.’ He turned back to Kit and held out his hand.

‘I’m Micky Novello. I won’t interrupt, I’m just in and out.’ But his voice faded on the last word. ‘But you . . . you remind me of—’

‘I’m Kit Philipson. Who do I remind you of?’

‘I don’t know . . . You, Mum, I think.’ He turned around again, but she took hold of his shoulders and pushed him towards Kit.

‘It’s Peter, you great idiot. Your little brother Peter. All grown up.’ And she went back towards the kitchen and left them alone with their past.

‘I used to be Peter Novello,’ said Kit quietly. There was a moment’s silence, then Micky sat down on one of the dining chairs.

‘God Almighty,’ said Micky. ‘Where did you come from, then?’

‘Glasgow, actually. Where I grew up.’

‘We always thought you must be in Sicily or Corsica, or somewhere dangerous and glamorous like that. Where the people clam up and keep outsiders away.’ He suddenly got up and threw his arms around Kit’s shoulders, which he could just reach. ‘Welcome home, boy.’ He sat down again with a thump. ‘But who did you grow up with?’

‘The Philipsons – Jürgen and Genevieve. The people I thought till a while ago were my birth parents.’

‘Bloody ’ell,’ said Micky, wiping his eyes. ‘This is an experience. Like a dream.’

‘It’s the same for me. Except that I had no

idea what was coming. I hope it's a pleasant dream for you.'

'Oh, it is, boy, it is.'

'Can I ask you a question?'

'Yeah – go on.'

'I gather Dad – my Leeds dad – is in some kind of home.'

'That's right, he is.'

'Is he senile? Alzheimer's, is it? If it is, is that why he's not here, being nursed by Mum? It must be very severe.'

'It's not that severe, and he's not dangerous. That's not the reason. Mum obviously hasn't told you that he and she separated two years after you were . . . abducted. They have hardly had anything to do with each other in the last seventeen years. He's in a nursing home, but it's not a bad one. Mostly when I go to see him he makes perfect sense.'

'You see him?'

'Now and then. We've always got on OK, Dad and me.'

'What does Isla think about that?'

'I've never asked her. I don't even know if she knows, though she could easily guess. We never talk about Dad.'

'I told your mother the only memory I have of him is his feet – stuffed into his slippers with the backs down and the heels exposed.'

‘That’s my dad. Still is.’

‘I don’t have any other memories, good or bad.’

‘They shouldn’t be bad, but they would very likely be patchy. The worst you could say is that he was so busy he didn’t have much time for any of us. I remember his playing very little part in our lives till we were old enough to play cricket and kick a ball round.’

‘My . . . other dad wasn’t much into sport. Perhaps it was one of the English things that never really gelled with him. But he liked sleeping through a cricket match.’

‘Wasn’t he English? Was he Italian?’

‘German Jewish. Got out just in time. Always felt relief and gratitude to the British, but also a bit of guilt.’

‘I suppose he would. Will you be stopping here with us?’

‘For a few days. I’m in a hotel – a nice, inconspicuous one on the road to Kirkstall Abbey. I won’t stay long this time. There’s still a lot to be done after my mother’s death.’

‘Was that recent?’

‘About six weeks ago. She left everything very orderly – she was that kind of person – but there still seems a lot for me to see to.’

‘I wonder if you’ll come round to my place? See the family, like. My wife is called Pat, and

we've got three, just like Mum and Dad. Ben, Becky and Tom.'

Kit could not hold himself back from saying: 'Your mum and dad had four, Micky. Four.'

'Sorry! I'm really sorry.' And he did look shamefaced. 'It's just that after a bit we didn't talk about you a lot. And the reason was Mum – it upset her. She'd go quiet, wipe a tear – you know how it is with women. So it meant that you were . . . not forgotten, but only there in the background. I had memories of you but over the years they have mostly faded.'

'I understand. I'd love to come and meet you and your family.'

Micky said: 'Tell Mum I've got to go back to work,' and slipped out the front door. When his mother came back the talk started – not structured: a mixture of gossip, impressions, exam results and future ambitions. Isla learnt that her long-lost son had done well in A levels and had started at St Andrews University two Septembers ago. He and his adoptive mother had both thought it better that he didn't go to the university she worked for. They talked about food they liked – Italian in Kit's case, Isla liking the old English dishes as well. Kit and Isla both drank wine, both disliked English beer, and Kit regretted that there were no Yiddish meals or drinks that his father – sorry! my Glasgow father

– had liked which he could have tried, because he'd heard Yiddish cuisine was fabulous. And so it went on.

Isla tried to persuade him to stay the night, but Kit thought that was too much in one day: he would prefer to be on his own now, so he could sit back and think about the whole experience of reuniting with his family. Isla accepted this (she had to do something similar, after all) and went to ring the taxi firm they used.

'I suppose tomorrow I'd better go to the police,' said Kit, as they waited at the front door.

'Police?' said Isla, seeming to tense up. 'But why?'

'Well, I must still be on their books as a lost person. A lost child probably, though they won't be surprised I've grown up.'

'But the Leeds police had very little to do with the investigation. As we said, the abduction happened in Italy – Sicily in fact – and the Italian police were involved, of course, so the English police mostly left it to the Italians.'

'I see. But there was a bit of publicity in the English press, surely? I'd have thought the English police would have responded to that.'

'Very little that I remember. The Italians considered it their case. I expect the name had something to do with it.'

'The name?'

‘Your name. Our name. Novello.’

Some enlightenment came into Kit’s face.

‘I just thought Novello was the name of some singer or other. I never thought of it as an Italian name.’

‘This looks like your taxi,’ said Isla.

She kissed him goodnight with emotions that Kit thought might be love, thankfulness, and, strangely, fear.