

SURANNE'S LIST

A Political Exposé Thriller (Local Government)

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SYNOPSIS

Suranne Roberts, recently retired civil servant, suddenly dies in mysterious circumstances – or so her niece, Sue Anderson, believes when she looks into the circumstances. With no children of her own, Suranne leaves her entire estate to Sue. But Sue inherits far more than her aunt's assets: she inherits *Suranne's List*. Little realizing what she's getting into, she sets out on a quest to learn what it means and what her aunt was involved in. The mystery of it is quickly solved, but as she works her way through the pseudonymous characters on *Suranne's List*, it very soon becomes clear that someone will stop at nothing to prevent her reaching the end of it. And when she's down to the last three names she realizes that one of them is prepared to kill her by any means possible in order to avoid identification and exposure.

PROLOGUE

Suranne slipped the disk into an empty Mozart sleeve and placed it in a vacant slot in the pine CD tower. Hiding her backup this way seemed slightly paranoid, but those threatening phone calls from *The Receiver* had her worried. For days now she had been living on her nerves lest he fetch up on her doorstep.

She had printed off only one contentious page from the disk. After folding it tightly, she hid it in the kitchen. A childish giggle disintegrated in a moment of self-doubt. She was playing a dangerous game. And was the risk justified? Would anyone really care about an exposé of this sort? Everyone seemed so apathetic these days.

She reached for her coat; time for a breath of fresh air. As she stepped outside she felt a stab of guilt at the tumble of weeds covering the path from the gate to her front door. The sound of a tractor droned faintly from a neighbouring field. But it was the buzz of male voices coming from the direction of McMurphy's scrapyard that caught her attention. Her expression turned sour as she passed their lopsided sign stuck on a rotting post in the middle of the grass verge.

"Afternoon, Suranne."

She paused to acknowledge Sean and Patrick McMurphy as they emerged from the ramshackle gates at the end of their unmade drive. All they needed were spotted cravats and a whippet, she thought. "Afternoon. How's your mother?"

"Fine," they answered together.

"Someone ought to do something about that filthy pile," she barked, jerking her head at the mountainous heap over the hedge. This snatch of conversation had been going on and off for years and always followed the same course. While Suranne was deadly serious, it merely seemed to amuse Sean and Patrick.

"Well, that's as maybe, but it's a free country," Patrick said pleasantly, "and it's our filthy pile."

"Finished the book, yet?" Sean asked.

"Almost."

"You've not said what it's about."

"It's about a bunch of crooks, and there's a spot in it for you pair. Afternoon." She marched off down the lane without a backward glance.

“Will you be giving us a free copy, then?” was Sean’s parting rejoinder. But there was no rancour in his mockery.

Avoiding the puddles from an earlier downpour, Suranne slowed her pace to a comfortable stride down the lane towards the public footpath. One glance at the gathering clouds and she feared her walk would be cut short; she had forgotten her umbrella. Leaves were beginning to collect in little windblown piles and she absent-mindedly brushed through them, wistfully reflecting on the passing of summer. Seeing the tractor rumbling across the adjoining field, she gave it a wave. She couldn’t be sure but thought it was Howard Boxley sitting in the cab.

Suranne was making for her usual destination: the excavation for the fishing lake. By this time the contractors would have packed up for the day and she found the quiet of the place soothing, not lonely or eerie as some thought. Fond of animals, she was looking forward to feeding the wildlife it would likely attract. Would Boxley splash out on a few plants? she wondered. She hoped so, and thought to pop in at the farm tomorrow to offer her advice.

Standing at the edge of the most recent diggings, she was about to peer over the side to check on the progress when a rustling of leaves momentarily distracted her. But after a cursory glance around she returned her attention to the massive hole, calculating the remaining time it would take to complete. This had become an almost daily ritual.

A sudden prickling at the back of her scalp scattered her thoughts. Instinctively, she knew that someone was standing right behind her. She spun around, almost slipping in the thick greyish mud, and immediately recognized the dark, brooding face. Her jaw dropped wide in shock.

Suranne’s first thought was to run, but he was blocking her path. Bracing herself, she regained her balance and strove to recover her composure. Though panicked by the murderous look in his eyes, she confronted him with a contrived look of bravado.

As the ominous silence prevailed, an ache in her chest expanded into excruciating pain and she was gripped by a terrifying sense of inevitability. Her hand fled to her coat pocket. It was empty; the pills forgotten along with the umbrella.

Between repressed gasps, she said, “You’re a bit out of your usual territory, aren’t you? To what do I owe the pleasure?” Despite the bluster, even she could hear the strain in her voice.

He stepped closer.

“Well, what do you want?” she challenged. Her feet felt leaden and the tingling sensation up her left arm was metamorphosing into numbing certainty. As hot panic boiled inside her,

she bravely resisted the urge to surrender to it. But she knew she couldn't hide it for much longer.

Oh, God

She knew exactly what was happening to her.

"Have you any idea just how many lives you're going to ruin with your bloody idiotic book?" he growled. "You stupid, meddling, fucking old bitch."

"*Mrs* fucking old bitch to you," she replied, defiant to the last.

CHAPTER ONE

The pain was almost physical. Nothing seemed real. The scent of death hung over Sue Anderson like the bank of dark clouds above. She still couldn't believe it. The sudden death of her Aunt Suranne had forced her to examine her casual attitude to mortality. Driving along Halfway Lane toward Suranne's cottage brought a rush of memories and she struggled to contain the tears. *Why did she feel so guilty?* The funeral had taken place five days ago, but the act of settling her aunt's affairs was going to be equally torturous.

As she passed the Boxley farm she noticed several of the Boxleys gathered in the front meadow, close to the old scratching stone, the favourite spot for grazing cattle. She lightly tooted the horn, just to acknowledge sight of them, but didn't slow down. She wasn't yet ready to face another collective show of sympathy.

As she drew up at the kerbside she noticed the gate swinging gently in the light breeze. She found the creak of its hinges – that Uncle Bill had always promised to fix but never got round to – strangely comforting.

The front door was stout and extra wide. It had been specially installed to accommodate her uncle's wheelchair just six months prior to his death. It swung open easily. But Sue hung back, loath to cross the threshold and begin the painful task ahead. Instead she turned and scanned the garden. The overgrown prized shrubs and assortment of summer annuals all looked straggly and forlorn. Even the bird table looked dirty and unattended. Gardening had been one of her aunt's favourite pastimes. She was always positively fanatical about keeping the bird table clean and well stocked. Sue wondered if she had been ill for several weeks prior to her death. *Even so?* Mystified, she shook her head. With an apprehensive sigh she steeled herself for what lay ahead and stepped into the hall.

The hall wasn't too bad. All the pictures and knick-knacks were strewn about in little piles on the carpet. The contents of the closet had been emptied and thrown in the corner. It looked almost systematic. The living room, though, was a different story. The devastation was almost total.

Stepping carefully, Sue made her way to a small empty space in the middle of the mess and stood there for several minutes, just looking around, hugging herself, and wondering where to start. Every item of furniture had been vandalized. All her aunt's ornaments had

been smashed to smithereens; pictures torn from frames; cushions raggedly cut from covers. Even the carpet had been ripped from the edges of the skirting.

But it was the computer that seemed to have taken the brunt of rage from whoever had wreaked the carnage. It had been dismantled and trashed. The hard disk had been pulverised with a hammer, it seemed. *Why?*

She kept sniffing, suspicious and fearful lest the intruder or intruders had left any revolting calling cards.

Sue found the rest of the cottage in much the same condition. If you looked beyond the wanton damage, she thought, it all seemed so methodical. And she began to suspect that the burglar had been searching for something. Could the destruction be the result of rage at failing to find it?

In the kitchen a layer of white dust from a burst bag of flour covered every surface. Close to the back door she spotted a big footprint and wondered if the police had stayed long enough to investigate the crime scene properly. Surely they had taken photographs?

Before attempting to clean up, Sue decided to give them a ring. As she paged through her mobile she tried to recall the name of the detective who had originally contacted her with the bad news.

CHAPTER TWO

The walls of the cluttered office were painted a depressing grey colour and D.I. Timkin looked equally drab in a rumpled dark grey suit that had seen better days. He didn't much care. Apathy had spread over from his personal to professional life now. And judging by the latest petty investigation given over to him, it would appear his lethargy had become noticeable.

The request for a 'face-to-face meeting' – as Miss Anderson had put it – left him feeling tetchy after her phone call. Expecting her any minute, now, he was frantically attempting to complete his paperwork on the case of the *stolen toilets*: after many years of lobbying from the parish council, the city council had finally given the go ahead for two public toilets to be built by the village green in Cradely village, only for the new sanitary ware to be stolen overnight following an afternoon delivery. So now they had two small buildings, built back to back, minus the all-important contents. There was a sound reason for the investigation: petty though the crime was, the Chief's wife had a seat on the parish council.

I get all the shit jobs just lately, he thought ironically.

The knock at his door had him mouthing a foul obscenity. He knew how the conversation would run. Only too aware of the lack of convictions for burglary, he felt no animosity towards his visitor. It was just that he had had this conversation more than a few times in the past and it always embarrassed him. He knew there was nothing he could do. The only reason he had checked it out in the first place was down to the unusual way the report had come in.

In a deceptively gentle voice, he responded, "Come in."

Taking off his spectacles, he made to straighten his tie and suddenly realized the contents of yesterday's lunch were splattered on it. The sloppiness wasn't his fault, he told himself. Nothing had been the same since his wife had dropped her bombshell. Unexpectedly nipping back home one day, he had come upon her in flagrante delicto with a man whom he didn't know from Adam – in the *bloody* kitchen no less. Would it have made any difference if he had reacted violently instead of simply slinking off like a beaten dog? He couldn't answer that. He only knew that three days later, upon his return to the happy love nest, he was faced by a packed suitcase and the peremptory order to get out – as if he were the guilty party. What a sad bastard he was. Couldn't even get past his humiliation long enough to tell her what a piece of shite she was.

Faced with Sue Anderson's immaculate appearance, Timkin was instantly embarrassed by his own shabby exterior. She met his apparent awkwardness with a friendly outstretched hand, which he took and perfunctorily shook. He indicated for her to take the only other seat in the room. She had a smile that could sell meat to a vegetarian was his first observation.

"Miss Anderson, there's really nothing more I can add to what I told you on the phone. Apart from the footprint – size ten, we think – we found nothing. No prints, apart from your aunt's. No witnesses have come forward. There're no reports of anyone suspicious hanging about at the time. Without even a list of stolen items, we simply have nothing to go on."

"Who reported the break-in, Inspector?"

"Ah, now I must admit that was strange. The caller was female but gave no name. It was logged at ten-twenty on Monday morning. Your aunt's funeral, I believe, took place the Friday before." Timkin paused momentarily, studying her intense expression. "It was made from a call box in Cradely village. We haven't been able to trace the caller. We assume the house was broken into over the weekend." He rested his elbows on the worn desk and adopted a bland expression.

"No suspects at all? Nothing?"

"Afraid not. The fact is this is an all too familiar story. They look in the paper, you see. Death announcements, funeral arrangements. If they find out it's someone living alone it's a pretty safe bet they'll get a free hand in the break-in. Some of these jobs even do the property while the funeral's taking place." Timkin shuffled his notes and returned them to the folder. "If you can provide us with that list of stolen goods it will at least give us something to work on. With a bit of luck something might turn up."

Sue shook her head. "That's just it, you see, there isn't a single item missing as far as I can see. Why would someone enter Halfway Cottage, completely wreck the contents and not steal a single thing? As far as I know Aunt Suranne had no enemies. So why? Something isn't right here."

She found the inspector's blank stare disconcerting.

He continued to just sit there, still and quiet, as if waiting for a punchline. After several rapid blinks, he shrugged his shoulders as if her words held no significance. "Look, Miss Anderson, how can you possibly know that nothing's missing? You told me you hadn't seen your aunt for quite a while."

A spark of anger flashed in Sue's baby blue eyes but she restrained the urge to voice it. "The only new thing Aunt Suranne bought in the last year was the computer. I know that cottage as if it were my own home. I spent most of my school holidays there, and have visited

her regularly ever since. Besides that, the cottage wasn't actually broken into. So either the door had been left unlocked or the burglar had a key." Sensing his lack of interest, she said more forcefully, "I think the cottage was systematically searched. Whoever it was couldn't find what he or she was after, so had wreaked as much havoc as possible."

Timkin rolled his eyes and began to tap the desk with an impatient finger. "Yes, that's all well and good. But the fact is, Miss Anderson, you haven't visited in three months or more, so you can't really be sure that anything's missing. I can't see what more I can do."

"Don't you think it's even the least bit odd, then? I mean, wouldn't you agree that it makes my aunt's death just a little bit suspicious?" Having only just thought of this, Sue could barely contain herself.

"Now just a minute, miss," Timkin blurted, raising his voice theatrically. "Your aunt died of a heart attack. Her doctor confirmed that she had a serious heart problem. You can't go making wild accusations based on half-baked assumptions. When you've had time to consider everything, I'm sure you'll see this for what it is. You're very emotional right now," he ended a little more calmly.

"See it for what it is? And what exactly is that, Inspector Timkin?" Her tone betrayed her mounting anger.

He chose to ignore it. "Look, let me know at once if you find out anything new and we'll go on from there. Until then, there's really nothing more I can do."

"So that's it then?" It wasn't really a question. Outraged, Sue stood up quickly and snapped, "Thank you, Mr Timkin. Thank you *very* much for taking the time to see me. I shall certainly be asking a few questions of my own. If I do learn anything I'll be sure to be in touch."

Timkin lurched to his feet and briefly touched her hand. A momentary cloud of worry hovered over his features as she exited his office. "Of course," he said. "Of course. Oh, and please accept my deepest sympathy. I didn't know your aunt but I know she was well thought of." He raised his hand to wave but dropped it when she didn't look back from the corridor. He watched her retreating figure for a moment then thankfully shut the door, an audible sigh signalling his relief at her departure. Now he could get back to the case of the stolen WCs. It didn't take too much thinking about.

*

Sue was muttering under her breath as she emerged from the police station. The inspector had probably interviewed only Mr and Mrs Starky, two hundred yards down the lane from Halfway Cottage, and both so old the pair of them were probably deaf as posts.

Something wasn't right. And she wasn't only thinking of the burglary now.

Needing to stock up on a few basic necessities she drove to the supermarket, resolutely driving Timkin from of her mind. Before she could clean up the cottage she had to meet with the insurance assessor, she reminded herself as she checked the time. She had considered putting up at the Cradely Arms for a couple of nights but threw out the notion, feeling she needed to be alone with her grief. As she prioritized her tasks – like the good little organizer she was – she couldn't help her thoughts straying. Who had sneaked into Aunt Suranne's cottage and why? And was her death really down to natural causes?

*

A blast of cold air from the open back door cooled the gloss on Sue's bare arms. Having filled several refuse sacks, she was now lugging them out on to the patio. Her hair was sleek with perspiration. The glow on her forehead quickly disappeared as she stood to catch her breath in the chilly night air. She leaned against the doorjamb, wearily drumming up the energy to finish the clean up. Glancing down at her hands she noticed a hole in the finger of one of her rubber gloves. *Drat it!* Well, there was only the sink unit left to do now. Time to get on with it. She returned to the kitchen.

Peering in the cupboard beneath the sink, her eyes alighted on a pair of pink heavy-duty, rubber gloves nestling in the sink bowl. *Thanks, Aunt Suranne.*

As she refilled the bucket for the umpteenth time, her thoughts were already turning to the following day's tasks. Having agreed the provisional sum allowed by the insurance assessor, there was still a tidy bit of work left in arranging for replacements for everything structural that couldn't be salvaged. Of course, a few phone calls should set that particular ball rolling.

She peeled off the damaged glove and threw it on the drainer. As she went to pull on the replacement her middle finger met something hard and sharp, and she squealed, thinking it was something nasty. Gingerly, she turned the glove inside out and a piece of tightly rolled paper slowly emerged. She cautiously unfolded it to reveal what appeared at first glance to be a computer generated list of ambiguous titles.



It seemed like nothing more than a childish bit of nonsense. If she had found it just lying about she might have been tempted to dispose of it without a second thought. But then, if that's all it was why had it been hidden in the glove? Could this possibly be what the burglar was looking for? Ridiculous! She couldn't make sense of it, albeit the handwritten postscript was a clear reference to Suranne's longstanding friend. Perhaps she would look Emmie up if she could find the time. On consideration, it might be as well to keep the list safe. She tucked it into her pocket.

CHAPTER THREE

Dawn was breaking. Sue had slept badly. Having brooded well into the night, her suspicions had turned into certainties. By the time her eyelids fluttered open to full wakefulness she had managed to convince herself that *Suranne's List* was a significant find. It had something to do with recent events.

Following a quick breakfast of toast and coffee, she got on with cleaning the rest of the house, though when her energy began to flag she decided that the living room would have to wait until the next day. Suranne's death at the excavation site kept leaping unbidden into her meandering thoughts.

*

Mid-morning and Mattie Boxley was just finishing the breakfast dishes. And the clan would soon be back expecting their tea and toast. With a weary sigh, she glanced at the dilapidated cuckoo clock hanging lopsided on the wall. Despite its ramshackle appearance, it was still going strong. The cuckoo even appeared now and again to tonelessly chirp the hour. It was only one of a job lot from McMurphy's palm-offs to the Boxley household. She glanced at the others: the decrepit washing machine leaning by the side of the sink, the so-called cooker with two of its castors missing. Fun and games every time she wanted that shifted to allow her to clean underneath and behind.

Mattie was feeling down. Every time she walked into the kitchen it reminded her of the many promises made and repeatedly broken. The life of a farmer's wife was gruelling and it was beginning to tell on her. Only thirty-five and she was already looking much older. Just lately she had begun to avoid peering at her reflection too long in the mirror.

Old William was sitting by the fire, not having yet been moved to the window. Moving his wheelchair slightly, Mattie placed the enormous copper kettle on the antiquated range to boil and then went back to the sink.

"I want me tea."

"You've just seen me put the kettle on," she said, exasperated. Then slow tears began to creep down her cheeks. At that moment the back door opened and they all piled in.

Arthur went immediately to warm his hands by the fire and check on his father. "All right, Dad?"

"I want me tea."

“He wants ’is tea. Isn’t it made, yet?”

“The kettle’s on,” Mattie sniffed.

“How ya doing GG?” Chris asked, fussing with William’s blanket. (GG, short for Great Granddad, was how William was usually referred to in order to avoid confusion with Granddad Arthur.)

Leslie came up behind Mattie and planted a kiss on the back of her neck. She petulantly shrugged off his warm greeting. He peered round at her and immediately spotted the tears. “What’s the matter, hon? What’re you crying for?”

“Bloody periods again, is it? Arthur said, uncaringly.

Mattie whipped round, dangerously twirling the dripping dishcloth. “No it isn’t. As a matter of fact it’s this damned kitchen. I’m sick of it. It’s making an old woman of me.”

“Oh, Christ. Not that again. We got you the cooker ’cause you didn’t like the range. And the washing machine too. They work, don’t they? It’s more than my Annie ever had.”

At this point Howard quietly picked up the morning paper and sneaked off to the bathroom to enjoy a bit of privacy and quality reading. It’s what he always did when he needed a respite from the battling Boxleys. Their struggle for survival was taking its toll.

Back in the kitchen Mattie was treading a familiar path and pleading a lost cause. “A museum’d turn its nose up at them,” she spluttered with a jabbing forefinger. “Early Roman rubbish, no less. In case you didn’t know, the agitator and mangle went out soon after the dolly tub. Fifteen years you’ve been promising me a new kitchen. And it’s always, ‘next year’. Thousands you’ve spent this year. New barn, new milking shed, and, wait for it, the answer to all our prayers, would you believe – a fishing lake!”

Arthur mashed his gums in an angry grimace. “Finished, ’ave you? We ’ad to ’ave the new shed and barn or Health and Safety would’ve shut us down. And as for the lake, that’s goin’ to bring us in a fair income. What little money we’ve got now ’as to be spent on necessities if we’re goin’ to survive. I don’t know what you want that you ain’t already got.”

Holding the dripping dishcloth aloft, Mattie made to throw it at him and then shook her head. Suddenly capitulating, she twisted round to face the sink again and stared despondently at the leaning taps.

“Maybe next year, love.” Leslie could have bitten off his tongue when she threw him a look of disgust.

Arthur sat down at the table, picked up his mug and banged it down again. “Tea, if ya don’t mind. We ain’t got all day. There’s silage to be rolled.”

“I’ll make the tea, pet,” Leslie said in a conciliatory tone.

Young Chris went over to Mattie and gave her a sympathetic hug. “Never mind, Mum,” he whispered, “I’ll be helping out soon.”

Mopping her face, Mattie managed a weak smile. “Listen, son. After school you’re going on to college. You’re going to be the first one in this family to come home smartly dressed in a business suit, smelling of aftershave instead of cow muck.” She glared pointedly at Arthur.

Arthur and Leslie exchanged significant glances but wisely chose to keep silent.

“I’m cold,” William groaned pathetically.

“You’re always blasted cold,” Mattie shouted.

“Hey, hey,” Arthur yelled. “Don’t talk to Dad like that. He’s ninety-one and deserves a bit o’ respect. Snappin’ at everyone like a rabid dog, y’are. It strikes me you need somethin’ to take your mind off things. Per’aps another babbie might be in order.”

Flabbergasted, Mattie’s jaw sagged open. Jerking a thumb at William, she said, “What do I need another baby for when I’ve got him to look after? If he’s not hunched over the fire, he’s parked over by the window. I swear people walking past think he’s a picture in a bloody window frame. But he can move, you know. I’ve seen him. When he thinks I’m not watching. And he can walk as well. He just wants waiting on; thinks it’s his right.”

“Well maybe it is. He did work till he was eighty, you know,” Leslie interjected mildly.

“I want a pee.”

“Chris, run and tell your Uncle Howie the library’s required. Are we ever ’avin’ this bloody tea or what?”

At the abrupt banging on the bathroom door, Howard clenched his jaw. He hadn’t even got to the sports page yet.

Life in the Boxley household.

Into the midst of this came Sue’s tentative knock at the back door.

She didn’t stay long.

*

Relieved to be back outside, Sue made her way down the lane to call on Mr and Mrs Starky. There was only so much of the Boxleys’ sardonic repartee she could take. She had detected a strained atmosphere immediately on entering their kitchen. They had always been noisy and boisterous in a nice sort of way; except for Howard who she thought of as a bit of a strange one. But the cloud of depression hanging over the whole family was plain to see. Sad times for farmers, she thought.

They were sympathetic and helpful, of course. But she hadn’t really learned anything new. The contractors working on the lake had found Aunt Suranne. They knew she was dead so

they hadn't moved the body. The police had been called immediately. As far as any of the Boxleys knew, only the McMurphys had seen Suranne on her final trip to the excavation. As to the anonymous phone call about the break-in, they couldn't hazard a guess to the caller's identity. Had any of them seen any strangers hanging about? The response was a collective chorus of no.

Did that mean her death was suspicious, then?

Sue ducked that one. Had Suranne ever mentioned a list of people she had labelled with absurd nicknames? An emphatic no was their combined reply, swiftly followed by a query about the *kind* of names on *Suranne's List*, which Sue skilfully dodged. After extracting a promise from Mattie to pop down and see her early on Tuesday evening, Sue had made good her escape.

The Starkys' cottage built much on the same lines as Suranne's but slightly smaller, was about two hundred yards further down the lane. Sue wasn't expecting to learn anything significant.

Mr Starky was gathering the last of the autumn leaves from the path. He smiled and doffed his cap, nodding hello and waving his pipe. Sue found the gentlemanly gesture refreshing and far removed from city life. Mrs Starky already had the door open, having spotted Sue's approach from her perch on the window seat. In her mind's eye Sue always likened Mrs Starky to a sparrow hawk: small and wiry with beady eyes and a tongue as sharp as a beak.

"Come in, Sue. I've been expecting you. I'll make a cup of tea – or coffee if you prefer."

"That's very kind of you, Mrs Starky, but there's no need, really. Please don't go to any trouble. I can't stay long."

"Well sit down then. You've got time for that, haven't you?" The tone was an immediate give-away to her background. Prior to retiring almost twenty years ago, she had been a schoolteacher – the *before-trendy* variety.

Sue cast about and sank into the nearest chair.

Mrs Starky tapped her ear. "There's no need to shout now. I've got a hearing aid. Not on the National Health, though. I had to pay private to get a half-decent one.

Still by the window, she opened it and shouted, "Alfred. ALFRED! Come in now, you've done enough." Turning to Sue, she chuckled and said, "He'd be out all day if I let him, catching his death of cold." Then her expression visibly changed. "I'm so sorry about Suranne. Such a terrible way to go. Sorry I couldn't get to the funeral. This bad leg of mine, doesn't half give me gyp. And I didn't dare let Alfred go to the cemetery. He's become so frail now. But he did go to the church. Did you see him? You got the wreath all right?"

Sue finally managed to get a word in. “Yes, it was lovely. Thank you. When did you last see Aunt Suranne?”

“Just three days before she died. She dropped off a birthday card for Alfred. He’s eighty-two now, you know. She couldn’t stay long. No one ever does,” she threw at Sue with a withering jerk of her head.

“Did she by any chance mention anything about taking up a new hobby, like writing perhaps?” It hadn’t taken Sue long to come to this conclusion, considering Suranne’s purchase of the computer upon her retirement.

“No. Never said a word about that. Why, was she writing a book? I could’ve helped her with that. My subject, you know. English. And maths. Of course, it’s all computers and ruddy calculators now. Give children a pad and pencil nowadays and you’ll likely be met with a blank stare.”

“Did you see any strangers hanging about? Either on the day she died or the night of the break-in?”

“Not a soul. But Alfred said he heard some banging and crashing that night. Be about eight o’clock, I think. I was having a bath, hearing aid out, so I didn’t catch a thing. He did tell me, but we never thought anything about it at the time. Thought it was the McMurphy brothers. They’re always making a racket. Used to be the bane of Suranne’s life, living as close as she did.

“Terrible mess the vandals left your aunt’s place in. Mattie told us. Said she’d looked in through the window. They hadn’t better come here. Keep my old hockey stick by the bed, I do. I’ll sort them out good and proper.”

Sue was quite certain she would, easily visualizing her wielding it.

“Have you any idea who would have telephoned the police to report the break-in?”

Mrs Starky finally paused, thinking deeply. She massaged her forehead as if willing the answer to reveal itself. “The only person I can think of is that young woman that helps out Mrs McMurphy. Sandra, er . . . yes, Taylor,” she announced triumphantly. “Sandra Taylor. She was probably being nosy. Looking through the windows of the cottage to see what your aunt had got. Didn’t want anyone to know so phoned it in anonymously. Lives in the village but I couldn’t say where. Can’t see it’d be anyone else.”

“Well thank you, Mrs Starky. You’ve been a great help.” *Surprisingly.*

Sue got to her feet and warily made her way to the door. Mrs Starky followed and *ordered* her to visit again, *soon*. Sue murmured something vague and then shot out before Mrs Starky had time to extract a definite undertaking.

“Alfred. ALFRED! Come in NOW!”

*

Mattie had earned herself a twenty-minute reprieve. The chores were done and the dinner was on, all the pots simmering. She served GG his cup of tea by the window and went to sit in the chair by his side with her cappuccino. She swallowed the first mouthful with a sigh of ecstasy, really relishing it.

Watching William as he cautiously sipped from a piping-hot mug of strong tea, she felt a stab of guilt on remembering her unkind outburst earlier. He wasn't that bad. Not much trouble at all really. It wasn't his fault she had to work so hard, and without any of the mod cons she so coveted. For the hundredth time that day she rolled her eyes and gave a wistful little sigh. “GG, I'm sorry I shouted at you earlier. I'm feeling a bit blue today.”

Her bottom lip began to tremble again. She stoically bit down on it, determined to shed no more tears. She took another sip of her coffee.

William suddenly spoke. “I saw someone.”

“What, GG, what was that you said? You saw someone?”

“After Suranne.”

“When?”

“Yesterday.”

Yesterday? He must be mixing the days up. “Who, GG. Who did you see?”

“Dunno. A man.”

“What did he look like?”

“Dunno. He wuz all wrapped up.”

Mattie leaned forward to catch anything further, thinking furiously.

“She ain't gone by today. Suranne.”

“No, GG. She'll never go by again.”