

An Office in the Grays Inn Road

By Len Maynard & Mick Sims

The Grays Inn Road, as many a visitor to London may tell you, is a long straight thoroughfare, with the tarnished splendour of the old railway station of Kings Cross at one end, and the understated importance of the many legal buildings of Holborn at the other. It is the home of the Eastman Dental Hospital, several pubs, countless snack bars, and hundreds of apartments and offices. Like many London streets away from the West End it bustles with movement all day, yet, once evening arrives, it settles into a quiet, nearly deserted somnolence. It cannot be called one of the more attractive parts of London. The closer you get to the Kings Cross end, where many of the apartment blocks look seedily run down, a definite air of menace hangs over the place; menace with an undercurrent of latent violence, which makes walking alone at night an uncomfortable experience.

The offices of the Phillips Theatrical Agency occupied the top floor of a turn of the century building at the Holborn end. It was close to the junction with Clerkenwell Road, about a fifteen-minute walk from Kings Cross station. It was a walk Joanna Phillips took one Saturday afternoon, two days after her husband's death.

The transition from wife to widow, at thirty-three, was not an easy one to make. It was the suddenness of it that she found so difficult to cope with. No preparation, no final words, no last goodbyes.

At breakfast on Thursday she was trying to persuade Hugh to take a holiday with her later in the year; an autumn break, perhaps Italy, to visit Florence again, the setting for their honeymoon. Running the agency had been taking all his energies recently. He had been working long hours, sometimes seven days a week, not arriving home until late, and he seemed so tired that Joanna was beginning to fear for his health.

By lunchtime she was sitting at home, numb with shock, as a young policeman, a dab of shaving-foam behind his ear, told her there had been a car accident and Hugh had been killed. There was no one else in the car and no other vehicles were involved. It appeared he had lost control of the car on a bend, perhaps he had fallen asleep at the wheel for a few seconds. The occurrence was apparently quite common. Before he left she wiped the shaving foam away with her finger.

The rest of the day and the next saw her wandering around the house, feeling lost and alone. The house seemed empty and cold, despite the spring sunshine pouring in through the windows. The identification of the body was bad enough, made worse by his mother who showed almost no emotion at all. For Joanna, even seeing the body and realising the physical fact of the death was not sufficient to persuade her he was gone. She still expected to see him in the room, to smell the aroma of the cigars he used, to feel him next to her in bed. She kept repeating his name over and over, kept feeling unreasonable guilt that she was to blame. If only she had been more firm and forced him to reduce his work load, to work less hours. The feeling of numbness overshadowed everything, leaving her thinking, hoping it was all a dream.

When Saturday came she knew she needed to be close to Hugh, to feel his presence, and she couldn't manage that in the house. Whilst they had shared some memorable times there, the office was the centre of Hugh's life, it was where he came alive. The agency had been his passion, and it

was in the office in the Grays Inn Road where he had proposed to her eight years ago. Her parents had been worried by the fact that he was ten years older than she was, but Hugh had won them over, as he did everyone, with his well-practised charm.

She opened the envelope the police had given her after the accident, which contained all the items found in his pockets. Taking out his office keys, she walked to the station and caught the train to London. It was about a forty-minute journey from the house in Cambridge. All she could think of on the train was the way they had talked about the future. Hugh had always maintained that he would leave her well provided for, assuming because he was older that he would be the first to die. Only he couldn't have imagined it would be like this, so suddenly.

She found the agency to be much more run down than she remembered. The lift that ferried visitors from the dour Victorian foyer to the floors above had probably been installed in the 1920's. It still had the old style brass lattice gates that fold like a concertina when opened, and close with a loud metallic clang, making people feel they are shut in a prison. Such lifts can be claustrophobic and Joanna took the stairs instead.

The offices themselves were three fairly small rooms, each leading off from a central reception area, and each used by one of the partners. The decor in Hugh's own office, like the rest of the place, was shabby and smelled musty. The windows were grimy and badly in need of a clean, the glass patinated by a brown film from the thin cigars. On the walls hung photographs of some of the agency's more famous clients, jostling for space with framed diplomas and dog-eared theatre playbills.

When she had come here in the past she had never really been aware of such details, but then before she had always been here with Hugh. Now he was no longer here she realised the office had always been tatty, she just hadn't noticed before because it was always filled with Hugh's presence, his dominant personality and his infectious ebullience. Without him here it was as if someone had stripped the varnish from a fine piece of furniture to reveal the pockmarked, worm-eaten wood beneath.

Despite the shabbiness, the agency was one of the three top theatrical agencies in the capital. Their list of clients contained stars of television, film and theatre, and the list was growing each year. It was successful and it was making money. Hugh could have afforded to have the place decorated every year if he wanted. Instead he insisted that the office was clean but unchanged. Unchanged from the way his father had last seen it when he died and bequeathed the agency to Hugh. Sentimentality was one of Hugh's more appealing, and irritating, aspects. The very drabness of the offices had become a byword within the theatrical world, and added to the Hugh Phillips myth.

A large, dark mahogany desk, empty apart from two telephones, dominated the office, a white blotter filled with ink doodles and scribbled messages, and the leather desk tidy Joanna had given him three Christmases ago. She sat down in the high-backed swivel chair behind the desk and breathed in the atmosphere. 'Oh God, Hugh, I miss you so,' she said, out loud, feeling the tears pricking at her eyes. She fought them back; he hated her crying.

She hoped she would see Hugh, smiling, perhaps slightly drunk, cigar in one hand, the silver tipped cane he used for effect in the other. The cane was another little affectation he used to laugh over with her, saying it was what some of his clients expected. She hoped she could see Hugh, even the Hugh she had seen in the mortuary, even the dead and lifeless Hugh, because she had a dread that without him her life would always be this empty.

To distract herself she pulled open the top drawer of the desk and sorted through the contents. There was little of any interest, mostly tax forms and other official documents, a bottle of aspirin and some postcards from clients. She came to the bottom drawer and found a picture frame, lying face down in amongst the boxes of staples and paper clips. She took it out and was surprised to find it was a picture of herself, taken on holiday several years previously when her hair had been longer and lighter.

'No wonder he kept this one hidden away,' she said, unaware she was speaking aloud, but the discovery bothered her slightly. She remembered that he usually kept the picture on the top of his desk, facing him. Why would he have put it into a drawer? Why didn't he want to see her?

Out in reception a phone began to ring. It rang twice then she heard Hugh's voice. A recorded message on an answer machine, nothing more, but hearing his voice broke down the dam she had built around her emotions and the tears finally came. She laid her head down on the desk and sobbed, mourning the loss of more than just a husband and lover, mourning her own life that would never be the same again.

When she finally regained control of herself the office was in darkness, lit only by the streetlights filtering in through the begrimed windows. It was time to go. She had come to the office seeking solace and found only heartbreak.

Locking the door, she walked out onto the landing. The whole building seemed deserted. She found the door to the stairs had been locked, which left her with no alternative but to take the lift, even though she hated the things. A stillness seemed to hang in the air, as if waiting for something. The only sound to break the silence was the whirring of the lift mechanism. When she pressed the call button the mechanism grumbled into life, the sudden noise making her move away from the lift entrance, in apprehension. She was aware of being alone in the darkened building, she could feel her heart beating faster, her breathing tight and uncomfortable.

The lift seemed to be taking an age to rise from the ground floor, and as she waited her unease began to grow. Whether it was weariness or whether she was just emotionally drained and feeling vulnerable, the effect was unpleasant. As the counter-balance dropped and the snaking cables hauled the lift up to her floor, she started to get the strangest feeling that when the lift finally arrived, it would be occupied. She sensed a presence, caged in the wooden and metal box that was inching ever closer to her floor, and she was convinced that whatever was rising from below was hostile. No matter how hard she tried to persuade herself she was being foolish and hysterical, she could not dispel the growing sense of panic. She found herself edging backwards until she was standing on the opposite side of the landing, her back pressed against the wall, ready to run if she saw anything occupying the lift.

Finally it reached her floor and she could see through the gates that it was quite empty, but still she had to brace herself to walk forward, pull them open and step into that confining little box. She shut the gates and pressed the button for the ground floor.

Whoever had used the lift last must have bathed in perfume as it hung in the air, heavy and cloying. It was a rich, heady scent, and as the lift descended the smell seemed to intensify, filling her senses, making her feel slightly nauseous. She started to breathe shallowly, cupping her hand over her nose and mouth, using her fingers as a filter, but the perfume was insidious and crept into her nostrils, filling her lungs and making her head swim. She felt sick and giddy and she clutched at the lift gates for support as her legs buckled beneath her. It was then that the lights went out.

The panic she had been holding at bay swept over her, overpowering, as the lift was plunged into darkness. Along with the panic came the unshakeable feeling that she was not alone in the lift. The lift continued its descent, but in inky blackness, which made it so much worse. She pressed herself into the corner, listening to the steady whirr of the lift's motor, and the clank and grind of the pulleys, praying for the descent to end. She wanted nothing more than to escape from the confining boundaries of that tomb-like box. In the blackness the insidious perfume was permeating into her clothing, seeming to soak into her skin.

When something brushed against her cheek she cried out. It felt like fur, warm and soft, but the touch was so fleeting, the memory of the actual texture was fading from her mind as quickly as the sensation vanished from her cheek.

At last the lift juddered to a halt and she threw back the gates and tumbled out, catching the heel of her shoe. She rushed through the foyer, yanked open the door and ran out into the street. She bent forward, taking deep lungfuls of the carbon monoxide tainted London air. She half expected someone to follow her out of the building but no one did. If someone had been in the lift with her then they stayed inside.

She had the presence of mind to lock the outer door behind her, then started to walk towards Kings Cross station. Spring sunshine had given way to night and the road seemed deserted. There were few cars, even fewer pedestrians, and she quickened her pace as the emptiness started to feel oppressive. Already frightened, she was bordering on panic. A couple of times she glanced behind, trying to quell the uneasy feeling that she was being followed, but each time she saw nothing but an empty expanse of pavement, stretching back towards Holborn.

An elderly man, walking a cocker spaniel on a lead, emerged from one of the tenement blocks. Dull eyes in a lined and care-worn face regarded her incuriously as she passed him, but the dog growled deep in its throat and, after she had gone three paces past them, exploded in a fit of ferocious barking. Something had frightened it. The old man was having trouble subduing the spaniel, yanking on the lead as the dog twisted and pulled, yapping and snapping at the empty air as if trying to attack someone. The man uttered several oaths then, using the end of the lead as a tawse, caught the animal a stinging blow across its hindquarters. The dog yelped and settled, and allowed its owner to tug it back on course.

A waft of perfume played at her nostrils, the same sickly scent she had smelled in the lift. It was less intense in the open air but its familiarity taunted her. She walked on quickly, her high heels clicking on the empty pavement. For a while she concentrated on the sound, letting the staccato beat fill her mind, driving out less pleasant thoughts. Ahead of her the lights of Kings Cross beckoned, whilst all around the buildings seemed to close in, giving the impression that she was walking through a dark, gradually narrowing tunnel. The click click of her heels was amplified in the silence, echoing from the buildings, increasing in tempo as she walked faster.

The feeling she was being followed intensified and, despite her constant backward glances, she could not shake it off. The echo of her heels had taken on a more definite substance until she was convinced that there was a separate set of footsteps keeping pace with her. She stopped abruptly, listening fiercely. The other footsteps stopped also, but a beat after her own. She turned slowly and for a moment, less than a blink of an eye, she was sure she saw something, a shadow, no more, an amorphous shape hewn out of the darkness. Then a car sped past, headlights blazing and the shadow vanished. She started to run.

The smell of the perfume was swirling about her, making breathing difficult, making her chest feel like it was encircled by a metal band that was slowly being tightened, cutting off her air

supply, making her heart pound. She was running, looking back over her shoulder, the other heels clicking at the paving a yard behind her own. Then the echoing footsteps stopped, and for a moment it was only her own insistent heels that sounded on the pavement. Then there was a different sound behind her. A single tap, tap, as if something sharp was being tapped on the ground.

By the time she took her seat on the Cambridge train, and sat there in the half-full carriage she had almost convinced herself that the panic stricken rush from the office to the station was nothing more than the product of her overwrought emotions. Still confused and numb from the news of Hugh's death she had allowed her mind to play tricks. She almost smiled at the way she had run the length of the Grays Inn Road. Nevertheless, it wasn't until the train got underway that she felt calmer.

Over the next few days preparations for the funeral occupied her thoughts, and the memory of the episode faded until it was like a half-remembered dream.

The funeral was not the sombre affair she feared it might be. It was helped by the choice of music. Hugh was a jazz fan, and had once told her that when he died he wanted to be sent off with the music he loved. Scott Joplin and Bix Beiderbecke might not be everybody's choice for a funeral, but they were Hugh's, and the lively ragtime set the mood for the day.

After the funeral everyone came back to the house. Luckily the weather was fine and they were all able to spill out into the garden, sparing a crush in the house. A jazz band was able to play continually from within a small marquee that had been set up in the garden. Joanna could not remember seeing so many famous people gathered together in so confined an area before. Hugh's agency played host to some of the most sought after names in the acting world and, had it been under different circumstances, it would have been fun to watch the interplay between them all. Clash of the Egos, Hugh would have called it. But as things were everyone was on their best behaviour, all genuinely mourning the loss of an agent who many also considered a dear and precious friend.

Then she smelt it. The same exotic, slightly musky scent she had smelled in the lift. She walked around the garden, ignoring people who spoke to her, nearly knocking over the girl serving the drinks. She had been scared in the lift and in the street afterwards, but now she felt angry that whoever it was had come to her house. She could find no one wearing the perfume.

Somehow the decision was made, over the next few days, for Joanna to take Hugh's place on the board of the Phillips Theatrical Agency. John Rosen and Peter Seymour, the other two partners were adamant they wanted her. They arranged, discreetly, for several key clients to contact her and persuade her she was needed. And of course Hugh's mother gently pleaded for her to join. 'It's always been the Phillips Agency, it really should have a Phillips as its figurehead.' She insisted, adding a little less tactfully. 'You don't actually have to do anything.'

Joanna knew that to do something was the best therapy for grief and she couldn't think of anything better. John Rosen was the accountancy partner and he shared the figures with her in a way that Hugh never had. They made impressive reading, business was good. And John was more flattering about his reasons for wanting her to join. 'You must know the business inside out. You shared Hugh's life, we all know he never made a business decision without talking it through with you first.'

Peter Seymour was the lawyer and he was even more persuasive when she met with him. 'I've been to some of your dinner parties don't forget. I've seen hard-bitten producers reduced to behaving like infatuated schoolboys when you've turned on the charm.'

The other member of staff was Michelle Buckley who had started as Hugh's secretary but had seen the role evolve into that of office manager. It was she who welcomed Joanna into the office on her first morning. Once John and Peter arrived they indulged in the decadent delight of a champagne breakfast before going to their separate offices.

Someone had replaced Hugh's nameplate with one that read 'Joanna Phillips' and a surge of emotion threatened to overwhelm her. Before the tears could flow Michelle called in to ask if she wanted a cup of coffee.

'You're a life-saver. The champagne's gone straight to my head.'

'Mine too,' Michelle said with a grin.

Joanna remembered the photograph. 'Was it you who tidied Hugh's desk? Only I found this in one of the drawers.' She reached in to fetch the photograph, but when she pulled it out she could only stare at it in disbelief. The frame had been bent, twisted out of shape, and the glass was shattered, starred and broken.

Michelle patted her on the shoulder. 'It was on the desk when I saw it last. It certainly wasn't broken like that.'

Joanna dropped the frame into the waste bin. It was only as it fell away from her hand that she noticed the photograph itself. It had been deliberately torn, not into pieces, more carefully than that. The head had been removed, and so had a tiny piece from the body, corresponding exactly with where the heart would be.

The day went well after that, and the early evening found Joanna and John sitting in the audience at an all woman mime act to watch one of the performers as a possible signing. After a brief meeting backstage they came away with a new acquisition for the agency, and they celebrated with a drink at a local bar. By the time Joanna got home she was feeling tired, but pleased with the way her first day had gone.

She was cleaning her teeth when the telephone rang. She picked it up in the bedroom wondering who it could be so late in the evening. She said her name and number, and repeated them, but there was no reply. All she got in return was static. She pressed the earpiece closer and realised the noise was changing. It began to sound like rushing swirling air, the sound you get when you press your ear against a sea shell, only, very faintly, she could hear voices. Male and female, high and low cadences, but no distinguishable words. It gave her the distinct impression she was eavesdropping on a couple engaged in a furious argument.

Assuming it was a crossed line she almost hung up but something, probably just curiosity, stopped her and she continued to listen. After a minute or two she could still hear nothing more and so she put back the receiver.

Seconds later the telephone rang again. This time there was a voice before she could speak.

'Hugh?' It was a female voice, querulous, close to tears. 'Hugh, please speak to me if you're there. I know you're there.'

Anger swept through Joanna's body. 'Who is this? Is this your idea of a sick joke?'

'Hugh?' Fainter now as if the caller was speaking some distance from the mouthpiece, and in the background was the same swirling noise, loudly rushing air as though the woman was in a speeding car with the windows open.

Joanna dropped the telephone and sat on the bed. The static noise amplified, filling the room. The noise was increasing in volume, a rustling, hissing crackle threaded through the other sounds, and then cries and whimpers, shouts of anger from both a man and a woman. Then, with crystal clarity Hugh's voice shouting above the screaming roar of a car's engine, 'Get your hands off the

wheel you stupid bitch!' and the animal like screech of skidding tyres. Then the sound of metal crashing through a fence, and she could see in her mind Hugh's car sailing through the air before landing upside down in a ploughed field.

Suddenly it all stopped and the bedroom was silent. Joanna pulled the telephone socket out of the wall and let the wire drop to the floor, where it lay like a thin white worm. It was nearly dawn when she finally slept and a woman's voice entered her troubled dreams, a despairing, pathetic cry, the voice of grief, her own voice.

When she awoke after a few hours sleep she felt tired and drained. The past few days were taking their toll. Peter Seymour was in a state of agitation when Joanna arrived at the office. He was sitting at Michelle's desk, pulling open drawers and rifling through them. As Joanna entered he looked up expectantly, then his face dropped and he went back to searching the desk. 'Sorry,' he said. 'I thought you were Michelle.' He yanked open another drawer and examined its contents. With an explosive, 'Damn!' He slammed the drawer shut and got to his feet.

'Problems?' Joanna said as she hung her jacket on the coat rack.

'Rebecca Tanner's file. I was working on it yesterday. I had it on my desk when I left last night, thinking I'd get in early this morning and finish it. Now the bloody thing's vanished.'

Joanna switched on the coffee machine. 'Why the panic?' She said. 'Surely it can wait until John and Michelle get in. One of them will know where it is.'

His face was flushed. It was unusual to see him so worked up. 'I have a meeting with Rebecca's solicitor in just over an hour, and I have to have all the figures ready. He contacted me weeks ago asking for a run down of all the monies owing to her so he can finalise her estate. I don't want to go there unprepared. It would look bad for the agency.'

Joanna left him to it and sat at her desk. Her head felt muzzy and there was a dull ache behind her eyes. She remembered the aspirin she had seen in the desk drawer. She shook three into the palm of her hand and tossed them into her mouth, washing them down with coffee. In the second drawer down she came across a pink cardboard folder which she was sure was not there yesterday. She opened it up on the desk. The face that stared back from the glossy ten by eight photograph had a quality of haunting, ethereal beauty. Dark almond eyes set in an exquisitely carved face, translucent, flawless skin, a small, straight nose in perfect proportion to the full and sensuous mouth, with lips that parted seductively in a half-smile.

Rebecca Tanner had been the actress of the moment, adored by the public, feted by the most influential producers, and indulged by the fiercest of film and theatre critics. Talent and beauty in equal measure, a devastating combination. Why she had killed herself at the age of twenty-five, when a successful career was laid out before her was still unexplained, still the stuff of rumour and speculation in the tabloid press. An overdose of barbiturates, combined with a half bottle of gin. No suicide note, no clues given to the desperate unhappiness that had driven her to take the deadly cocktail.

Joanna stared at the photograph and felt unutterably sad. Rebecca had come to the agency straight from drama school. When she came to Hugh and asked him to represent her he had signed her immediately. Unusually, on this occasion, he did not talk it through with Joanna first, though she would have readily agreed with his decision.

A gentle knocking on the door drew Joanna back from the precipice of dark and dangerous imaginings. John Rosen sauntered in, smiling, then he saw the open file on her desk and the smile slipped from his face. 'Peter's going frantic looking for that,' he said.

‘Then he should be more careful where he leaves his things. I’ve just found it in my desk drawer, though he swears he left it on his desk last night.’

‘I did.’ Peter stood in the doorway behind John. John turned at the sound of his voice and the look that passed between them excluded Joanna.

The belligerence faded from Peter’s eyes in an instant and he came into the room, hand outstretched to take the file.

The telephone rang suddenly in the outside office. Before anyone could pick it up the answering message cut in and Hugh’s voice sounded out. At first it was the same message Joanna had heard on the Saturday she visited the office but gradually the voice changed. The official message subtly altered with Hugh’s voice becoming huskier, softer, until Joanna began to recognise the seductive voice he used when they were making love. Only he wasn’t talking to her, that was obvious, he was speaking to another woman. He didn’t use a name but he laughed in a certain way, he used words to describe what he wanted to do with the woman, words he never used with Joanna. And then the voice told Rebecca that it adored her.

Joanna walked into the reception where Michelle was standing staring at the telephone in open-mouthed astonishment. Without hesitation Joanna pulled the wire from the wall as she had done with her own telephone last night.

‘Get the message on the answering machine changed and then come into my office,’ she said to Michelle. ‘Now,’ she added harshly when Michelle didn’t move. There was no sign of Peter and John. Evidently they had gone out.

About five minutes later Michelle came in, looking more her normal self. Joanna had already poured out two large brandies. Michelle took her glass, and swallowed the drink quickly. Joanna did the same and poured two more drinks.

Neither of them spoke but both knew what the subject would be when they did. ‘God knows he was at the flat often enough. But it’s all circumstantial. I never had any real proof.’ It was Michelle who broke the deadlock.

‘Her flat?’

‘Well, she was using it, but it belongs to the agency. I thought you knew.’ Michelle had the strength to look directly at Joanna as she spoke.

‘It seems there’s a hell of a lot that I knew nothing about,’ Joanna said. ‘But then I was only Hugh’s wife.’ The bitterness of the words seemed to wash over the office. ‘So what’s happened to the flat now?’

‘It’s still vacant. Nobody but Hugh went there after she died. We didn’t like to...’ Her voice trailed off.

‘Take the rest of the day off,’ Joanna said. ‘I need the keys to the flat, they weren’t with Hugh’s things.’

‘In my desk. Second drawer down. Hugh threw them in there a few days before he had the accident.’

‘The address of the flat?’

‘St John Street, in Clerkenwell. The number’s on a tag attached to the keys.’

Clerkenwell was becoming the latest fashionable area in London to live. Once the hub of the jewellery and watch-making trade, high rates and rents had driven out the craftsmen who had plied their trade in the area for decades. City of London overspill and an influx of Hong Kong businessmen had provided the money, and left the way clear for the developers to move in, sweeping away workshops and small factories, and replacing them with high-priced residential

accommodations. As wealthy people moved in to the salubrious studio flats and loft apartments, the whole area had taken on the image of an inner city village. Expensive restaurants and wine bars catered for those who could afford their inflated tariffs and clothes shops selling designer wear were flourishing.

St John Street was in the centre of this cultural revolution. Close to the Smithfield meat market, its once dilapidated buildings had been given a face-lift, and now even abandoned meat-lockers were converted into dwellings for the monied few. The flat lived in by Rebecca Tanner was in one of those very buildings. The front wall of the building still bore the legend, 'Smithfield Cold Store', picked out in blue ceramic tiles dating back to the turn of the century, a once functional sign turned into a design conceit by the architect commissioned to convert the building.

Once inside, polished steel and smoked glass banished any echoes from the past. The stairs leading to the upper floors were pink granite, polished to a rich lustre. Joanna slipped the key into the lock of 12b and turned it. She hesitated then, wanting to go into the flat, to see for herself what Hugh and Rebecca's love-nest looked like, yet terribly aware that once she opened the door of the flat she would be stepping into a chasm of emotional turmoil. Grief at death had been transformed into gradual realisation that he had deceived her. The pain and disappointment were a sharp counterpoint to the anger she had been so successful in hiding from herself for so long.

John and Peter had tried to stop her going to the flat. They had returned to the office and were furious that she had sent Michelle home. When she rummaged in Michelle's desk and found the key they had both remonstrated with her, telling her it was a bad idea coming here.

'Hugh would not have approved of this,' John said, in a desperate, last ditch attempt to make her see sense.

'Hugh's dead,' she said coldly. 'There's no point trying to protect him now.'

John and Peter had obviously been talking together because when John next spoke it had all the hallmarks of a rehearsed speech. 'Look, Joanna, I'll be honest. There was something going on between Hugh and Rebecca. It wasn't serious, I'm sure it didn't mean anything to Hugh and he had ended it weeks ago. He told me he couldn't bear to deceive you any longer.'

Hard as his death was to bear, Joanna felt the thrust of his betrayal even more difficult to accept. Death was final, and her grief had a natural cadence to it. His infidelity was just as permanent, but because it was unfinished business between them it would always be there, spoiling the memories, infecting the healing process. 'It means something to me. You all knew, and I didn't.'

Peter spoke for the first time. 'When Hugh ditched her she was devastated...'

'Peter, no...' John tried to intervene.

'...She couldn't cope with his rejection. She blamed you. It's why she killed herself.'

Joanna opened the door to 12b and stepped inside. She found herself in a small lobby, tastefully decorated in cobalt blue. An antique coat stand was to the left of the door, hanging from it a Burberry mackintosh and a Hermes scarf. Expensive domesticity that did more than hint at a long-term commitment. The area was lit by a skylight that let in the sun, enhancing the blue of the walls, making them shimmer like water. There were three doors leading from the lobby. Joanna opened one and found herself in the kitchen. Smallbone, hand-painted units, German engineered appliances, marble worktops. Hugh had obviously spared no expense.

Despite the grandeur of the kitchen there was something wrong with it. For a moment she could not decide what it was, then she opened the cupboards. Every conceivable pot and pan,

casserole and roaster was there, stacked in neat, clean towers. Some of them still had the makers' labels stuck to them. She opened the refrigerator and apart from two bottles of tonic water it was empty. The eye-level cupboards were the same. There was not a scrap of food to be seen. The place was expensive but shallow. Designed for living without being a home.

She walked through to the living room. It was a large room with the floor laid to board, maple with exaggerated graining. The furniture was upholstered in white leather, and a wide-screened television dominated one corner of the room. Light came from a huge picture window at one end of the room, which gave a view along St John Street, to the Smithfield Arch and beyond to the rising stately dome of St Paul's Cathedral.

The atmosphere in the apartment was curiously flat. Joanna had no idea what she was expecting. Some clue, perhaps, to the personality of the woman who had stolen her husband, but in the two rooms she had been in there was nothing. They, for all their opulence, were bland, empty shells devoid of character. They had the same unlived-in feeling found when you visit show-houses on new estates. There was no evidence of the high passion that had caused Hugh to deceive her so cruelly.

If there were no clues here to the character of Rebecca Tanner, the bedroom painted an altogether more vivid picture. There were silk sheets on the unmade, circular bed, clothes littered the floor and hung from the backs of the two Regency chairs that stood sentinel either side of the door. The dressing table was cluttered. Pots of cream, tubes of foundation and bottles of nail polish, jostled for space on its crowded surface. Stuck to the mirror, surrounding the glass like a garland, were pictures of Hugh. Hugh relaxing in a pub garden, Hugh in his dinner jacket at a business function, Hugh dressed in sweater and slacks, ready for a game of golf, looking incredibly handsome.

Joanna pulled one away from the mirror to take a closer look at it and somewhere in the room something hissed. Startled, she dropped the picture to the floor and spun around, but the room was empty. There was a bottle of perfume on the dressing table. She opened it and sniffed. It was the same sickly smell of scent that had been haunting her for days.

Something caught her eye in the half-open wardrobe. She pulled the door wide and ran her hand over the soft, silky fur of a mink coat. She lifted the sleeve of the coat and touched it to her cheek, shivering as the feel of fur on her skin reminded her of something that had brushed across her face.

If she needed any more confirmation that Hugh had shared the flat with Rebecca then she found it hanging from the rail in the wardrobe. Two suits that could only be Hugh's, a casual jacket and several shirts, as well as three pairs of the tan slacks he favoured, hung in silent condemnation of their illicit affair. Clothes he never wore at home, bought exclusively for this life. She lifted the sleeve of one of the jackets and breathed in the smell. It was the perfume that was so familiar to her. She had never smelt it on Hugh. Not on his clothes, nor on his body. Washed clean before he came home, late to her, as though he could cleanse his guilt so easily. Or her anger.

'Oh, Hugh. You bastard,' she whispered, and closed the door of the wardrobe, when an awful childish giggle insinuated itself into the room. She froze where she stood, realising what she had anticipated. She was not alone.

She took another step towards the door, and something struck her in the middle of the back, knocking the wind out of her. Breathless she staggered forward to be met by a stinging blow that caught her across the cheek, and sent her reeling backwards.

The silence in the room was an almost tangible force, so complete it weighed down on her like earth upon a grave. With her hand pressed to her face to relieve the pain of the slap, she moved forward again and walked into an invisible cloud of perfume, so rich and dense that she immediately started gagging for air. The fumes were choking, making her eyes stream, blurring her vision.

A faint silky rustling sound broke the silence and she turned towards the bed. The sheets were filling out, rising and pulling as though someone had slid underneath them. She wiped the tears away from her eyes as the sheets started to undulate obscenely. Far from being one figure beneath the sheets it was obvious there were two. A faint moan swelled up to become a scream of ecstasy as the bed started to rock and shake in a steady pulsating rhythm. Gasps of delight, squeals of pleasure, echoed from the walls, and Joanna clamped her hands over her ears to try to shut them out. It was no use. Rebecca was not going to be denied her final performance, and Joanna was the unwilling audience. The figures under the sheets were moving with sensual precision, building slowly towards a conclusion that was inevitable.

Joanna started edging towards the door, and was inches away, when unseen hands gripped her shoulder and threw her to the floor. She crashed against the dressing table, sending bottles and jars tumbling. Her head hit one of the ornate rococo handles, and the sharp metal opened a gash on her forehead. Blood began to pour into her eyes and she pushed herself into a sitting position, wiping the blood away with the sleeve of her blouse.

On the bed the sheets were rising up, draped and creased over a lithe sensuous form, taking the shape of one person instead of two. Joanna could make out the swell of the breasts, the rounded shape of the head. It stood wavering in front of her, as suddenly sharp nailed fingers clutched her throat and dragged her towards the bed. She tried to scream but could not draw enough air into her lungs. Gradually she was pulled to within inches of the draped form, watching in horror as the sheet moulded itself into the perfect form of a woman. She finally screamed as the fingers released her throat and she found herself staring at a smooth silken face. The scream reverberated in her head, mingling with the throaty laughter coming from the shrouded figure.

Then Joanna became aware of something else in the room. Eddying all around her, displacing the cloying stench of perfume was the rich, pungent aroma of cigar smoke. The sheet bucked and twisted and fell back to the bed where it writhed and rippled, rising and falling in frantic motion as another figure took shape beneath it. Joanna looked on helplessly as the two figures struggled with each other, no longer in a passionate embrace. In one was strength with weakness, in the other desperation with courage. It was an erratic dance, not harmonised, not coherent. A low wail of despair began to rise up from the bed, a keening, unearthly screech that shattered the mirror of the dressing table, and made the entire room vibrate. Joanna sank to her knees, her senses battered into submission by the sound. Blood started to trickle from her ears and her head began to swim. The last thing she saw before she blacked out was the empty sheet fluttering down to the floor where it lay still. Joanna pitched forward in a dead faint as the shriek was cut off by a cold and final silence.

Someone else now owns the office in the Grays Inn Road. Joanna sold the agency a few days after the incident at the flat. Peter still works there, though John left immediately the sale went through, and started up on his own in a small room in Shaftsbury Avenue. Michelle married her actor fiancé and is now somewhere with him in central Africa, helping him stage Shakespearean drama's against a jungle backdrop.

With the money she made from the agency, and from the sale of the house, Joanna ended her brief career as an agent and went to live in Cornwall, where she now spends her time looking after three cats, two goats and a pig. When she has some spare time she writes the occasional romance story for women's magazines. It is a full life, but a fairly lonely one. She still misses Hugh enormously, and always will. There is a gaping, empty hole where once was the warmth of companionship and love. She misses Hugh, but will she ever forgive him?

As the mist draws in over the jetty, and over the estuary at the rear of the house, she often asks herself if forgiveness is possible. Always the answer is the same. No, probably not.