

The Ice Cream Seller

By Stephen Phillips

Chapter 1 – Croydon: November 1999

The house lights in the Ashcroft Theatre dimmed, cocooning each member of the audience in their personal envelope of darkness. Lucy Bowen wondered what on earth had made her come to a psychic reading. It was not as if she believed in such things, after all.

Well, to be honest with herself, she did know why she was there. She had not long ago broken up with her long-term boyfriend – was that the effect of the ‘seven-year-itch’ she wondered, or simply that she and Simon had grown apart – and her closest friend Karen had wanted to ‘take her out of herself’. Karen had planned a full evening during which she would be unable to think about him; drinks at a wine bar, the show and then supper at their favourite Indian restaurant, just round the corner from the Fairfield Halls complex in Croydon.

This really was not the sort of performance Lucy would normally go to. She was more attracted to bright and lively musicals; mainly modern ones, although she did have a soft spot for Gilbert and Sullivan, especially when the extra-lyricist had added something of topical relevance to the words of one of the comic songs. But living and working in Croydon meant there were not many of those playing nearby and she could not face the prospect of a train ride to Victoria Station followed by goodness knows how long through busy London traffic, to reach a suitable theatre. So when Karen had suggested a quick trip to a local theatre to see ‘Psychic Pete’ – a well-known television personality who had written several books on psychic phenomena – she couldn’t summon the energy to say no. But at least in the setting of this intimate theatre she could sink back into her comfortable seat and ruminate uninterrupted – whatever Karen had intended.

It was not just the breakup with Simon that had upset her. As Karen knew, Lucy had only recently started to recover from the shock of losing her mother to cancer and the absence of her long-term partner at such a time had been particularly hurtful. It seemed that he was incapable of providing the loving support that she needed at this point in her life. Was this part of what had driven him away, Lucy wondered; her apparent neediness at such a critical time? Losing her mother had felt like being cast adrift in an open boat, bounced around by a relentless series of increasingly insistent waves. She didn’t know what had driven Simon away. And right now, she still felt too battered to think straight about anything to do with her emotions.

Whether the death of Lucy’s mother was why Karen had chosen a psychic show, or it was just chance, Lucy faced the prospect of sitting through an hour and a half of the sort of

mumbo-jumbo that she could probably live without. But at least she could use the time to think about her life.

What Lucy had not allowed for was Karen having purchased seats at the front of the auditorium, just below the stage, 'so that they could see more easily' she had said. As Lucy looked surreptitiously behind her at the sea of faces there to witness a famous personality performing live, she feared there might be little chance of anonymity so close to the stage. It also didn't help that Karen had co-opted a group of their friends from work to join them on a 'girls' night out' and that they'd had several drinks at the wine bar before the performance; some were becoming quite boisterous, already drawing attention to themselves.

Gradually, almost imperceptibly at first, the dark platform area started to brighten; a spotlight focussing on a handsome man sitting completely still on a throne-like chair in the centre of the stage. He must have been there for some time, thought Lucy, since she had not noticed any movement on stage since their arrival – and the curtains had been open as far as she could recall. Perhaps this was part of the illusion he was about to perform for them – appearing as if a spectre himself. Lucy had never been to a psychic show before, so she had nothing to act as a reference point.

Psychic Pete sat still for so long that the audience started to rustle in their chairs, wondering if the show was ever going to start. Lucy took the opportunity to look more closely at him; evaluating what she saw. The slightly greying hair at his temples suggested he might be about ten years older than herself. His almost perfectly symmetrical features and pleasing eyes making him even better-looking in real life than on the television. Not that she had ever paid much attention to him, she told herself, but there had been a time a year or so earlier when he had been somewhat ubiquitous in the media. She couldn't recall why.

Then, he spoke; a mellifluous sound that was equally soothing and compelling. His words wafted across the expectant audience, challenging them to ask him questions, throwing out suggestions that might elicit a reaction from them. First one person, then another held their hands up for the microphone that would allow them to communicate with the psychic and, hopefully through him, either to contact someone in the 'afterlife', or find the answer to a question that had been troubling them.

Looking surreptitiously at the people around her, Lucy wondered what drew them to performances of this sort. They were probably far from gullible. In fact they looked like a cross section of any group you might find in a restaurant, library or shop. But perhaps they tended to be self-selecting, in that they had some sort of agenda for being there. In many cases, she suspected that it might have been the loss of a loved one and a desire to establish any kind of contact, in order to achieve closure. This had not really been her motive for coming, but she had to admit to herself that the possibility of a message from her mother had been at the back of her mind, when agreeing to Karen's suggestion.

Listening carefully to the proceedings, Lucy realised that in many cases, the ‘words from beyond the veil’ were predictably anodyne, with messages of love and well-being. Several people were apparently selected from the audience by Psychic Pete to receive more or less specific predictions. But what seemed to be happening, as far as Lucy could tell, was the psychic was throwing out vague statements in the hope that someone would react in a way which allowed him then to weave some sort of story round them.

Occasionally, however, there was something less easy to explain. One woman asked for the microphone and, in a broken voice which told of her extreme emotion, told Psychic Pete that she had lost a valuable coin which had belonged to her late husband. He would be upset if she was unable to find it, so could he help? Nobody in the audience seemed to question the implication that the dead man (or Psychic Pete) would know either way – such was apparently accepted by a communal suspension of disbelief. Pete took only a moment to assess the situation and the audience looked on in wonder as he guided her towards a zipped section of her handbag which she seldom used.

“Look there and you will find what you are liking for,” he said, winning a round of applause when he proved correct. Of course this could have been down to trickery, or the woman might have been a ‘plant’. But the sincerity with which she greeted the discovery suggested that there was more to it. Either Pete was good at reading body language and could tell that something was concealed in the bag – and her subconscious – or he had a genuine extra-sensory gift. There was no way Lucy could tell which was the case. But her interest was piqued.

Quite out of the blue, the psychic pointed to a man sitting a few rows behind Lucy and her friends. “Would that gentleman kindly answer his telephone before it disturbs everyone?” This caused a ripple of comment in the audience; nobody had heard a phone ring at all. The murmuring turned to a crescendo of applause as the mobile telephone actually rang a few seconds later and the man quickly answered it.

“Sorry,” he said to the people around him, red-faced as he rose to move out of the auditorium. His voice carried further than intended against the background noise so that everyone heard him add: “I need to get to Mayday Hospital as soon as possible. My wife has gone into labour.”

“Should have been New Labour,” shouted a wag in the audience, above the growing sound of approval at the accuracy of the prediction. Gentle laughter followed the husband’s hasty retreat from the theatre where he probably should not have been in the first place, given his wife’s condition.

Again, Lucy felt that this could all have been a ‘plant’. But the alacrity with which the man had reacted at least added some verisimilitude to the performance.

And so it went on for quite some time, and Lucy suddenly realised that she was actually enjoying the surprising variety of the evening. Even if she did not entirely believe what she

was seeing, it was vastly entertaining and she was able to see that – at the very least – many of those present were gaining solace from the messages of wellbeing and love they received from the ‘other side’.

“Why don’t you ask him about your father, Lucy?” prompted Karen, perhaps louder than she had intended. She knew everything about her best friend. “Your mother might tell you now,” she added, more quietly.

Being so close to the stage had its disadvantages, because Psychic Pete seemed suddenly to become aware of the attractive young red-headed woman sitting near the front. He did not, however, invite her to ask the question that seemed to be in her mind.

Instead he went suddenly quiet, sitting completely still for perhaps thirty seconds during which the audience started to rustle in their seats, wondering what had happened. Lucy looked at him and noticed his eyes had closed and he seemed to be listening to something. She wondered if he was angry at the disruption. After a moment he spoke.

“I want to speak with Lucia,” he said, looking directly towards her and uttering the words clearly, without needing to project his voice by artificial amplification. The acoustics in the theatre were good, but his voice seemed to Lucy to be capable of carrying as far as he wanted it to – wherever he was.

“That must be you, Lucy,” whispered Karen loudly, putting her friend on the spot. “Raise your hand so he can see you.”

The idea appalled Lucy, not just because she was dubious about whether she could be the person he was asking for, but also because his words had created a strong sense of foreboding in her; she felt a chill in the pit of her stomach. Could it possibly be that her mother wanted to contact her, after all? Perhaps it was to tell her who her father had been, as Karen had suggested; something Sandra Bowen had steadfastly refused to say right up until her death some months earlier in a hospice at the young age of 57, despite their having been very close. They had had to be, because there was nobody else in their lives until Simon had come on the scene; and mother never really liked him. Lucy had been deeply hurt by her mother’s unwillingness to give her any information on the subject of her paternity, but never let it show. Perhaps mother had somehow perceived her feelings and now wanted to make amends.

Looking round to ensure that nobody else had put up their hands to identify themselves as the person Psychic Pete was calling for, Lucy half rose from her seat and waved tentatively towards the stage. There was a ripple of applause around her, largely led by the group of girls she was with, encouraging her to participate in whatever was about to happen.

“Are you Lucia?” asked the psychic in his clear, resonant voice, from his throne-like position; he had not stood during the entire performance, Lucy suddenly realised.

“My name is Lucy,” she said. “I don’t know if it is me you want, but nobody else seems to be volunteering. So here I am.”

Pete smiled at her, recognising she was not really attuned to this type of event and that she probably only spoke at all to save him the embarrassment of getting no response. He decided that he liked this slender young woman.

“I have a special message for you,” he said. “But not one suitable for everyone to hear; at least not now. Please come and see me after the reading is finished.”

Lucy sank back into her comfortable seat, red-faced from this brief exposure to the rest of the audience and wondering what on earth this message might be, why it could not be shared generally, as all the others had. And why the name he had called out was not quite right.

This brief exchange effectively brought the psychic reading to an end, as Psychic Pete slumped back into his chair and the lights dimmed on stage. The curtains finally closed and the house lights rose again. Lucy had to admit the evening had, after all, been entertaining. But she also decided the invitation to speak with the psychic later was probably a mistake. In any case, Pete had apparently decided against offering her any messages, so perhaps she was the wrong person after all, and he had not wanted to admit to the fact – perhaps to embarrass her for having volunteered incorrectly. No, she decided, he would not want to see her after all. As Lucy followed Karen and the girls to collect their coats from the cloakroom, nobody mentioned the final exchange involving their friend; perhaps they were planning to make jokes about it at the Indian Restaurant. Making their way out through the broad, stone floored entrance hall, Lucy too had almost forgotten the incident. So when one of the ushers approached them in the foyer, she wondered why; had they left something in their seats, perhaps? It was the sort of thing some of her friends were given to do.

“Mr Walters has asked if you could spare him a moment, please, miss?” the usher said quietly to Lucy. It took a moment for her to realise that ‘Mr Walters’ was the psychic, rather than a manager at the venue as was her initial fear on being approached. Not that Lucy felt she had done anything to attract disapprobation from those who ran the theatre, but she was the type of person who frequently had the sense of having ‘done something wrong’ even when this was patently untrue. She was therefore pleasantly surprised to learn that it was, after all, the performer who wanted to see her.

She looked hastily at Karen, reading her quizzical smile as an indication that she should take the opportunity to meet an interesting and handsome man. The colour rose in her cheeks and, quickly saying she would catch up with them at the Indian Restaurant later, she followed the usher along the corridor that ran between the Ashcroft Theatre and the main concert hall towards the dressing rooms. Lucy wondered why she had accepted this unusual invitation. She was, after all, entering a domain with which she was unfamiliar. Should anything go wrong – you heard such strange stories these days – she was not at all sure she could find her way out quickly enough to escape. But the performer had not looked like a potential rapist

and at least one of the attendants knew that she had been invited backstage, as well as Karen and the girls.

The usher knocked on the dressing room door and showed Lucy in without waiting for a reply. She entered to find Psychic Pete in a state of mild disarray. It was not that he was unclothed, even partly so; but the room was strewn with articles of clothing, half-drunk cups of a beverage (probably once tea or coffee), even a half-eaten sandwich. It was a mess – in complete contrast to his smart appearance on stage. The psychic recognised her surprise, possibly even distaste, from Lucy's raised eyebrow and almost imperceptible inhalation.

"Sorry to be a bit untidy, Miss ..." he realised that he did not know anything about her other than her first name. And he had that wrong. "Um, Lucia. I tend to unwind after a show by dressing in casual clothes and having a drink. Would you like some sherry?" That really surprised her; she somehow saw him as a whisky drinker. And as a restaurateur, she was seldom wrong about people's drinks preferences.

"A sherry would be very nice, thank you," she replied, knowing that this would sit better with the wine that she had been drinking earlier – and would probably return to later – than a grain based drink. "And my name is Lucy Bowen, not Lucia." As she accepted the proffered chair, Lucy inspected him more closely than she had been able to while he was on stage. She realised that the developing lines on his face made him really very good looking, in a slightly lived-in sort of way.

"Oh, yes, I am sorry," he replied, ignoring her scrutiny of him, to which he was accustomed. "You said that earlier. I'm sorry to ask you to come and see me like this, but I simply cannot get a particular image out of my head; I have not been able to do so all evening, in fact. The impression started even before I spotted you in the audience." Lucy looked into his eyes, hoping for some indication of when he had first noticed her, but he continued with his story without noticing the slight stiffening in her body which indicated her growing interest in him; sorry, in what he was saying, she mentally corrected herself.

"I don't really know where to start, but I must tell you that you have lived before; so much came over to me very clearly when you stood up in the stalls; I knew immediately that you were the person I was looking for. In a previous life, you were an ice cream seller; I think it must have been in Victorian England. When I looked at you in the audience, the strange feeling which had started earlier crystallised and I saw a young woman, lying on the ground in the arms of a young man." Lucy looked at him, suddenly round eyed in astonishment.

"You must realise that most of my performance is an act," he continued, choosing not to be distracted by her visible reaction, keen rather to explain himself. "It is a form of entertainment; one that is based on my ability to 'read' people from their body language and to anticipate what they want to hear. Occasionally, however, I am overcome by a sense of knowledge that is completely beyond even my ability to understand. I experienced such a

feeling this evening. Because of the direction of the lighting, my face is largely in shadow, so that I can see the audience. When I noticed you, a few moments before I spoke of it, the name Lucia sprang into my mind and I saw the girl again. She had been killed in the most horrible way. The feeling actually started earlier this evening, even before I saw you; but your face brought the image more sharply into focus.” Lucy didn’t quite know what to say. As a chat-up line, this was certainly original, she decided, keeping her face as impassive as she could.

“I don’t know if you believe in reincarnation,” continued Pete, unaware of her thoughts, “but all the evidence I have seen during my career suggests that people – well, at least some people – are born time and again, throughout history. Of course since there are so many more people alive today than throughout the whole of history to date, some souls must be ‘new’. But others are already caught in an eternal merry-go-round of birth, death and rebirth.”

“I find that difficult to accept,” replied Lucy, allowing herself a sip of the remarkably good Fino Sherry the psychic had poured for her to gain time to marshal her thoughts. “I cannot believe there is anything beyond the grave – certainly not ‘life’ giving us a second chance.”

“An interesting choice of words,” he said, smiling at her. “It suggests there are already things in your life you regret; and which you might like the opportunity to put right. How old are you, may I ask?”

“That is very forward of you,” she countered, but not actually resenting the question. Glancing surreptitiously in the mirror behind Psychic Pete’s head, she found time to hope she was still attractive to men – despite having been out of the ‘dating game’ to which she would soon have to return, for a long time. She did not realise that it was her pleasing features – particularly the petite nose and elfin figure – which had first drawn Pete’s eye to her. “I am thirty four. Which I suppose is better than thirty five,” she added, in a self-deprecating way.

“Don’t knock it,” he replied. “Some of us are seeing that age fast disappearing in the rear-view mirror of life. I am over forty,” he added for some reason she could not immediately discern.

“I can’t prove the fact that we have all lived before,” he continued his theme, “and will probably do so again, to the satisfaction of anyone. In fact I frequently have difficulty in really believing it myself. But there are such strong indicators in its favour, discounting the possibility is equally challenging for me.”

He paused for a few moments, sipping from his glass, which Lucy noticed he had not refreshed when he had filled one for her. Was he abstemious, she wondered? Or is mine drugged, she suddenly thought, with rising panic. Feeling no ill effects from the fortified wine, she took the opportunity of his silence to look round the room in greater detail. It was a normal dressing room, she imagined – not having any personal experience of such places – with a large mirror with strip lights round it to facilitate putting on makeup. Had he been wearing makeup she wondered, smiling internally at the thought that such a high-profile man might have to resort to it in order to avoid looking ‘washed-out’ on stage. Strong lighting can

be so unforgiving, as any girl knows. There were few humanising touches in the room, nothing that reflected his personality. But given that he would probably only be there for one night – or at the most two – this was hardly surprising. Only his overcoat, hanging neatly behind the door, gave any semblance of order, of his really *occupying* the room. Lucy wondered if this itinerate life suited him; whether he lived far away and, if so, whether he stayed in a hotel while on tour, or commuted home. It depended where he was, she supposed, wondering why she was even asking herself such questions about a man she had only just met.

“I live quite close to here; Purley in fact,” he said, as if reading her thoughts. “My parents have a biggish house there. It pleases my mother to have me around – keeping an eye on me, she says – but I know she is worried because my father is getting older and rather forgetful. I think it helps her to have me on tap. They have even given me space for an office and consulting room.”

“You make it sound as if you are a doctor or psychiatrist,” replied Lucy, not knowing why he was telling her this.

“An interesting analogy, Lucy ... um, if I might call you that?” he added quickly. “What I sometimes do is try to help people privately find answers to the questions which may arise out of public performances. Of course, as you probably realise, evenings like this are all rather superficial; they have to be given their impersonal nature. But people also consult me directly if there is something they need to know about themselves or their families. I am very honest and always tell them that I cannot help. My services are not exactly cheap, and I would not want anyone to feel cheated.”

Here comes the sales pitch, Lucy told herself, suddenly unsure of her position in his room. No wonder he is softening me up with a drink.

“What I want to say now might surprise you,” he said, “but I would very much like to practice past life regression on you. I was deeply upset by what I saw earlier. The attack on that young woman was particularly violent and I had the intense feeling the circumstances of her killing were never completely resolved – or avenged. She needs to know who killed her; I have no idea why, but that is what I think.”

“What is past life regression?” she asked, while adding to herself: *and what will it cost?*

“I would hypnotise you and enable you to go back into your past life – her life – in order to relive the experiences that led up to the murder,” he replied. “Some of it will not be very pleasant, I imagine, given what I saw, but I can quickly bring you out of the trance if you become distressed. Oh, and I should add that my mother will be present as a chaperone. She is a bit deaf, but having her there prevents any suspicion of malpractice while clients are hypnotised. And this is for my benefit. I will not be charging anything at all, however long it takes to get to the truth. Why don’t you think about it and get back to me when you are ready?” he added, giving her his card.

He offered to drive her to meet her friends, but the restaurant was only a short distance so she said she would walk. In Croydon nothing of interest is too far away; although it is not a small town, the amusements are largely concentrated in the town centre. Lucy's favourite Indian was just on the corner of Park Street. Pete courteously insisted on accompanying her to the restaurant to make sure she was safe. It was after ten, and some parts of the town were not quite as safe for a young woman alone at that time of night as one might wish.

Lucy walked into the restaurant giving very little attention to her conversation with this somewhat enigmatic man. Pete really was attractive, she admitted to herself. But so had Simon been, and look what a mistake that had eventually turned out to be. It was not just that he had failed her when she most needed his support, but that she never really knew where he was – or where their relationship was going for that matter. In the end, she accepted it had been going nowhere; they had been coasting in a meaningless way for more than a year. Had he found another woman? To be honest, she now neither knew nor cared. But she was not about to leap into another relationship on the rebound, so she put the psychic to the back of her mind, once she had satisfied her friends with what had occurred during this 'tryst', as Karen put it.

A week elapsed before Lucy made contact with Psychic Pete. She had put his card in her handbag without thinking; and given it very little thought since then. She only came across it again when she was looking for her purse to put some change into the till of the small but smart restaurant she managed. Looking round the main dining area, which she had been responsible for redecorating the previous year, she felt it was a pleasant establishment. The walls were a relaxing shade of dark green, below an off-white ceiling. The suspended light fittings could easily be dimmed from 'bright lunchtime', to 'convivial evening', and the tables just far enough apart not to feel cramped. She admitted to herself that the furniture was a little basic, but then their prices were generally aimed at the small-business community so it seemed appropriate. Situated in South Croydon, the restaurant was close enough to the main town to attract a good clientele for casual luncheons, whilst a quiet room at the back allowed larger groups to hold meetings or private luncheons. Most bills were settled by credit card or on account, but the occasional drop-in customer would pay in cash, so having change in the till was essential.

Psychic Pete's card gave Lucy something of a jolt, because she had just been checking stock levels and found that they were almost out of ice cream. Seeing it brought to mind Pete's comment about the death of a young Victorian ice cream seller. In her customary decisive way, she immediately resolved to give him a call and make an appointment. After all, what did she have to lose?

“Hello, Mr Walters,” she said into the receiver, looking in the mirror while she spoke so she could watch her own reaction, as she wondered how her call would be received, “this is Lucy Bowen. I don’t know if you remember. We met ...

“Of course, I remember you,” he interrupted her, with a smile he hoped she could not hear. “In fact I was just thinking that I had not heard from you. Mother gave me some ice cream after lunch and it brought you to mind,” he explained. No need to tell her that she had seldom been out of his thoughts since they had first met. “I do hope you have decided to come and see me so that we can start looking into your pasts.” Lucy noticed the plural, but decided that this was not the time to discuss it. This was, after all, company time and she should not really be using the telephone at all. She worked out when she would next be ‘off shift’ for a few hours and made an appointment to see him.

A few days later, on a cold morning at the start of December – not long to go until the end of the century, indeed, of the millennia – Lucy found herself walking up the frosty pavement on the hill from the Purley Railway Station towards the address Pete had given her. She did not have a car of her own, although she had driven Simon’s on occasions in the past – usually so he could drink while they were out. She found it easier – and cheaper – to commute by train from Selhurst, where she lived, to her work in South Croydon. It was also probably quicker than fighting her way through the Croydon traffic, anyway. It was therefore a simple step for her to catch the train to Purley. It also meant that she could easily get back to South Croydon for work, later, and then on home at the end of her shift. Which would be late that evening; there was a special party on for a local business to promote itself, which is how she had managed to justify a late start.

Feeling unaccountably nervous, she walked up to the front door of an imposing, double-fronted, three-storied Victorian house. It had a semi-basement, so she had to mount a half flight of stone steps in order to reach the rather grand entrance portico. Pete must have been watching out for her, because he already had the heavy, black painted front door swinging open before she could ring the bell.

“The bell does not work very well,” he apologised, “and as I work in one of the front rooms, I tend to keep an eye out if I am expecting anyone. I don’t have a secretary or anything – it would be such a waste of time, given the nature of my work.” It was almost as if he was talking nervously in order to fill a vacuum, she felt. But he is on his own ground in every sense of the word, so why should that be, she wondered? In truth, this was actually one of the few occasions on which Pete had had any visitors to the house. Describing his office as a consulting room had been something of an exaggeration. He normally performed on stage and only met individuals in exceptional circumstances. This case, he felt, justified the additional effort of opening his home to a client. Or was it rather that Lucy was ‘his type’ of

woman; he could see from the way her eyes seemed to penetrate his own, reaching into his very soul, every time she looked at him that she was intelligent. And being a redhead helped. She was far closer to his 'ideal' than the series of vacuous blondes to whom his mother kept introducing him; in the hope of finally securing some grandchildren, he assumed. Her strong but delicate features made her someone he would not mind getting to know better. But this was a professional meeting and he needed to focus on the business in hand.

Slightly intimidated by the surprisingly grand black-and-white tiled entrance hall though which she was conveyed, Lucy said little more than to offer a polite greeting. She would not settle until the mother appeared to act as chaperone; and that did not seem to be happening any time soon, she thought, as she was ushered into the office. The room Pete used as an office was apparently intended to double up as a sitting room, because there were comfortable chairs as well as a chaise longue, in addition to a desk and chairs in the bay window. A computer sat on the desk with its large upright 'tower' taking up rather more space than was helpful, leaving little room for much more than a keyboard and the heavy screen.

"Why not put the computer tower on the floor, to make more room on the desk?" were almost the first words Lucy had spoken since arriving. "And surely you could have one of the new flat screens, too? That would make it far easier for you to work."

Pete smiled at her and thought for a moment. Was she taking an interest in him – or was it simply her well-organised mind encouraging her to seek order in her surroundings? Speaking with her for a short while the previous week, he had quickly formed a good opinion of her intellect, although he could not have given a logical reason for the thought. Now, the way her lively eyes seemed to dart round his office, evaluating everything she saw, seemed to indicate an active brain which would not take things on trust, but would require proof.

"Actually, I do most of my work sitting in the comfortable chairs. I only use the desk for checking e-mails and my diary," he replied. "Would you like to take a seat so that we can talk?" Well there was little point in being there if she was not to sit down, but Lucy was still concerned that the promised mother had not shown up. She was not a particularly nervous person; indeed, she was confident that she could take care of herself in most circumstances. But on this occasion, she was sitting in a house with a well-built strange man about whom she knew relatively little – other than his media reputation. What is more, nobody knew she was there. She had made a point of *not* telling Karen and the others too much about her interview with Pete, when she had reached the restaurant that night. Instead she had pretended that he simply wanted to thank her for offering to participate in the evening and to see if he could take her out for a meal. She had not, at that stage, mentioned his assertion about a murdered girl, thinking they would consider her a convert to his form of 'mysticism'. Nor had she told Karen she was going to see him today. She was completely at the mercy of this man, except for any defence she could provide for herself. And what if there was a second man in the house, waiting to connive at who knows what being done to her?

The door from the spacious, oak-panelled hall suddenly swung silently open – Pete had not actually closed it when entered, but it was certainly ajar – something Lucy only noticed out of the corner of her eye. Here it comes, she thought to herself, while forcing herself not to look in that direction, for fear of appearing weak.

“Am I too early?” came a voice from the opening, its owner hovering hesitantly, as if slightly in awe of the psychic.

“Not at all, mother,” he replied, instinctively standing up as she entered. “May I introduce Miss Bowen to you? Lucy, this is my mother, Mrs Walters.”

“How do you do, my dear?” said the older woman, addressing Lucy directly, who had turned to see who had entered the room as soon as the voice spoke. The woman, smartly dressed in a twin set and skirt (no pearls, Lucy noticed) looked as if she was somewhere in her seventies with white hair and sunken cheeks within a strong bone structure. She must once have been very attractive, thought Lucy, relaxing more completely than she had thought possible. It made her smile involuntarily. “Oh, what a pretty smile you have,” Mrs Walters added, hoping that her son might find this one more interesting than the last girl to whom she had introduced him. Like most mothers, she was concerned about what would happen to him after she was gone. It was not that he was incapable of looking after himself physically – there would be plenty of money when she and father died to allow him to employ people to do the cooking and cleaning – it was more a matter whether he would have any emotional support, when they were no longer there to provide it. And for a sensitive boy (as many mothers also think of their sons) that would be essential.

Normally, Lucy was embarrassed by compliments. Well, she would be had she been in the habit of receiving many. The problem with Simon was that he had seldom even looked at her after their first few years together and certainly never commented favourably. Nor had any of the friends with whom he had surrounded himself – and her. But this tall, slim woman seemed to have a knack of setting one at ease, and her age made the comment somehow maternal, and therefore acceptable.

“I am pleased to meet you, Mrs Walters,” replied Lucy, smiling again. “You have a lovely home here,” she added, taking in the room with a sweeping gesture of her eyes.

“Thank you, my dear,” the older woman said, making Lucy wonder whether she had a problem remembering names. “I try to keep it nice for Peter to bring his friends here. Not that he does so very often. You must be special,” she added her eyes dancing with a surprisingly impish expression, for a woman of her age. Or perhaps it was not really surprising; we tend to make assumptions about the elderly that are seldom borne out in practice. And this woman seemed to have seen much of life; had probably served in the forces during the war.

“Please don’t embarrass my client, mother,” said Peter reverting to the persona attached to the name by which she had always called him, even as a child. He chose his words deliberately to re-establish the correct tone for the meeting and remind her that she was there

for a specific purpose. It was not just to make Lucy feel safer that she was present. His mother seemed to have a special gift for reading people and knowing when they were genuine and when they were being insincere. This would be important to Peter when he hypnotised Lucy; he needed to be sure that she was fully 'under' and not simply humouring him. Not that there was any reason to think that she would do so – she had no reason to act unnaturally. After all, it was he who had called for the session, rather than Lucy, so she would gain no benefit from pretending to be hypnotised and then making up stories.

Lucy turned her most devastating smile on Peter and admonished him for speaking in such a way to his mother.

“I am not in the least embarrassed by Mrs Walters, Peter,” she used his full name for emphasis, to reinforce her amity with his mother. “Shall we get on? I only have a few hours before I am due at work.”

Mrs Walters moved gracefully across the spacious room and sat on an upright dining chair standing close to the corner of the room diagonally opposite the doorway. It was typical of a woman of her generation that she should prefer to sit upright, rather than to relax – or slouch as she would have put it – in a more comfortable armchair. At least when they had visitors.

Peter sat Lucy down on the *chaise longue*, with her back to the corner position taken by his mother, and himself took the nearest chair to her after drawing the curtains slightly, to darken the room. It was north facing and as the sun was covered by clouds there was no need to do more, to create a relaxed atmosphere.

“What I am going to do first,” he explained in his normal voice, “is help you to relax physically and then clear your mind. After that, I will put you into an hypnotic state. To achieve this, you need do nothing other than to place yourself in my hands and trust me not to harm you. If I did, I suspect mother would come over and give me a thick ear,” he added, to the accompaniment of a disapproving noise from the older woman indicating he had better not try!

“Just as long as you don’t put any post-hypnotic suggestions into my mind,” Lucy joked.

“Actually,” replied Peter, “while that is perfectly possible, it would not make you do anything dangerous or even very much out of character. Stories about people being made to run around and cluck like chickens after being hypnotised may have some truth in them, but those involved were probably people who might do so of their own volition, for fun. In any case, I won’t be doing anything untoward to you,” he added, thinking to himself that there might be one or two things he would like to do with (rather than to) this young woman. But not in front of his mother. He moved some cushions so she was comfortable, being very careful not to touch her in any way, and then told her to lie back and relax.

“Now, if you are completely comfortable, I would like you to focus on the sound of my voice,” he said in a soft, gentle tone which made Lucy think of waves on a beach. “Please

relax and forget where you are. There is nothing in the world for you to listen to other than my voice. Don't try to focus on anything at all, not even your own memories, because we are going beyond your own childhood. We are going to find Lucia in your subconscious mind," he added.

"Now I will start counting backwards from ten and by the time I reach one, you will be completely relaxed and able to hear me and answer my questions. Ten ... nine ... eight ... seven ... six ... five ... four ..."

Chapter 2 – Croydon: Spring 1865

Lucia's brown eyes carefully scanned the faces of the people milling around her small corner of the fairground, hoping that some of them would come and buy her ice creams. If she failed to sell everything Uncle Giuseppe had made, he would be angry. And she knew from harsh experience the nature his punishment for her failure would be likely to take; a stormy face at best, harsher treatment at worst. It wouldn't be the first time. After all, he was always telling her that such a 'pretty face as hers' should easily be able to attract customers. If she failed, she wasn't trying hard enough and must be chastised. There were all sorts of people at the fair: fine ladies parading with top-hatted gentlemen at a sedate pace, the women wearing the crisply laundered morning dresses which she knew they would go home at lunchtime and change; shop assistants who had managed to get a little time off work were walking briskly with their sweethearts, dressed in their Sunday best – even though this was a Tuesday – eager to catch a sight of everything before having to scurry back to work. And as for the rest, Lucia noticed with disgust that you could still see on their faces the grime in which most of the manual labouring classes existed, despite their endeavours to wash it off in order to attend the event. At least she hoped they had washed, the smell might otherwise have been far worse! And the fair visiting town was still an 'event' for a population whose lives normally consisted of five and a half days working hard for inadequate pay, then half a day off, followed by virtually obligatory attendance at church on the seventh.

Lucia didn't really like the Croydon Fair. She was not sure why, but it sent a shiver down her slender back every time Uncle Giuseppe took them there. Perhaps it was because, with its densely populated streets and tall buildings, this was one of the larger towns they visited on their annual progression round the country; it seemed so impersonal to her. But her uncle insisted that they should go every year; and since her mother and father had died over a decade earlier, when she had been about four years old – she was not exactly sure of her age – Lucia had had no alternative but to do whatever he said. It was either that, or making a living on the streets, selling herself to the men who already looked at her as if she was a delicacy on a plate they would like to devour before moving swiftly on. She would not even have been entitled to any parish relief under the poor laws; having been brought to England by her parents as a baby meant that she had no 'native' town or village in which to claim assistance. The family had come over as part of the mass immigration of more than 4,000 people from the Italian peninsula, seeking a better life. Like many Neapolitans, her father had carried on the family tradition of ice cream making and gone into business with his brother. When he and his wife died in one of the many cholera outbreaks to hit London during the 1850s – two of the thousands of people to die from vomit- and diarrhoea-induced dehydration in the span of only twenty four months – Giuseppe had quickly taken over sole control of the business; and with it, perhaps less enthusiastically, responsibility for his niece.

But he had at least provided her with a home, whatever the cost to her frail body. At least her mind remained her own.

The girl could hardly remember her father at all, and her mother was little more than the memory of a pleasant smell. But she knew she had hated Uncle Giuseppe from a very early age. It was not that he was unusually cruel to her – the beatings and other punishments she received were no more severe than those given to other children she knew. But the barely suppressed smile on his face while chastising her, suggested he actually enjoyed hurting her; while the strangely distant look in his eyes as he forced her to ‘be nice’ to him afterwards – to make up for her alleged misbehaviour, he said – terrified and revolted her. As Lucia grew older and formed a friendship with Pietro, a boy some years older than her and another of Giuseppe’s adoptees, she began to realise that there was something fundamentally wrong with what the old man demanded of her. Pietro was kind to her and never hurt her. She supposed that she loved him, but was not really sure what that meant. Certainly his gentle ways and pleasing smile made her feel safe when they were alone together. But was she simply clinging to the only person who did not make her feel afraid, or was there more to it? Perhaps time would tell.

Frantic to sell her stock of ice cream, Lucia started to walk about in front of the stall, hoping that the sight of a bright-eyed young woman in a newly pressed dress that rode just above the ankle would catch the eye of some of the gentlemen, so that they would buy ices for their ladies. Her skirt was not *deliberately* kept short, showing the bottom of her leg – something that was no longer acceptable in polite society – it was simply that Uncle Giuseppe was too mean, or too canny, to replace it for her as she had grown to her current height of five foot two inches. Keeping it clean and smart was a challenge, but the effort of doing so made her feel better than the other showgirls, in their generally grubby skirts and blouses. And their poorly washed hair, even faces, which made her shudder internally.

Lucia caught a gentleman’s eye and forced a smile.

“An ice cream for your lady, sir?” she asked hopefully, thrusting a glass ice cream holder towards the finely dressed, but rather vapid-looking, woman accompanying him in the hope she might take pity on the girl and ask for one to be bought for her. In this case, she was lucky and the man asked for two penny licks.

“After all, my dear,” he said to the lady, his imperious look around taking in all the bustle, “who knows how long we will have the fair to enjoy. I understand that the burghers are talking about closing it down for being too riotous. In any case, there will be little room to hold it in future, if the railway company gets its way. They want to use the space for a new station, closer to the main commercial centre of town.”

“Riotous, Mr Brown?” she retorted, her hand to her ill-covered bosom in mock horror at his first words – railway companies were of no interest to her. “What do you mean by bringing a respectable lady to a place like this ...” The remainder of their conversation was

lost to Lucia as they strode away, having quickly enjoyed the meagre quantity of ice cream provided, before returning the receptacles to her. But she could see the woman was by no means displeased by his attentions.

Perhaps the woman was right, mused Lucia while she sought out more customers. Respectable ladies did not go to fairs – or at least, not as much as they once did, by all accounts. Something seemed to be changing in English society and, according to her uncle, it had much to do with the Queen, a woman not so long ago bereaved by the death of her much loved Prince Albert. During the intervening four years, some of the joy seemed to have gone out of the upper classes and this was beginning to permeate down to the middle classes, who were ever eager to emulate their betters. Lucia hoped this attitude would not eventually reach the working classes, because they were usually her best customers. Their obvious delight at spending their hard-earned pennies on the miniscule but tasty and exotic portions of ice cream they were given always gladdened her heart. It was something she could offer people of her own class normally only available to their betters. Lucia was always careful to speak with an Italian accent – but clearly enough to avoid any misunderstandings over price – so the small element of mystery might be preserved. Unsurprisingly, she was always more successful selling to young men than anyone else.

While she was engaged in thinking about the state of the world, such as she knew it, Pietro crept up behind her and gave her waist a gentle squeeze. He did not want to cause her to drop the glass penny lick receptacle she was holding, or she would be made to pay for it later by Giuseppe. He never used the honorific ‘Uncle’, even though the older man constantly demanded it of him – to show that they were ‘all one family’. That Giuseppe had taken Pietro in at all was amazing, given his penny-pinching and highly unpleasant personality. Pietro was not related to them, but was a boy Giuseppe had encountered some years earlier, shortly after he had taken on responsibility for Lucia. Pietro being a little older than his niece may have influenced his decision unofficially to adopt this son of another couple who had died in the epidemic which had killed his brother and sister-in-law. He would not only be a companion for the girl, but also help to keep an eye on her, while Giuseppe was busy with his drinking and women.

“A penny for your thoughts,” he said in a mock gruff voice trying to imitate Giuseppe.

“That had better be you, Pietro,” she said, without looking round, “or I will scream the place down.” He was a lad of sixteen or so summers, with strong hands which never pressed to hard – or inappropriately – with a pleasing face. His smile was shy, but engaging; at least, to her.

“How did you know it was not your uncle?” he asked, knowing the answer; Giuseppe wouldn’t have been so gentle. Or as careful where he put his hands. Pietro was already in love with Lucia, but recognised that she was probably too young to make a similar

commitment. He was also aware of the physical demands placed on her by the older man and wanted to distance himself from them.

“Have we sold much?” he asked, knowing he should have been there to help, but that she usually sold more when he was absent.

“Not enough to satisfy uncle,” she replied. “Where is he, making more ice cream?”

“You must be joking,” replied Pietro. “I watched him stagger to the Wig and Pen in Katherine Street. I wish the building would fall down on his rotten head, then we could run the business ourselves.” His most secret desire was to have Lucia all to himself. He sometimes wondered whether this made him any better than Giuseppe, or if his regard for her was of a purer form and therefore more deserving of success. After all, he did not want to possess her but to share his life with her. Well, if he was honest with himself, he did want her in a physical way, but that was only part of his desires; he wanted to protect and provide for her even more than to cure the ache in his body which only being with her would be able to assuage.

“Neither of us knows the secret recipe he stole from my father, when he died,” she reminded the boy for the umpteenth time. It was a shared dream of theirs, to be able to have their own business someday. For Lucia, it may have been little more than a desire to get away from her uncle; for Pietro, it was more a matter of settling down with the girl he wanted to spend the rest of his life with. “If only we could find out what special ingredients he adds to the cream to give it such a wonderful taste,” she continued.

“He must have it written down somewhere,” said Pietro. “I have seen him looking at a paper secretively when making a new supply. It is as if he cannot remember the right proportions to use and has to remind himself.”

“More likely it is a magic spell that he has to cast on the ingredients to ward off the evil influence of his own involvement in its manufacture,” she replied and they both laughed.

“No wonder we never sell enough ice cream to make a living,” boomed a man’s deep voice behind them, causing them to spring apart as if they had been doing something illicit. “We cannot clear all this stock if you two are always conniving together behind my back, while it goes off. Get back to work both of you. We are not going home until you have sold everything.”

Home, at this time, was the most miserable inn that Croydon had to offer. Even that was a concession because, despite the sunshine, it was still too cold after a harsh winter to camp as they usually did; the cramped wooden and canvass-covered wagon in which Giuseppe made the ice cream serving also as their living and sleeping quarters. The fact of having to pay for their accommodation was another reason for Giuseppe’s foul temper, although truth to tell, he required little provocation. It would be nice, thought Lucia, if his personality was the result of years of hard work, having to bring up his brother’s child without the support of a woman.

But in reality, she knew, he was only alone because no woman would have him, for his rough ways and reported ferocity on the few occasions when he was able to entice a woman into his bed. Only the most experienced prostitutes would have any congress with him, these days. He had always been a thoroughly unpleasant man and his sister-in-law had been terrified of him when she was alive, according to the few people Lucia had ever met who had known her mother. Even her father had seldom, apparently, challenged him on his behaviour towards women. That Giuseppe had brought up Lucia after her death would have filled her mother with horror. But she would also have felt pride at seeing how well the girl was turning out, despite the malevolent influence of this man. Lucia was an open and honest girl who disliked disobeying her uncle not because she feared him – although there was an element of that – but because it was in her nature to try and accommodate people. Pleasing her uncle was a matter of conscience for her, however harshly he might treat her.

“I wish you would let me help making the ice cream, sometimes, uncle,” said Lucia. “After all it was my father’s recipe ...” she was unable to continue her sentence, as Giuseppe grabbed her roughly by the throat with one of his ham-sized fists and snarled at her, waving the other in front of her nose. She hated the feel of his breath on her face, but tried to conceal her repugnance to avoid making matters worse.

“It was *my* family’s recipe, you little guttersnipe,” he almost spat into her mouth, “and don’t you ever forget it. I clothe and feed you out of the goodness of my heart. If you don’t do as I say, you will be cast out on the street, to earn your living like the other motherless strumpets. And as for you, boy,” he turned his ill-temper towards Pietro, who refused to cower, “you can forget any ideas you might have about marrying her. She will make a fine prize for anyone who can pay me a suitable price for her virginity. And it won’t be you.” With that he strode off, with only a backwards injunction that they must sell all the ice cream before the end of the day.

Smiling secretly to himself, Pietro was unaccountably heartened by the exchange. While he had never made a secret of his regard for Lucia, he had equally never declared himself to her as a potential suitor. That Giuseppe had felt the need openly to reject him in such a capacity meant his would-be sweetheart could no longer be in any doubt as to his intentions. If she was not interested in him, she would certainly tell him so and he could reply that it was only Giuseppe, speaking in his cups; if she *was* interested, his life would be complete. Almost. But what really pleased him was the assertion that she was still a virgin. Pietro had always assumed that Giuseppe’s attentions to his niece had involved forcing her to share his bed. This, it now appeared, was not the case. His relief must have shown on his round, soft face, which was something of an open book to Lucia; she already knew how he felt about her – but was not quite sure how much she reciprocated his feelings.

“I know you think my uncle has been abusing me,” she said to him, more gently than she had ever spoken to him before. “And I know that you hate yourself as much as him, for not being able to prevent it from happening. But you should know that whatever he has forced

me to do – and some of those things are too horrible to describe to you – I can still look forward to giving myself to the man I marry, for the first time. Don't look so glum," she added as his face fell a little. "I didn't say that it couldn't be you. Nor am I saying that it will be. Yet."

Later in the afternoon, just as Lucia was starting to feel they might achieve their aim of selling everything before the sun finally lost what little warmth it offered late in the day and the fair closed, she happened to overhear a conversation that was clearly not intended for general consumption. Having found a bush behind which she could relieve herself, she was squatting down and could not be seen. So when a pair of smartly dressed gentlemen came into the nearby clearing in the scrub, she was able to remain hidden and silent.

"The town has received a magnificent offer for this land, Councillor Williams," said the first man. Peeping carefully through the bushes, Lucia could see that it was the tall man with bushy mutton-chop whiskers who had bought ice cream for himself and his lady earlier.

"That is all very well, Councillor Brown," replied the other, a rather overweight, slightly nervous-looking man. "But we risk the wrath of the traders – and those who enjoy the fair – if we sell it and there is nowhere for them to hold this eyesore in future. Not that I mind upsetting the general populace, but what about the property owners; the ratepayers? Don't forget there will be an election soon and if we get on the wrong side of them, they might vote us out of office. Who would then benefit from the generosity of our 'friends', in order to put profitable opportunities their way? I believe we must exercise caution."

"Then what we need is some sort of pretext for closing the fair which has nothing to do with the proposed development of this site," said Brown. "Though what it might be I have no idea. It is too late to repeat some of the trouble we incited amongst soldiers coming back from the Crimea; a pity, because they were good at creating terror amongst the locals. But they will all have disbursed by now. Perhaps something to do with India, do you think, Williams?" he added tentatively.

"I am sure you will come up with something, Brown," replied the other, his eyes betraying a dislike for the Brown that might have been obvious, had he been paying any attention. "You seem to have quite a knack for getting what you want. I have always wondered what happened to change the mind of the Town Clerk when he initially opposed you over your idea for expanding the alms houses in North End. More of your corruption, I assume ..."

"Quiet," interrupted Brown, urgently. "I think we are being watched. Yes, behind that bush, a girl." As he spoke, Lucia, realising that she was observed overhearing something she should not have done, rose from her hiding place and fled back towards the main fairground and the relative safety of the ice cream stall.

“It doesn’t matter,” said Williams. “She is young and looks foreign. She probably didn’t understand us – probably too ignorant to know what we were talking about in any case. She’s only a child, dammit, man.”

“I have seen her face somewhere before,” mused Councillor Brown, “but I cannot remember where. We cannot afford anyone to know what we are planning. If she did understand us, she is a potential threat. And you know how I deal with those.”

“This is no time for any of your extreme measures, Brown,” said Williams, his sense of honour finally challenged. “I will not be a party to anything of the sort. I would rather drop the entire scheme.”

“Please do not alarm yourself,” said Brown promptly, in a conciliatory tone. “I intend no more than to pay the girl to keep her mouth shut. Ten pounds is nothing to me, but would be a fortune to a fairground waif. That’s it! I saw her earlier when I was walking your wife round the fair. She was selling ice cream. I will go and talk with her.” It was news to Councillor Williams that Brown had been to the fair with his wife, whom he had thought to be at home. But he decided to let it pass; Brown was not a man to cross lightly.

Lucia fled the scene intent only on getting back to Pietro and telling him what had happened. Seeing him there clearing up after selling the remaining stock, gladdened her heart in a way that surprised her. Perhaps it was just relief at being safe from pursuit; or might it be the pleasure of knowing he would always be there for her? Her eyes filled with a mixture of fear and excitement, she quickly explained to him what she had heard.

“Should we tell your uncle?” he asked. “If the fairground is sold, he and the other traders and showmen would not be able to come here and make money. He will be very angry and might incite the others to take some sort of action. If we are lucky, he might even start a riot and get killed,” he laughed.

“That would be nice,” said Lucia, uncharacteristically harshly, “but others might be hurt too and I wouldn’t want that on my conscience. And nor would you, if you think about it for a few moments, Pietro. If you truly love me, there must be another way.” She had finally decided he was the man she wanted to spend the rest of her life with; if they didn’t act now, they might never have a better opportunity. She had an embryonic idea and needed to talk it through with the only person she really trusted. Him.

He stooped slightly to kiss her, gently brushing his lips against hers for the first time, delighting in the softness of her skin. “How can you doubt that I love you? I would do anything for you, you must know that.” He kissed her again, this time more fervently, savouring the sweet taste of her lips and the clean scent of her breath.

“I do. I have always known it,” she replied, shyly returning his kiss. “I want us to make a life together, but it must be on the right foundation. I want to open a shop that sells ice cream.

If we had access to the family recipe, and could get hold of some money, we could run away and start a business of our own, far away from fairgrounds – and Uncle Giuseppe. I am sure that one of the men recognised me from when he was walking round the fair with a young woman. If he did, he is likely to come back to ensure my silence, and I can ask for money.” She thought for a few moments, sorting out some details in her own mind before sharing her idea with Pietro

“I have an idea how we can turn this to our advantage,” she told him. “You stay out of the way and keep an eye out for a tall whiskery gentleman in a dark blue coat with yellow breeches and a tall grey hat with a dark blue band round it. If he comes to talk with me, I will try to negotiate with him, but I will not keep him talking for too long. As soon as I engage him in conversation, you go and tell Uncle Giuseppe that a gentleman is taking an interest in me – that will bring him here, at top speed. But if you are not too quick getting the message to him, he is bound to be too late actually to see anything. I will get rid of the man by arranging to meet him later to be paid,” she added, developing her thoughts as she spoke. In truth, it was she, rather than Pietro, who had the brains. But he was brave and kind, which was what mattered. “In the meantime, you must use Uncle Giuseppe’s absence to find, and recover, the recipe. It must be in the wagon and I think I know where.” She described a hiding place that her uncle thought she did not know about, and told him how to open it. “If you are careful, he will not discover the loss until he next makes some ice cream and that won’t be until tomorrow morning ...”

“...by which time we can be far away, *Dolcezza*,” he finished her thought using a term of endearment from their native Italian. And living as man and wife, he added in his own mind, relishing the thought of spending the rest of his life with her. They kissed again with growing intensity, enjoying the physical contact so long denied them by uncertainty, increasingly oblivious to their surroundings.

Not long afterwards, Councillor Brown approached the now denuded ice cream stall. It looked bleak and soulful, bereft as it was of its usual adornments and stock. Not that this made much impression on a man who only saw columns of figures wherever he looked. Even the allures of Mrs Williams were nothing more than a distraction for him, a way of securing a voice in her husband’s ear, in support of whatever he had planned. She was just a means to an end; he could not even be bothered to bed her very often to achieve his goals, except when it was essential. She was, after all, rather insipid for his taste.

Seeing only Lucia at the stall, he strode purposefully up to her and spoke. He looked at her in contrast to ‘the Williams woman’ and decided that this one was certainly prettier, but in a common sort of way, with her overly clean face and lack of makeup – not that she needed any, he decided. Of course, she was far too young to be anything other than a casual

plaything, but that could be fun in itself, he thought. There was much he could teach her. But he had no time for that; well not at the moment, anyway.

“I know that you were spying on me earlier,” he said accusatorially, without any attempt at greeting or preamble. What would be the point with a girl of her class? “Who put you up to it?” he demanded.

Using her best Italian accent and thickest English, she replied: “I no understand. What you say I do?”

“Don’t waste time with me, strumpet,” he fired at her, deliberately using a term with sexual overtones to see if she reacted. She didn’t seem to know the word, so his subtlety was wasted. “I heard you speaking perfect English earlier. Now; who told you to follow me?”

“Nobody, sir,” Lucia said, reverting to her normal voice. “I had simply gone to relieve myself when you and your friend Councillor Williams came along. I know nothing about plans for the fair field,” she added showing she had indeed understood what she heard.

Brown looked at her in an appraising way. This was going to be easier than he had thought; she clearly had a sharper mind than he was expecting and that should make her possible to deal with; one way or another. He smiled, unaware this made him look more like a ravening tiger than a friend, to her eyes.

“If that is true what do you want in order to remain silent?” he asked, confident in his belief that everyone has their price; which in her case he could easily afford to meet.

“I want fifty pounds to disappear completely, sir,” she responded promptly, convincing him he was right. “Then you will never see me again and nobody will hear a word from my lips on the subject.”

“How do I know I can trust you?” he challenged. She might easily try to double cross him. Would it be safe to pay her and trust to her silence, he wondered? Or would more permanent measures be needed, after all. It might be exciting to try a new experience.

“Who would believe the word of a common working girl against that of a gentleman, sir,” she countered. “Give me what I want and we will both be satisfied.”

“Very well,” he replied, still uncertain about precisely what course he would follow, but prepared to act in whatever way was necessary to help him achieve his objectives. He had to be decisive; but for that much money, he would expect more than just her silence. “Meet me here in three hours and I will have your money for you. It will be dark and nobody will see us then.”

“Yes sir,” replied Lucia to his already departing back, confident that all her troubles would soon be over. As expected, Giuseppe arrived wheezing and puffing, too late to catch her with her alleged admirer. He glowered at her innocent face, but said nothing and stalked off; towards a public house, she hoped.

Pietro returned to the ice cream stall later, without the recipe. He told Lucia he had managed to find the recipe in the place she suggested, but Giuseppe had returned unexpectedly quickly from the wild goose chase on which he had been sent. The old man was in such a foul temper from all his running about that he had apparently decided against a drink, so Pietro had quickly put the paper back in its hiding place. Her uncle had been deprived, as he thought, of a bribe for selling his niece's virtue, simply by the mischance of having arrived too late to catch the man. He did, however, overhear their last words agreeing to meet later, as he arrived panting from the exertion, on the opposite side of the stall. He determined to catch them in whatever transaction they were about to undertake and grab the money for himself. If the gentleman wanted to deflower his niece, who cared? Once he had his money.

Later, as soon as they felt Giuseppe must finally have left the wagon to return to the inn at which they were staying and drink himself into a stupor, Pietro left Lucia at the fairground to meet their 'benefactor' and went back to the hiding place, to recover the precious recipe. Having done so successfully this time, he returned towards the place where the empty stall still stood so that he and Lucia could make good their escape.

Passing through the dark, eerie fairground he became disorientated, losing his way amongst the scrub and bushes. He was not careless, but wanted to avoid seeing anyone who might be on the same path, so late at night. Not that this was likely in the moonless gloom. After almost a quarter of an hour of blundering about as quietly as he could, he suddenly heard a loud scream. Knowing in his heart that it must be Lucia, he dashed in the direction of the noise, no longer concerned whether he was seen or not. Reaching the position of the ice cream stall after three or four minutes, which felt like an eternity, he thought he saw a figure running off into the darkness. Possibly it was Giuseppe, but it was too dark to tell. Anyway what would the old man be doing there at that time of night?

But all other thoughts were expunged from Pietro's mind when he came across Lucia lying on the ground in a pool of her own blood. Her life was ebbing away and there was nothing he could do about it. He could not see precisely where she was wounded, or, indeed, what had happened; but she was clearly beyond human aid, the light in her eyes which he loved so much quickly fading. There was nothing that he could do for her other than to be there for her – to ease her passing.

"My love," he said tenderly, "I got lost. But I have the recipe."

"And I have the money," she replied, opening her hand and showing the fifty pound note that she had been given, now stained with blood, and making no mention of the dreadful pain she was in, from the savagery of an attack that she didn't really understand.

She managed a smile, but said nothing more as her failing vision recognised a policeman approaching them, carrying a lantern that reflected his badge of office carried proudly on his left breast.

Lucy came slowly back to consciousness in Peter's consulting room, visibly shattered by the experience of 'sharing' the death of a young woman; her lips compressed, her cheeks fiery red spots in an otherwise colourless face, while tears welled in her eyes. Mrs Walters was sitting bolt upright and unmoving in her corner chair, shaken to the core by the increasingly dreadful story Lucy had recounted over the space of ninety minutes. Peter himself was red-faced, inexplicably angry at what he had heard; that men of 'his class' – even though it was more than a hundred years ago – should behave in such a way was incomprehensible to him. Towards the end of the regression session, his mother had looked at him, suggesting with her eyes that he should stop the recital to save his patient from having to relive so much horror. But he had been powerless to halt the story, fearing that to do so at so sensitive a point might actually cause harm to Lucy.

"That must have been the worst experience of my life," he said to nobody in particular as they each strove to recover themselves. Lucy had put her hand to her head as if she had a headache and was clearly physically uncomfortable, not to mention wet through, having perspired profusely when recounting the last, most harrowing, part of the story.

"It was even worse for Miss Bowen, Peter," his mother told him quietly, recovering herself more quickly than her son. Perhaps she had seen bad things in her long life. "She must have been living the part. I hope she doesn't remember the attack in any detail."

"Of course, what was I thinking? Are you all right, Lucy," he asked, turning to her.

"No, But I will be shortly," she spoke as herself for the first time in ages. Recovering after several minutes from the emotions of the experience, Lucy looked enquiringly at Peter. "How is it that I remember almost everything that happened? I mean, not just having been able to recall events from a century and a half ago while under hypnosis; but now I am awake, how am I recalling everything I told you. And so clearly?"

"It seems to me the subconscious mind can somehow 'know' things the conscious mind doesn't," Peter explained, hoping that a prosaic conversation might help her overcome, if not forget, some of the trauma which still showed in her ashen face. "It is the basis of past life regression that previous lives can be brought to mind. I must admit that neither I, nor anyone else, fully understands the mechanism by which such memories can be transmitted or retained – or whatever process is involved – or subsequently recovered in a session such as this." He hoped this explanation made sense to her, it didn't always to him.

"Your second question is easier to address," he continued. "Once having recalled events from a previous incarnation, it becomes firmly implanted in your conscious mind, like any

other memory. Whether or not we can retrieve any additional information, we can easily go over what you told us, as much as we want to. The question is, do you want to?"

Lucy thought for a few minutes before answering, during which time, Mrs Walters quietly left the room, before returning just as silently, without either of the others knowing she had been absent.

"I cannot leave this as it is, Peter," Lucy told him, the horrors of her newly found 'memories' still showing on her face, but now more in control of her emotions. "This young woman was brutally murdered. But we don't know by whom. What you said last week suggests that Lucia did not know either. Or perhaps she somehow suppressed the memory; certainly, I have no perception of the actual attack on her, so she must have done – unless she was rendered unconscious at the start of it." Peter had noticed the description of Pietro finding Lucia had not been preceded by one of a meeting with Brown – or the presence of Giuseppe. Only the severest trauma could have put that out of the young girl's mind. What had the attack involved, he wondered?

"If she asked *you* to find out who killed her, it might have been that there was never a public enquiry and that nobody except Pietro ever mourned her," continued Lucy, unaware of Peter's thoughts. "We need to find out who did it, if we can. It is too late for retribution, but at least we can allow Lucia to rest in peace if we discover the truth for her."

"I believe you have to get to work, Lucy," said Mrs Walters, using her given name for the first time. "You probably want to freshen up," she added practically. "I have prepared the bathroom for you. It is on the first landing, you will find soap and fresh towels there. Take as long as you need. Peter will drive you to your place of work, won't you dear?"

He smiled at them both, thinking what a devious creature a mother can be.