



RING-A-RING O' ROSES

Just why Mary Hammond pressed the button on the answerphone when she arrived back home she couldn't say. No light was flashing to indicate a message, and all that she really wanted to do was to climb into bed. She had just returned from a week at her company's head office in Los Angeles and was exhausted from the two flights, first to Chicago, then, ten hours later, to Heathrow, where she had got a taxi. Coming in the front door, she had dumped her suitcase on the floor and, as an afterthought because it had caught her eye, pressed the button on the machine.

The first message was the dentist asking Matthew to call at his convenience. This was followed by a message from Matthew's sister inviting them over for a barbecue on the weekend after next.

The third message was the voice of a woman whose identity wasn't at first clear.

'Matthew, sweetie, I'm here waiting for you. It's seven o'clock. Come on, you know you want to.'

Shock is an interesting animal. Sometimes it doesn't immediately pounce. You see it in the corner, huge, unbelievable, and for a few moments can only register its existence.

Mary pressed the rewind button and listened again.

'Matthew, sweetie...'

Although the speaker had adopted a deeper, sexier tone, it was still recognizably Matthew's marketing manager, Hazel, an ash blonde creature in her mid-twenties. The wheedling words transmitted a sick feeling to Mary's stomach. She sat down on the seat beside the phone-table, her hands resting on her lap, her eyes staring glassily ahead. In normal circumstances she would have gone round the house to see that everything was in order. But her mind, having been yanked from its soporific state with the acceleration of a drag-racing car, kept going back to Hazel's words.

'Seven o'clock,' she had stipulated. Presumably they had arranged to meet last night or the night before. At present it was Friday midday in the UK and Matthew would be at work. Mary could feel something building inside her, the first signs, perhaps, of a panic attack. She picked up the phone and, before the feeling could take hold, dialled Matthew's number.

No answer. She tried again, this time dialling his office number.



'Hello, can I speak to Matthew?'

'Is this Mrs Hammond?' queried the receptionist.

'Yes.'

'Oh, hello, I thought I recognized your voice. Matthew is currently with a client. He should be finished within the next half hour.'

'In that case, can you put me through to Hazel?'

Mary had given no thought to what she would say to the girl and, anyhow, wanted to get off the line with the receptionist whom, she recalled, possessed an unattractive smirk.

'Hazel is off ill today. Shall I get Matthew to call you after his meeting?'

'No thanks,' she heard herself saying. 'It's not important.'

She rang off and remained sitting stock-still except for her hands, which she was surprised to see were shaking.

A contact book lay by the phone and she opened it under 'B'.

Here it was: Hazel Bowers, the second name down. The address was Woodcote House, Kimpton Green. That had been Mark Bowers' address. Mark, Hazel's husband, had been Matthew's business partner in their sailmaking company, and Mary and Matthew had visited Woodcote House three or four times, although not since Mark's death three years ago.

She picked up the phone and began to dial the number.

But then, having second thoughts, she replaced the phone. What would she say? Most probably something foolish. She didn't yet know the facts and might be jumping to conclusions. Surely if Matthew was having an affair, there would be more evidence to go on.

Search the house, a voice in her head said.

She went in the study to look on Matthew's PC. Perhaps she was going mad. After all, she and Matthew had been married for 13 years. And it wasn't as if they didn't get on. On the contrary, they did get on – even if things had recently settled into a rut. In the last week their only communication had been one email to each other.

Christ, what was the password to his email account?



Mary tried about five or six different words – even forcing herself to type the word ‘hazel’ – before giving up. His browser history was empty and had obviously been deleted.

Wasn't that suspicious in itself?

She went upstairs to the next most natural place to look for evidence: their bedroom. There was nothing, at least of relevance, in his bedside drawer. Mary saw a tired woman in her mid-thirties staring back from the mirror on the dressing table. She was dressed in a smart blue business suit but knew that underneath her clothes she looked lumpy and that there were stretch marks around her abdomen. She and Matthew had gone through a lot lately. Fifteen months ago their daughter Bethany, aged six, had died of meningitis. So painful was that memory, and the anguish that had followed, that she and Matthew had hardly discussed the subject and, since then, she had thrown herself into her job as sales director for a software company. In truth, she and Matthew didn't go out much these days and didn't talk about anything important.

There was nothing in the dressing table drawer except some prescription tablets of Matthew's for tension headaches. She took three of them and, because four of the critters popped out of the container, took another one. There were no love notes or anything of the kind in Matthew's pockets. In general, he was amazingly organized. Not the sort to leave his mobile phone, with potentially incriminating text messages, lying around.

Surely his co-workers would know about his affair? Surely someone would have told her about it?

Then again, maybe they wouldn't. She could hardly claim to know Matthew's work colleagues. And why should they talk to her? Their loyalties would lie with their boss. When he wished to be, Matthew could be the quintessence of charm. She recalled him wearing a bowler hat at his company's Christmas party. Hadn't she overheard him say to someone, 'Yes, she is very attractive'? And hadn't she looked over at a group of women, one of whom was Hazel? It hadn't really bothered her, naïve though that sounded, even though it was rare for Matthew to comment on a woman's looks.

Come to think of it, very rare.

She felt a telltale clutch in her stomach. Panic, overcoming what good the tablets might do, was returning. She watched herself pop another pill, thinking all the while that she was looking more haggard



than ever. Even their luxurious bedroom seemed in a way to be taunting her. Had the bed been used by anyone else besides Matthew? It was neatly made up. Too neatly? Mary sniffed the air, trying to detect a new fragrance.

She escaped the room and went downstairs.

She really had gone mad. Sniffing around her bedroom like a Springer Spaniel! That message on the answerphone must have a valid explanation that she would learn, and no doubt laugh about, after she had spoken to Matthew.

She made herself a cup of tea, thinking back to certain comments, not all of them complimentary, that Matthew had made about his marketing manager. When Hazel had hitched herself to Mark Bowers, Matthew had seen their relationship as a sign of a midlife crisis that his business partner was going through. Hazel had only been 18 when they had started going out, and Matthew had frowned on Mark giving her a job, mentioning her gold anklets and referring to her as Mark's 'bit of fluff'. Mary remembered seeing the skinny young thing with her puffed-up hair and her hundreds of teeth for the first time. She had been put in charge of social events and team-building exercises before being brought into the marketing side. In those days she had come across as rather shallow and fun-loving, yet ironically, while Mark had regressed in maturity, going in for all sorts of adrenaline-fuelled activities and dying eventually in an accident on his classic motorcycle, Hazel, according to Matthew, had more than proved her worth. She had studied sailmaking, gone on a design course, and sailed with her husband on numerous occasions on board their yacht, *Lazy Hazy*. Despite this insulting name – Hazel was sometimes called Hazy – Matthew had told Mary that Hazel was 'not dumb or lazy by any means'. The water feature in the office foyer, replete with a model sailboat, had apparently been her brainchild.

Mary resolved to think about something else until she could call Matthew again. Perhaps she should send an email to her boss in the States. She had been overdoing work lately and could do with a few days off to recuperate. Cup of tea in hand, she returned to the study and was about to sit down at the PC when she noticed Matthew's briefcase, the less-used one, leaning against the desk. She hadn't yet looked in this briefcase and, feeling calmer now, was tempted to leave it alone.

But, with a sigh, she lifted it onto her lap and flipped open the catch.



It was practically empty. A white envelope lay alongside a folder in one of the two open compartments and she lifted it out, seeing the word MATTHEW on the front. Her hands started to shake again. The ridiculous thought occurred that it could be some sort of card from Hazel.

And, yes, it was indeed a card. On the front flap a white rose was pictured in a garden setting.

She opened it and read:

On our anniversary. Hazel xx

The room seemed to swim, everything – time, space – forgotten, and the sick feeling in her stomach returned.

Our anniversary.

That could only refer to something that had been going on for years, or for one year at least. This time last July, what had been happening? Hadn't there been a trip?

Yes. A week-long trip to Marseilles on which several staff in Matthew's company, including Matthew and Hazel, had gone.

Mary placed the card back in its envelope and back into the briefcase. She didn't know what to make of it and couldn't accept so quickly Matthew's betrayal of her and their daughter, Bethany. She stood up, feeling a need for movement. Her heart was fluttering. Upstairs, ingesting with a toss of her hand two more tablets, she noted again her image in the mirror. Her friend, Sally Taylor, popped into her head – Sally, who had gone through a messy divorce and now frequented, with much humiliation, the singles scene.

On her birthday Sally had undergone cosmetic surgery.

Mary went back downstairs, this time with an idea about how to settle things. Kimpton Green wasn't far, about three miles away, and she would turn up on Hazel's doorstep and talk to her, whether the girl was supposed to be ill or not.

Where on earth was her car key?

She suddenly wanted to cry. Such a simple thing and yet it seemed to sum up how her life had fallen apart. Her whole existence, she could see now, was based on Matthew. It was lucky that there



were only two of his tablets left or, quite seriously, she might feel tempted to end things there and then. She went through the study with its hateful briefcase, then the dining room and living room, noting the Art Nouveau furniture she had painstakingly collected, all the while feeling a scream rising in her throat...

And then she saw her car key, sitting, ironically, by the phone, where this nightmare had begun. Grabbing it, she closed the front door behind her and got into the BMW. To protect her heart, she had in a sort of way shut down her brain but now had to switch it back on to drive the car. She steered her way through the gates, turned right, and right again, out onto the Hammersley Road. This was the route she normally took to Sally's. It was a brilliantly sunny day and, still wearing her jacket, which she had not thought to remove before getting in the car, she gently curdled.

Matthew, like Mark, must be going through a midlife crisis. He had slimmed down and, perhaps tellingly, had started putting gel in his hair. He had also been working late, although, to be fair, he had sometimes worked late in the early days. In any case, while Mary was out of the country on business, which occurred frequently, he and Hazel would have plenty of chances to see each other. Plenty to talk about, too, in the way of office gossip, the running of the business and the late Mark Bowers. Hadn't Matthew said that Hazel liked gardening, which was also a pastime of his?

Gardening! The girl was certainly trying to change her image from Mark's 'bit of fluff'!

Mary almost came off the road as she went round a corner. An odd sensation had hit her, a dizziness that, just for a moment, had obscured her vision. She gripped the steering wheel tightly. Not far to go now. She was just coming out of a woody section onto a wide vista of green where the few houses in the neighbourhood, with big gaps between them, were set back from the road.

Another memory. Six months ago Matthew had made Hazel marketing manager. That was interesting in itself but, when Mary had turned up at Matthew's workplace, she had discovered Hazel installed in Mark's old office, an office clearly designed for a partner or director, which had remained empty since Mark's death. Mary had mentioned the subject in passing to Matthew – insinuating, possibly, that Hazel was getting above her station – but he had replied that Hazel was 'a star'. She had been working on sails specifically for women (ridiculous; did these sails have frills attached?) and that with more women sailors these days, it was important to attract female clients.



Oh, my God. She was losing her mind. She had gone past two turnings and, going too fast down a hill, had realized too late that she needed to turn left. Quickly glancing over her shoulder to confirm her mistake, she felt a judder as the car thudded onto the verge and then another, more powerful jolt as she nosedived into a ditch.

How long had she been sitting there?

She had no idea, but thoughts of petrol leaks and the car exploding prompted her to open the door and scramble out onto the verge. The car was resting at a 45 degree angle. The bonnet was probably smashed in – ‘probably’ because she could not bear to go round the front of the car and inspect the damage.

For a moment she forgot why she was there in the first place.

Then she remembered: Matthew's affair with Hazel. Looking up the road, she could see the turn-off to Kimpton Green and, brushing herself off, set off on foot the few hundred yards to her destination. Nobody was around. That was not so strange because the road was rarely used. What was unusual was the clarity of her surroundings: the outline of a beech tree, the greenness of the leaves, the brightness of the sun. The road to Kimpton Green, when she got onto it, was narrow and in poor repair. Never mind. Onward! She had to look down to ensure she didn't slip on the gravel or in one of the potholes at the side of the road. Her skirt was scuffed. Really, this was so silly. She had no idea what she would say to Hazel, even assuming that the girl was at home.

Past the first house on the left. Then the second. Then the third...

A black BMW, similar to Mary's own, sat in the drive, driving another spike into her heart. Had Matthew suggested to Hazel that she buy the same car or even helped out with its purchase? This house, a barn conversion, was bigger than their house. All this wealth on display was obscene. Perhaps the little gold-digger had sabotaged her husband's motorcycle, which had led to his fatal 'accident'...

Unlikely. But then, who could tell? The last time Mary had been here was four years ago when she and Matthew had been invited to a summer party. A gate at the side had been left open and the guests had filed into the garden. A gloriously sunny occasion, it had been then. She recalled a fountain, a fishpond and flowers.



She knocked on the door. No sound at first from within but, shortly, she could hear footsteps approaching.

The door opened...

And then Mary had a blackout. Perhaps it was nerves, confronting this special friend of her husband's. Her body tensed. Her fingers curled and tightened, as if she was still clutching the steering wheel of the car, as if, after a delay, the effects of the crash had caught up with her.

The tenseness eased.

And there she was: Hazel. Hazel smiling, although, in truth, there was something odd about her. Perhaps she really was unwell. Her face was blotchy, her eyes were bloodshot, and her hair was in a mess. It would be untrue to say that Mary's anger dispersed in that instant. But, with Hazel looking so terrible, she regained a little of her normal self.

'Mary, come in.'

Hazel's voice was raspy. One would have thought that dressed as she was, in faded jeans and an old yellow T-shirt, she would have been mortified to see Mary. Or at least interested in why she had turned up on her doorstep, rather than appearing, as she did, somewhat spaced out.

'I haven't seen you since the Christmas party,' she said in her distorted voice.

Mary followed her into the living room. A sumptuous three-piece suite faced a fireplace that was surmounted with a painting of Lazy Hazy. Further inside, a Moroccan table, brought back from travels in the Mediterranean, stood on a raised level overlooking the patio.

Hazel stumbled over the step to the higher level but managed to regain her balance by clutching onto the top of a chair.

'I feel kind of woozy. I keep going from room to room, I don't know why. I think I'm looking for something.'

There was something clearly the matter with her. She was no longer the self-assured, scantily-clad thing who had danced with Matthew at the Christmas party and who had said, 'Goodbye, Mary,' at the end of the evening. In fact, she seemed to be hardly aware that Mary was there. Everything had an unreal quality: Hazel's wooziness; the fact that Mary hadn't uttered a word; the fact that there were



certain images, such as a single white rose in a vase, which came into focus while other images remained blurred.

Mary thought about asking a question, but the opportunity had gone. They went through an archway into a family room that she couldn't recall from her previous visit. A pile of toys lay on the floor and a cot stood in one corner. A mini-snooker table had been set up. She remembered Matthew saying that he wanted to buy a snooker table for Bethany.

Hazel stopped and half turned her head so that Mary could see her profile. There was an ugly red patch on her neck.

'Matthew and I came in here, I remember that.' She rubbed at her throat in some discomfort. 'He wanted to break things off.'

She glanced at Mary and the latter could see that her eyes, which were red-rimmed and protruding, had been crying.

'He wanted to finish with me even though I told him, I assured him with all my heart, that I loved him.'

It was all so obvious that Mary didn't react. She simply watched as Hazel, after a dismissive wave of her hand, went through another archway. In the next room, there were books and board games on the shelves and, beneath the stairs that angled the wall, a couple of children's bikes had been propped up.

Hazel stood facing Mary with her hand resting on the banister.

'Only yesterday we went upstairs and made love.'

The words were spoken in a deadpan voice. Would she show Mary exactly where they had made love? Fortunately, she stayed where she was, turning her head the other way to look out through the French doors. A preternatural light filled the room. Mary could see an expanse of lawn fringed by shrubs and trees and, interspersed among the statuary, a fountain.

Again, she felt she should say something. She had come to confront Hazel about her relations with Matthew, and yet Hazel, without prompting, was telling her everything she wished to know.

'The children used to like it here. Ray, my gardener, used to come with his seven-year-old son, Edward.'



Another suspicion confirmed, albeit of no importance. Hazel employed a gardener and so didn't do everything herself. This was as obvious in its way as the revelation concerning her affair with Matthew.

'He was a sickly boy, always coughing and sneezing. I let Ray bring him along because he was convinced the environment here was good for his health. That's why there are so many toys in the house – to give him something to do. Edward especially enjoyed playing with your daughter.'

The words fell casually from her lips. So casually, indeed, that Mary at first did not pick up on the import of what she was saying. Bethany, then, would have been left to play either in this room or in the garden while the adults made their way upstairs.

A sickly boy, always coughing and sneezing...

A pulse of shock shook her body. The words of the doctor who had tried in vain to save Bethany's life rang in her ears. So this was how it had happened. In her mind she could visualize Bethany and the sickly Edward left to play on their own, holding hands and kissing as an experiment...

Matthew had never blamed Mary for what had happened. He had never said that she should have phoned for an ambulance sooner or taken more notice of Bethany's headache and her stiff neck.

Had that been because he blamed himself? Didn't Hazel realize the implication of what she was saying?

When Mary had started following her around the house she had, incredibly, felt some sympathy for Hazel in her confused state. But now she was reverting to the view that Hazel was scheming and not very nice.

'Matthew changed after the death of your little girl. We all noticed that he was more serious and subdued. That was why I suggested we go to Marseilles. It was the first time that we'd seen him laugh in ages. We went out sailing and had a fun time.'

She again disappeared, leaving Mary to stare at the staircase and the lingering image of Hazel's hand on the banister.

Only yesterday we went upstairs and made love.

The sunshine was blinding when Mary stepped outside. Hazel was walking along a path that wound snake-like up the garden, and Mary was surprised to see how far away she was already. She



felt like Alice in *Through the Looking-Glass*, running to keep up with the Red Queen. Adding to this impression, strange statuary, often with a nautical theme, struck attitudes at intervals along the path.

She caught up with Hazel at the fountain.

'It was here that our argument started. He said that he was going back to you.'

Cherubs frolicked at the feet of an angel with outspread arms while jets of water shot into the air to be turned into droplet-shaped diamonds by the sun. Hazel's eyes looked redder than ever. Mary noticed – yet another defined image – a tiny purple spot on one of her eyelids.

'I begged and pleaded with him to reconsider, but he was adamant. Have you ever seen him when he has that hard look on his face?' Hazel looked away and swallowed. 'I told him that he had to stay with me because I'd killed Mark. It wasn't true, of course – I hadn't killed Mark – but I wanted to keep him at all costs. I said that he was implicated in Mark's death because both of us had benefited from it: me, because I had come into money, and him, because he had become the sole partner in the company. It was then that he scared me. Only for a moment, but he looked at me, I thought, with real anger in his eyes.'

Mary followed her as she backed away. She was aware that they were entering a different section of the garden in which there were a multitude of flowers, hollyhocks and delphiniums, on either side of them.

Hazel turned around once more.

'He said he didn't believe me. He said that he'd come to realize that you and Bethany were his only family, and that I was just someone who had latched onto him in a weak moment. That was when...' Her voice had become raspy again. 'That was when I threatened to tell you about our affair.'

They went under a trellis arch and Hazel stopped before an opening on the left-hand side. Mary recalled that by turning left one entered a rosarium. That was probably where the picture of the rose in the anniversary card had been taken.

'This is where it happened. Whatever I'm looking for is in there.'

She pointed to the gap in the trelliswork that led to a tunnel shrouded in greenery.



'I've come here twice already, but somehow I can't find the strength to make it to the other side. I remember that Matthew and I were next to the roses. "Don't you dare talk to her," he said. And then he gripped my neck.'

Mary didn't need much imagination to picture what had happened next. She could see Hazel's eyes bulging in horror and hear her throat gurgling. Down, down, down, she had plunged, her scalloped blonde hair losing its shape, her arms thrashing about, into the bed of roses.

Summoning her strength, Mary went through the gap in the trelliswork. Hazel had disappeared from view and, in the process, it seemed, Mary lost her bearings. The tunnel of greenery grew darker and denser until she realized that she was having another blackout.

Suddenly everything was bright. Because of the shift in place, this was the most disorientating experience so far. Somehow or other, she had arrived back at the turning to Hazel's road.

How? What did it all mean?

Further up the road she could see her BMW in the ditch opposite the beech tree. Everything appeared as it had done earlier. Not a soul was to be seen and it was the same bright, sunny day displayed in the same rich colours.

She began walking towards the crash scene while trying to piece together everything in her mind. After the crash, she had got out of the car. She remembered walking along this road and then turning onto the road in disrepair. Moreover, she had definitely made it to Hazel's house. The sight of Hazel's BMW and her front door were too vivid not to have been real. Then... perhaps... she had wandered about, hallucinating. Yes, that was what she must have done. The experience of walking with and listening to Hazel was too surreal to have happened.

Even so, the whole thing was distinctly worrying. Another issue was that for some reason she felt frightened about returning to her car...

And then the reason why she was frightened became apparent. Someone was slumped over the steering wheel. Mary stopped walking. On this lovely summer's day – too lovely and too perfect – she was looking at her own body. It seemed, in fact, that she had not survived the car crash. Or, if she continued to exist, it was as a ghost. The meaning of her meeting with Hazel now made more sense.



Hazel, like Mary, must be a ghost. Perhaps Hazel had suspected that if she went through the gap in the trelliswork, she would come across her dead self or, at the very least, suspected that she would discover something awful.

Mary sat down by the beech tree. Rather than feel sad or aggrieved, she felt a sense of numbness. So this was all there was to life. She felt she had a much greater insight now into the events leading up to her death. She felt she could even understand why Hazel had lied about killing her husband and threatened to talk to Mary about her affair with Matthew. Love could push people to such extremes. Mary could even, she felt, understand Matthew's reasons for killing Hazel when, in reality, the person he was angry with was himself. Once life's secrets had been laid bare, one realized that there was nothing much to worry about. In her case, even if Matthew had taken the decision to leave her, it wasn't worth dying over.

Something inside the car moved. Mary trained her gaze on the body in the driver's seat and saw a finger tremble.

She was alive! Barely alive, but alive!

She approached the car, immediately aware of a choice that confronted her: get back in the car and struggle on living, or give up on life. Did she really wish to carry on without her daughter and with a husband who had betrayed her?

Another thought occurred: was Hazel contemplating a similar dilemma? And how would Mary feel if Hazel survived?

There was no further movement inside the car and Mary imagined she had little time to decide what to do. Matthew had betrayed her, but then arguably their relationship had been in crisis for some time. One could contend, moreover, that the reason he had become so angry with Hazel was because of his feelings for Mary. Ultimately, he had chosen to be with his wife over his 'bit of fluff'.

Mary opened the car door.

She could hear people's voices. She was in a hospital bed and someone was holding her hand.

'Hello, darling. How are you feeling?'



It was Matthew. In truth, in answer to his question, she wasn't sure how she felt. Too many conflicting thoughts, dreams within dreams, were going on inside her head. Matthew was smiling, looking incredibly youthful, with his hair layered so that it fell perfectly over his forehead.

'Excuse me, nurse?'

He beckoned to a girl in a blue uniform and told her that Mary had woken up. The nurse came over and felt Mary's pulse.

'You've had a nasty knock,' she said, as Mary felt the gauze bandage on her forehead.

'Is it all right if I stay with her?' asked Matthew.

'By all means.'

'I've brought you a present,' he addressed Mary, after the nurse had left them. 'I know it's a bit early for your birthday, but I think under the circumstances we can stretch the proprieties. I'll open it for you.'

He produced a jewellery box from which he took out a gold necklace. Tears sprang into her eyes.

'It's all right,' he said, patting her hand. 'It's understandable after the shock you've had.'

She couldn't have explained why she felt upset. Just everything, she supposed.

'You crashed the car,' he continued. 'Your injuries are superficial, but when you were discovered you were unconscious. I think you might have to undergo a CAT scan at some point because of the concussion.'

Fragments of memories were returning. If only she could concentrate, she felt she could get to the bottom of the mystery. The crash had given her a knock, which had been compounded by the pills she had taken at the house. What had she decided earlier? Oh, yes; that the experience with Hazel had been a dream. In other words, she had gone to Hazel's house and then must have wandered about in a daze before returning to the car. But, even then, it wasn't clear-cut. After the second blackout, she had had a lapse and imagined seeing herself lying half-dead behind the wheel.

'It's funny,' he said, 'I would have thought after coming back from the States you'd just want to take it easy. What made you decide to leave the house? Were you on your way to Sally's?'

'I think so.'



'I've called Sally to tell her about your accident. She's very concerned. She'll probably pop in to see you later. What happened, if you don't mind me asking? Do you remember much? Did you swerve to avoid something?'

'A rabbit,' she said, without thinking.

He found this amusing.

'Oh dear. You and your little furry animals. I was wondering if a car might have been driving towards you on the wrong side of the road.'

'No, nothing like that.'

'Mary...' He lowered his voice. 'I don't know if I should tell you this as you're probably still in shock. We heard some tragic news at almost the same time we heard about you. It concerns Hazel Bowers. Do you remember Hazel? Blonde, bubbly and attractive? It's somewhat of a freakish coincidence because you were found only two or three hundred yards from where it happened. She's been murdered. Strangled to death. No one has any idea who's responsible.'

So Hazel was dead after all. How odd, particularly as Mary had guessed that something of that nature might have happened. It was interesting that Matthew did not look overly upset. Certainly, if he'd been having an affair with Hazel, he was a first-rate actor, employing euphemistic words like 'attractive' and 'bubbly' to downplay his feelings. Nor, incidentally, did he give the impression that her death had anything to do with him.

'She was a star on the work front,' he went on. 'Very amusing as well. She used to tease me about Tristram Cunningham, a client of ours. Tristram has a habit of calling everyone sweetie and Hazel was convinced for some reason that he fancied me. She even left a message on our answerphone yesterday pretending to be him.'

The thought occurred to Mary (strange that she had not thought of it before) that no real mistress of her husband's, unless she wanted to be discovered, would have left such a saucy message on their answerphone. Moreover, it was incredible that David had not bothered to delete it.

'Actually, the message was about a party last night. I didn't stay long at this party, but the irony is that, because Hazel got a bit plastered and had a hangover this morning, she took the day off. Makes you wonder what fate has in store for us, doesn't it? One day off work and you meet a person who



strangles you to death! I feel especially bad because I was complaining about her all through this morning, cursing my luck because, with Hazel not in, I had to fill in for her and my time was taken up with extra meetings.' He shook his head at the memory. 'Sorry, I shouldn't be rambling on like this. Part of it is relief that you're all right. Life is so precious, isn't it? This afternoon all of us in the office were discussing our memories of Hazel. She was one of those people that attract others not so much by their looks but in the aura that they transmit. Justine, who was probably the closest to Hazel, was saying that she suffered from mitral valve prolapse and so often felt short of breath. I think that makes her even more of a remarkable person. Do you know,' he went on, 'that she sent every member of staff a card to celebrate the company's tenth anniversary? On the front was a rose from her garden. She and her boyfriend were both keen gardeners.'

More memories were returning. It was Mary's friend, Sally, who employed Ray the gardener with his snivelling son. Perhaps Mary had thought of them because she had been driving the route she normally took to Sally's house. In any case, as an explanation for Bethany's meningitis, it was inadequate because Ray had only just started his job with Sally.

'Can you imagine what her family are going through?' said Matthew. 'Hazel's boyfriend, Gavin, must be devastated. Not the most sociable of people, but a nice guy all the same. I suppose it's fortunate that they didn't have children.'

The image of Bethany appeared to her: Bethany Rose Hammond.

'Just imagine opening your front door and being strangled to death. According to the police, the marks on her neck were made by long fingernails and make them suspect that the murder was carried out by a woman. It's the strangest thing I've ever heard of. I can't conceive of anyone disliking Hazel.'

At which point Mary's vision of events changed once more. Matthew's hands were no longer around Hazel's neck and Hazel was no longer plunging down into the roses. The hands Mary could see were slim and tapered, curling and tightening as hers had been when clinging to the steering wheel of her car. The long nails were painted with a distinct brand of varnish and, on the third finger of the left hand, there was a wedding ring identical to hers.