



## A LITTLE LOCAL DIFFICULTY

### 1 Excellent Intentions (Hull)

The phone call that preceded the murder came at 9.15pm. The phone was located in the hall and, although Janaway was absorbed in a programme about grizzly bears, his attention was broken by Josie saying, 'Oh, hello. Yes... Is everything all right?'

He reached for the remote and turned down the volume.

'Really?' he heard his wife. 'That's very odd.'

His first thought was that she might be talking to their GP, Doctor Alexander. Three weeks ago Josie had given birth prematurely to a girl, Sophie, who had died in her parents' arms. Doctor Alexander, who had been given all the relevant information, had already rung to ask Josie how she was and had promised to ring again. It was surprising, come to think of it, that Josie had risen immediately when the phone had rung. Perhaps it was because she was expecting somebody to call. Or perhaps it was because she did not care for the programme they were watching. There was always a danger with nature programmes that they might depict something gruesome.

'Yes, that must be very unsettling for you both. Who on earth would do something like that?... Right. I see... And you say this has been going on for how long?... Yes, yes – absolutely. It's very worrying indeed.'

Obviously the person Josie was talking to wasn't Doctor Alexander. And yet, whoever it was, Janaway imagined that the issue might not be as serious as it sounded. Josie was always very understanding towards people and their problems, and it was possible that her anxious tone of voice was misleading.

'No, no, it's quite right that you should call here,' he heard her say. 'After all, what are neighbours for?'

*Neighbours.* Well, at least the net was closing in on the caller's identity, although the neighbours with whom Janaway was familiar would probably have popped round in person if the matter was important. With half an ear still listening to the conversation in the hall, he observed a grizzly facing the



camera close-up in a pose reminiscent of his boss, Superintendent Gray. Behind the TV, in the right angle of the wall, were bookcases containing more than two thousand mystery novels. Even outside his job Janaway maintained an interest in crime, and the majority of the novels consisted of Golden Age crime fiction with titles like *The Night has a Thousand Eyes* and *Excellent Intentions*.

'So the last one arrived this morning?' Josie said.

The grizzly was now marking its trail in a manner that would have indicated a significant departure of behaviour if carried out by Superintendent Gray.

'OK, I'll talk to him now... Well, if anyone'll know what to do... Yes, yes, I will... OK, Magda. Bye!'

A moment later Josie entered the living room and simultaneously Janaway turned off the TV. He couldn't think of anybody called Magda.

'Michael!' She could hardly stand still, her hands hovering, as if about to start typing in mid air. 'That was Magda Causley calling from number seventeen. Somebody, she says, has been posting anonymous notes through their front door to her husband Stephen.'

It was wonderful, apart from anything else, to see Josie looking so interested in something outside of their personal lives. After returning to work a week and a half after Sophie's death, Janaway had come home twice to find the curtains drawn and Josie asleep in bed.

'What do the notes say?' he asked.

'She didn't go into details, and I didn't press her, but "threatening" was the word she used to describe them. They got another one this morning that must have been posted overnight.'

The Causleys were uppity and kept themselves to themselves. He recalled seeing them pictured in the *Cambridge Evening News* – once when they had attended an event for Cancer Research and another time when Causley had received a Business Excellence Award. Josie, he remembered, had once said that the lady at number 17 was 'absolutely beautiful'. For such an accolade to be given, the recipient had to satisfy two criteria, a) to have nice eyes, and b) to have nice hair, the features Josie most disliked about herself.

'Why didn't Stephen Causley call us, if the notes are for him?'

'I don't know. Because he's a man and men, as we know, don't like to discuss their problems? Michael, be quiet and listen a minute! I promised Magda that you'd go over there and talk to them about



it. You will, won't you?'

He baulked affectionately at his wife's plea, touched by her expression of concern.

'Do we know anybody who's been in their house before?'

She shook her head solemnly.

'No. You'll be the first.'

It was a cold December night but, for so short a walk, Janaway did not bother to wear a coat. Well-built and 6' 4," he almost defied the elements to attack him. At the age of 38, his hair had acquired the odd grey member and one or two lines had sharpened on his forehead. These factors, however, did not deter the interest – inexplicable to him – that he received from women. Perhaps it was his dry sense of humour that was so attractive. Or perhaps his abstracted air. He certainly gave the impression that his thoughts were elsewhere, absorbed in some otherworldly problem.

He shut the front door behind him. The Causleys had been living in Fenwick Avenue for about a year. Number 17, was huge, the previous owners having extended it repeatedly, the former mistress matching each extension with an extension to her breasts. When the house had reached a point where further expansion was impossible – a state of affairs that arguably applied to more than one area – the owners had left to make way for the Causleys, not wholly dissimilar (an older man, younger wife) to their predecessors. Perhaps the house attracted a certain type of person. Fenwick Avenue, in general, was unusual in that its houses were different on one side to the other. ('Schizo-Fenwick Avenue' was what Harry, the Newsomes' son, had dubbed it at the Janaways' housewarming party six years previously.) On Janaway's side the houses were three-bedroom semis occupied by people such as teachers, doctors and civil servants. On the opposite side were larger detached houses occupied by the retired and people with more substantial incomes. What Janaway liked about Fenwick Avenue was its proximity to Cambridge's city centre – a left-left-right-left took you to the ring road – and its quietness. Not many motorists unlocked that left-left-right-left combination, and the road, at present, was devoid of moving vehicles.

'Think!' he chastised himself.

He let himself back into the house – 'That was quick,' said Josie – and rummaged under the kitchen



sink for cotton gloves and an exhibit bag before retracing his steps back out into the cold.

Number 17 had mature trees to its sides and a low wall in front. In the front garden a silver birch stood at an angle, whipped by the recent gales, and the wide, mosaic-patterned driveway contained two cars: an S-type Jaguar for the man of the house (registration number S6 CAU) and an Audi A4 Cabriolet for the woman (registration number M3 CAU).

Janaway entered the porch, which was supported by two Roman pillars, and rang the bell.

'Hi. Mrs Causley? I'm Michael.'

A slim, voluptuous woman in a short, black figure-hugging dress stood facing him. It was impossible not to be startled a little by the glamour on display, as one might be if one encountered a famous model. She had flowing dark hair and claret-red lips, and her prominent cheekbones provided the substructure to vivid blue-green eyes.

'Michael, the chief inspector?' she queried.

'"Michael" on its own is fine.'

'Wonderful!' she said, backing away and allowing him to enter. 'I'm Magda. Thank you so much for responding to my distress call.'

He gestured to his shoes to show his willingness to take them off but, after being told not to be silly, stepped into the house. In the hall a staircase led to an impressive gallery landing. A huge chandelier hung down from the two-storey ceiling, and pilasters and cornices jutted out from the walls to reinforce the Roman motif suggested by the porch. Bright lighting from inlaid spotlights made him feel as if he had entered a film set decorated in elegant golds and whites.

Magda Causley led the way through an arch, her jasmine scented perfume lingering in the air.

'You have a fantastic place,' he said. 'Josie and I didn't know the people living here before and so this is the first time I've been in this house.'

'Did you see her b...?'

She held her hands suggestively in front of her in an impression of the previous owner.

'If I'm honest, I couldn't miss her b...,' he said, making a similar gesture.

They both laughed and she touched him, somewhat unnecessarily, on the arm.

'Can I get you a drink?'



He requested a coffee. After she had gone, he glanced around the living room, taking in the heavy swag curtains, the elaborate ceiling, the fireplace (with fire blazing) fashioned from marble in the Victorian style. A white leather sofa stretched out to his left and, facing it, a gigantic TV nestled in the niche of a bay window. He moved further inside the room. Stuck on the wall on the far side were a group of framed photos together with two certificates relating to Cygnet Software. What the photos all had in common was the figure of Mr Causley. He might be wearing plus fours on the golf course, or wearing a ratcatcher jacket with a bright green collar and posing with his hunting buddies, or attending a Rotary Club function and sporting a luxurious grey moustache (which had been shaved off elsewhere). The man, in his various disguises, came across as a caricature of the hunting, shooting and fishing fraternity and Janaway, who found the photos a little artificial, wondered what Causley's fellow poseurs really thought of this gentleman in his sixties with his bent back and wide crooked smile.

'I see you're admiring my exploits.'

Janaway almost jumped with shock, swinging round to view the real thing, so to speak, dressed in a pale green cardigan patched up on the elbows. Causley looked older than he had in the photographs on the wall, and his splayed feet and substantial paunch gave him rather a 'Toad of Toad Hall' appearance.

'I believe,' he added, gesturing to the display, 'that your chief constable is hidden among those ruffians.'

'Is she?' Janaway replied, automatically glancing at the photographs again.

He turned back to shake Causley's hand in greeting but Causley either ignored or didn't notice the gesture.

'Yes,' Causley murmured, 'good friend of mine, the chief constable.'

His tone seemed to suggest he could say a word, good or ill, in Janaway's service. Janaway withdrew his hand, which was hanging awkwardly in the air, and pondered what level of acquaintanceship with the chief constable he could claim in return.

'Well, sit down, old chum,' said Causley. 'Let's get this over with.'

He assumed a place at one end of the sofa and gestured to Janaway to take an armchair. It bothered Janaway that no acknowledgement had been made that he was offering up his time. In fact,



Causley looked distinctly grumpy, as if he was doing Janaway a favour by offering up *his* time.

‘Cigar?’

Janaway declined the offer. Causley delved into a finely carved mahogany case and removed the wrapper from his cheroot. As he was performing this operation, he stared at his visitor with no trace of a smile, as though summing him up.

‘You have a problem you wish to discuss,’ said Janaway.

Avoiding eye contact with Causley, he observed the bluish, too-perfect flames of the fire, and fiddled characteristically with his fingers.

‘I’ll be honest with you, In-spec-tor.’ Causley pronounced the word carefully. ‘I think this whole poison pen business is nonsense – kids playing games, nothing more than that. Yes, I can tell you about it. Yes, you can go away and jot something down. But, I can assure you, it won’t make a blind bit of difference. The reason, the only reason, you’ve been dragged out from the bosom of your home is because of my wife.’

It appeared that Josie’s generalization about men not wishing to air their problems had proved to be correct – with this particular man at any rate. Clearly, if there had been anything worthwhile to discuss, Causley would have talked to his high-ranking friend, the chief constable.

‘Ah, here we go, Michael. Enjoy!’

Magda re-entered the living room armed with his coffee. She addressed Janaway with a smile as she handed over the mug.

‘Hey, hey, where’s mine?’ declared Causley.

She hesitated, a tinge of red on her cheeks. Janaway wasn’t sure at first if Causley was being serious.

‘Oh, I—I’m sorry, Stephen.’

‘Thank you,’ he replied sarcastically. ‘My usual, if you please.’

After she’d gone back out, Janaway glanced at his host who gave him a wink.

‘Keep ’em in their place, eh?’

Causley produced a nasty chuckle that turned, with some justice, into a coughing fit. Such was the unusualness of the situation, Janaway even wondered if he was being tested and whether this was all



a game. He gazed around the room and noticed two more photographs, one of Pope John Paul II (not this time with Causley included) alongside a framed wedding photo of his host and hostess. More coughing. Janaway was about to get up and offer to pat Causley on the back when his wife returned with a brandy in a balloon glass. Causley gradually recovered himself, sipping his drink, before leaning back on the sofa and stretching out his feet inside their green leather slippers. The contrast between he and Magda, sitting side by side, was striking: she, wide-eyed and concerned; he, slouching and apathetic. An extra button had come undone on his shirt, revealing a rash on his chest.

‘So what do you think, Michael?’

‘I haven’t told him anything yet,’ her husband interjected. ‘But now that we’re all present, the reason for dragging you from your aforementioned bosom is because a certain well-wisher has been sending me messages on and off for the past six weeks. He, or she, has been posting these *billets-doux* through my door at night, all of them addressed to “S.C.”.’

‘Saying what?’

Causley shrugged.

‘It’s up to you, if you want me to look into it,’ Janaway said in frustration.

‘Ha ha ha!’ Causley rubbed his hands. Janaway had been goaded enough, his breaking-point determined. ‘Yes, In–spec–tor. That was why my wife called on your services, was it not? The matter could hardly be more important. My life, as they say in the best whodunits, is in the gravest peril.’