

# Purplewood Hill



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Nina Kramer

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For Olga, Diederik, Olivier and Anna



# Prologue

‘So this is it, this is as far as I have come. From now on, it will only go downhill. All the dreams I had are vanished, no longer young, no longer attractive, no longer promising.’

She always laughed at wrinkled people who said, ‘deep down inside me there’s a young girl hiding’. Not anymore. She sat on top of a hill, wishing it was a mountain, wishing she could go up higher, knowing the view would become better and better as she went on. But there was no way up anymore, this was where it ended. The hill was rising above the surrounding landscape as it was, a landmark in the area. Depending on your point of view, it presented its nice slanting slope or its harsh, sharp edge. The woman was sitting close to the edge, waiting for her friend to come. They both agreed this would be the day, this would be the place, this would be the time. At the dawning of the day, what a laugh, how ironic. No more dawning, no more days.

She had gotten up very early that morning. In fact, it was still the middle of the night. It felt like going on holiday, like having to catch a freakishly early plane, surprisingly pleasant. It made her feel thrilled and excited, full of anticipation. What would be the right clothes for the occasion? Are there, in fact, any right clothes? She didn’t know. But somehow it seemed important that it should be right. Right for the little girl inside, the foolish little girl. Right for the middle-aged woman she had become, even more foolish. Well, that wouldn’t show, she would not allow herself to look foolish. So climbing a hill demanded sensible shoes, her walking shoes. And it would indeed look foolish to wear a skirt above her sensible walking shoes.

Therefore, a pair of jeans seemed more appropriate. It could be chilly on the hill this time of the morning, but the walk could be

sweaty, layers seemed to be the best choice. And so on, she dressed from bottom to top. She did not bother about her hair. The wind on the hill would blow it all in a mess anyhow. What about make-up, would it make any sense to wear make-up? She felt naked without it, and she did not like that feeling. So make-up it was, but not too much.

She had not been so excited in a long time. Was it a silly idea? It probably was, she still didn't know if she had the nerve to go through with it. They had been right on one fact, though, there was no fun in growing old. Sitting on the edge, contemplating her life, she never saw or heard the other woman coming up behind her.



Day One

Thursday



## *Eliza*

‘Tiger, Tiger!’

The lovely appaloosa was twisting her ears, indicating that she was getting nervous. She wished the woman would not shout like that. Fixing her gaze on the distance, she tried to get back to her dreams. She stamped her hooves, annoyed by the disturbance.

‘Shoo Sita, don’t get nervous,’ Eliza said, ‘you should know better than that. I’m not shouting at you.’

‘Tiger! You forgot to feed the horses again,’ Eliza shouted at her son. ‘I’m getting tired of having to remind you, again. I never had to remind you before.’

‘Before I didn’t have to go to school in the morning,’ sulked Tiger. ‘Why did we have to settle down? I hate it here, I hate school! And by the way mum, sorry, I have to go. Say sorry to Sita and Freddy from me. Could you please, please feed them for once? I’ll give them a hug when I get back. Have to run!’

Tiger ran off swift and athletic just like his name suggested, and just like his father Eliza thought.

‘What about a hug for me?’ she shouted, watching him run off. But the boy was not paying attention to her anymore.

She wondered, not for the first time, if it had been such a smart move to settle down here. The neighbourhood was certainly shocked when they bought this piece of land in the village and built their huge circus tent on it. There had been complaints from people about the massive white and red stripes blocking the view from their backyard. Could they not live somewhere else, in someone else’s backyard? Her husband Kai almost used that as an excuse to pack it all up again, move on. But she stood firm. Their boy needed stability, she argued. He was getting to an age where it was important to grow roots, make friends. Travelling with a circus and being home-schooled was not sufficient anymore. She did not want to admit that she hated

settling down herself. She hated to acknowledge the fact that she could not do it anymore. She could no longer be Tiger's teacher. The boy was outsmarting her more and more. He was such a bright boy, way ahead of his ten years and so much smarter than she would ever be. She did not want him to know that yet. That was the main reason why she had argued to settle down and send him to a regular school, but she never told anyone.

She took Sita by her halter to lead her to the water tank. Sita had already calmed down and seemed to be back in her own dreams. 'Come on Sita, wake up, time for water and food, I guess Freddy is already waiting to be fed.'

'Eliza! Your phone! Your phone is ringing! Dammit, what is the use of having a mobile phone if you never take it with you?'

'Don't swear Kai, the boy.'

'The boy is already off to school, your phone rang twice. You should pick it up, might be important.'

Eliza handed over Sita to Kai and went off to search for her phone. It would probably be somewhere on the first floor of the tent. She loved living in a tent and especially this tent. It was a kind of left over from the circus, given to them by Kai's brothers. They altered it a bit to make it fit for semi-permanent living. On the ground floor, it had a big arena, a space to perform, with enough space for an audience. On the first floor, it had a living space, made of a wooden platform, everything they needed. The tent somewhat reminded her of the kind of tents called yurts. She took the spiral staircase in the back of the tent and entered the kitchen space, hoping to see her phone somewhere lying around. Eliza was just about to shout to Kai, to give her a ring in order to find her phone, when it rang. Not wanting to miss the call again, she ran to the sofa at the other end of the room. When she reached her phone and picked it up, she saw she had missed three calls already and had two messages, from an unidentified caller.

'Hello, Eliza Robbin speaking.'

'Mrs. Robbin, glad to hear from you, this is Detective Sergeant Rylan, Purplewood Hill Police. I'm calling about your mother.'

Eliza sank down on the sofa. Her first reflex was to answer she did not have a mother. She had not kept in contact with her mother for about 15 years. As far as Eliza was concerned, her mother did not even know she had a grandchild. To her, her mother was dead.

'What about my mother?'

## *Tory*

Detective Inspector Tory Sandel moved the piles on her desk. She liked a neat desk and could be seen piling and rearranging it several times a day. That is to say, on those scarce days, she was not out on fieldwork. If anyone dared to make a remark about it, her defence was that she needed to have an organised desk to balance the disorganised world. In her opinion, the world was a messy place, no logic, no predictability and certainly not organised, no matter how many rules were written. No one bothered about rules anyway nowadays. No wonder governments tried to keep order by writing more and more rules, it was just a last straw trying to prevent total chaos.

Her need for order in her world was also the main reason why she always dreaded the weekends her kids would be coming over. Of course, she loved them dearly, but the mess they were making never ceased to upset her. They took over her neatly organised house and left their stuff littering around everywhere. She had to remind herself over and over again not to try to work on kid weekends because there was a severe risk of her files getting lost in the kids' stuff. She did a lot of work on her computer, but always liked to spread out her evidence, her own notes with her ideas, leads and suspicions and everything slightly related to her case on her two desks at home. It gave her a sense of overview. When the kids were visiting, she had to pile it all away. No use in confronting the kids with pictures of mutilated dead bodies and other gruesome things. Some might think children were used to such images by watching television and playing computer games. Real life could be much worse.

Many people gossiped about the fact that Wilfred, her ex-husband, had been granted custody of the children at the time of her divorce. Some people had expressed their deep

sympathy to her. How hard it must have been for her. But those who knew her better understood, it was all for the best. Tory was a bright young officer with an attentive eye when she married her childhood friend, Wilfred, at the age of twenty-one. Shortly after the wedding, her first child was born, a daughter, and two years later another daughter. Tory was really ready to go back to the real work as she called it. Working as a desk researcher on fixed hours started to bore her. Unfortunately, Wilfred begged her to give it another try. He really would like to have a son. They soon found out they got more than they bargained for, Tory was expecting twins. Two boys, on top of the two girls they already had, was more than Tory could handle. At first, she strained to keep her life organised, but as things got more hectic, she started to let everything slip, neglecting her children and locking herself into her study. Wilfred made his best effort to support her as much as he could, but with four kids under six and a wife who started to act more and more like a recluse, it was no wonder he felt things had to change. They did not. In the end, it was Tory's idea to get a divorce. As she put it to him, 'It's not that I don't love you anymore, it's just that I don't love being a mother as much as I had hoped for. I'm so sorry, I just have to leave in order to stay sane.' But that was all years ago. The kids were now all in their teens, not that having teenagers made parenthood any easier. Tory was really happy that Wilfred managed to remarry a very capable and motherly woman, who was warm and good to her children. It made her feel less guilty. And to her surprise, she didn't even miss Wilfred all that much. Tory re-focused on her work and took a file from her desk to take home. No use arguing with the Chief Inspector over that case again. Tory was convinced it was not an accident but had no proof so far. Of course, anyone could make an unfortunate fall while hiking on Purplewood Hill. The woman might have tripped over some roots or just misjudged her steps and

slipped, but somehow Tory doubted that. The woman's body was found lying on a ledge, a bit beneath the top of the hill. In Tory's eyes, she had looked far too poised for someone who accidentally slipped, not having the appearance of a woman who just went for a hike and wandered around absent minded. The dead woman looked like a woman who had meticulously planned out everything and would most certainly have looked where she was going. Tory could relate to that, it takes one to know one.

'Tory? Any luck in finding out some more about Mrs Birkenhead?' her boss asked. 'Any relatives we should call, for instance?'

'No sir, not yet but I've Rylan working on it. I'm sure he will find someone soon. I've got to run now, get back to you ASAP.' Tory put the copy of Mrs Birkenhead's file in her big sensible bag. She also made sure she uploaded everything she thought relevant to the Birkenhead case to her own secured place in the cloud. She would download it to her private computer and erase it from the cloud at home. That would be her first priority after arriving at home. Second priority would be to take her dog Bors for a long walk, on Purplewood Hill. She had managed to secretly move the plastic evidence bag with the woman's glove, found on the body, in her bag. Nobody had missed it yet.



## *Hekate*

‘Take one spoonful of valerian root, one spoonful of lime blossom, one spoonful of chamomile blossom and one spoonful of catnip and mix it with one and a half pints of water. Add the herbs to the water and let it boil for about twenty minutes. Drink two to three times a day before meals.’

Hekate knew the recipe by heart, like most of the common recipes she made. This was one of her regulars. Next to brewing it for customers, she often made it for herself. Looking those up in her recipe book still comforted her. She liked the feel of the old paper and the smell of the leather cover and enjoyed the little illustrations accompanying the text, written and drawn by one of her ancestors. The book had been in the family for some ages now. Another reason why she still kept looking up the recipes was a failure she made some time ago. She had to admit that recipe was a bit more complicated. Her mistake with it had made her ill for almost a week. What luck it was just for herself and not one of her clients. After that, she never completely relied on her memory for mixing up potions. This was an easy one, though, meant for sleeping.

Sleep did never come easy to her, and after moving into her new home, she experienced extra trouble sleeping. Hekate always said you should not move old people, just as old trees should not be moved. And today she was really feeling old, all of her seventy-three years. Four years ago, she had left her old cottage near the watermill. It was not entirely voluntarily, although she made sure it looked that way. That old cottage with the big orchard and her herbal garden was a lovely place. Her big cellar under her garage was another asset.

In the village and beyond, she was known as Hekate the Wisewoman. Nobody knew her real name anymore, and she did not care. In fact, she was happy most people had forgotten her name. The name Hekate was carefully chosen when she

started her practice in herbal medicine and healing, many years ago. Hekate, named after the Greek goddess known for her knowledge of herbs and plants, also the goddess of crossroads and entrances, a goddess depicted holding two candles. It seemed appropriate for the work she did, helping people not only with herbal potions and ointments but likewise listening to their troubles and helping them make decisions. Perhaps, after all, it was not the smartest name, because for those really into old mythology, it was known that Hekate also ruled over witchcraft and necromancy. The adjective 'wise woman' was given to her when she was getting well known for her cures and potions. She wore it with a secret pride. And it might have been only that good reputation that saved her from losing her cover. Moving away from her old house was a hard thing to do, and she still regretted the fact that it had been her only way to escape. It all started when a new neighbour moved in the house close to her backyard. The man seemed nice enough in the beginning, admiring her lovely apple trees and commenting on her beautiful patches of dahlias. He told her how he loved gardening himself, and they had some nice cups of tea on her porch discussing the needs and care of particular plants. But soon he started to complain about her cats wandering in his garden, asking her to keep them inside. Of course, she wouldn't do that. Free spirits like cats should not be limited to an indoor life. Then the man started to play loud music in his garden late at night. Hekate regretted telling him she often had trouble falling asleep. After other neighbours started complaining about the noise, the music had stopped. Instead, a big mean dog made its entrance to the neighbour's garden. It barked and barked, every time any movement was spotted in its own or adjacent gardens. Soon after that, her beloved Lisa went missing. Lisa was an adventurous cat and was known for challenging dogs. Everybody had thought that very funny, a

little cat chasing big dogs. Later Kobe did not make it home at night. Hekate had called and searched for him for days, but he never showed up. Hekate suspected the neighbour's dog or the neighbour himself. What a good fortune her kitten Sebastian was not yet going out that far and Ni'ele always liked the comfort of her pillow on the porch much more than adventures. At least those cats survived.

The big shock came when Hekate saw her neighbour walking into her garage one day. He made a feeble excuse about wanting to borrow some gardening tool, and seeing the door was open anyway, he might look first before bothering to ask. How could she have been so careless and leave the garage door open? The man almost discovered her trap door leading to the cellar. No one was allowed in her cellar, no one. What scared her even more, was the pistol she noticed hidden under his jacket. That had been the urgent reason for her move. Of course, it could all be totally harmless, perhaps he was just looking for gardening tools after all, but she would not take the risk.

Soon enough Hekate found the perfect place near the village, a place called Purplewood Rock, just far enough. The neighbour should not have any excuse to visit her again, and not so far it would raise suspicions. She told all her friends, family and clients, the orchard and garden were getting too big for her to maintain, and she did not like receiving her clients in her own house anymore, lacking some privacy. The perfect place was found near a pond, a small house with a separate tea house in the garden. The teahouse would be ideal for counselling her clients. A little extra that came with the property was a folly that the former owner built, a glass tower with an observatory on top, perfect for gazing at the planets and the stars. It reminded her of her former job as an astronomer, before her retirement. A pity the tower did not have an elevator, but

luckily Hekate was still very fit for her years, thanks to her herbs.

The biggest benefit of the little house, however, was none of those. She suspected a little help from her friends at headquarters in finding this particular house. It was built halfway into an enormous rock, with a tunnel system underneath. Related to that, not wanting to raise suspicion, she had lived her life low key the last couple of years. Her herbal practice was reduced. Hekate did not take on many new clients, using her age as an excuse.

Now she was worried again, very worried. Yesterday she received a disturbing phone call from her daughter and had not slept all night. Confiding her worries to her daughter would not help her. Her daughter, who was just like Hekate, always wanting to know everything, always trying to get to the bottom of things. There were some things however, she did not want her daughter to know.

'Well then,' Hekate said to herself, 'no more worries until I find out more. Wait till tomorrow.' She took her sleeping potion and activated the bookcase that opened to show a hidden corridor leading to a small cellar. The size was just an illusion, no more hidden cellars in this house, just a whole hidden basement. After she had entered the cellar, another bookcase slid in front of the corridor, hiding it from sight. She went up to the ground floor and opened her front door.

'Sebastian! Sebastian! Dinner! Hey, Ni'ele, coming in for a little bite aren't you dear? Good girl. Hey, Sebastian, that was quick, hanging around for the next meal as usual? Come in my darlings, dinner time.'

## *Eliza*

Eliza was holding the phone and listening to a voice telling her about a woman found on Purplewood Hill. It made no sense, no sense at all. She was staring at some dirty socks Tiger had left on the sofa, thinking about the laundry piling up near the washing machine. Later that day, after working with the horses, she might do the laundry or perhaps it would be better to start sorting it out now and get the machine going.

'Mrs Robbin, are you still there?' the voice on the phone said. 'Oh yes, I'm sorry, what about my mother? Who're you again?' Eliza realised she had not caught a word of what the man on the other end of the phone was telling her. The voice grew a little impatient, although Eliza could hear the man was trying to conceal his annoyance.

'Mrs Robbin, this is DS Rylan from Purplewood Hill Police, I'm very sorry to inform you there has been an accident with your mother, Mrs Birkenhead. You are her daughter, aren't you? Your name and number were on her phone, she had listed you as Child.'

How typical her mother, not even her name, uncanny thought, though, being listed in her mother's phone.

'Yes, I guess Mrs Birkenhead is still my mother, I ... I think. Yes. The fact is, I sort of lost contact with her, I'm sorry. Why are you calling me?'

She really should do her laundry first, she thought. She needed that red and orange dress tomorrow.

'Mrs Robbin, can you tell me where you live? Do you live anywhere near Purplewood Hill? We'd like to come around. We need to speak to you urgently and would rather not do that on the phone.'

'So it's serious,' Eliza was really getting anxious.

'Yes I live close, near the centre of Purplewood Village, big tent with red and white stripes, you can't miss it. What happened?'

'I really rather not discuss that on the phone, Mrs Robbin, I'll be with you in fifteen minutes if that is OK with you.'

'Yes sure, OK, I guess. See you.'

Eliza hung up. What was her mother doing in Purplewood, she wondered? Was she looking for her again? Or was it just a coincidence? What had happened to her? Must be something serious if the police contacted her about it. Probably gotten into some kind of trouble, like she used to. Eliza sighed. Fifteen minutes, she had to talk to Kai before the police showed up. But perhaps it would be better to get the laundry in the washing machine first. Who knew how long the police were going to keep her busy? She should be careful with that red and orange dress, it might not be colourfast and ruin her other laundry.

She was still sitting on the sofa with her phone in her hand when Kai came up the spiral staircase.

'Hey darling, found your phone? Are you coming down soon? We've to start working on those signs. Remember?'

Kai was used to his wife being absent minded from time to time lately. They had a lot on their mind. He knew Eliza was worried about Tiger, whose behaviour changed since moving here last summer. There was also the burning question about how to make ends meet. Birthday parties, circus school and dog training were good starts, but not enough. On top of it all, some things of the past were haunting Eliza lately. It could be related to this place. Kai was still not totally convinced they made the right move. Nevertheless, he would do anything for his wife. Eliza turned around to face him. 'It's my mother,' she said, 'there's something with my mother. There has been an accident. They found her on Purplewood Hill, the police I mean. They are coming to pick me up in a few minutes.'

'Oh damn,' Kai said, remembering Eliza's mother. 'Is she dead?' Somehow Eliza had not even thought about that possibility, strange. Of course, that would be the most logical explanation.

Why else would the police refuse to tell her more on the phone? It must be some protocol, never tell next of kin their relatives are dead on the phone, must be done face-to-face. Yes, that must be it, Kai must be right.

'Perhaps,' she said. 'They wouldn't tell me.'

She got up to reach out to Kai, who put his arm around her shoulder. She rested her head against the tattoo in his neck and rubbed her nose against it. An automatic gesture she had learned from the horses.

'Damn it,' she said. 'I always hated my mother, often wished she was dead. And now...'

She felt a tear running down her cheek, how stupid. Annoyed with herself she stepped away from Kai and rubbed her eyes. She let out a heavy sigh, straightened her shoulders and looked out of the window to see a police car coming through the gate. 'They're here,' she said. Kai held out his hand for her to walk down to face the police together. She always liked the warm and yet determined way he handled things.

They walked together to meet the police officer who introduced himself as Detective Sergeant Rylan.

'Tell me, Sergeant,' she said. 'Is my mother dead?'

Rylan started to stutter a bit.

'Please just tell me, I need to know.'

'I'm afraid so Mrs Robbin, yes. I'm very sorry. I'm sorry for your loss... We would like you to come with us, though, please. Ever so sorry to bother you, this must be hard... We need someone to identify her.'

'I'll come,' Eliza said. She walked to the police car.

'You may take your husband with you...' Rylan suggested.

'No, we've a little boy, someone should be home when he gets out of school. It's all right. I was never very close with my mother. I can handle it.'

She threw a kiss at Kai and got into the police car.

## *Shihari*

The wind was strong tonight. Shihari heard the rain pouring down on her roof. The whole room was swaying. She opened her eyes and sighed, hoping the wind was blowing from the right angle. She definitely had to fix that roof again soon. The house squeaked. Really, it was not always that much fun to live in a tree house, no matter how nice her house looked on bright and sunny days. But she needed it, she couldn't live in a normal house. Without her connection to the trees, without the seclusion of the forest, she felt lost. Despite that, blending in was essential. Oh yes, she had tried living in a normal apartment before. It made her sick. It had dulled her senses, had given her headaches. Living in a tree house was her rebellion against the need for blending in, although not many people were aware of that. She made sure she never invited people to her home and was always a bit vague when people asked her where she lived.

'Oh somewhere in the woods,' she used to reply and then she would change the subject or make some lame joke. It almost always worked. If people persisted, she would put on her sad face and say she would rather not talk about it. No one had ever dared to ask more after that.

Oh Holy Light, the roof was really leaking. That awful drip coming from the corner in the kitchen was back again. Shihari cursed this place with its bitter climate, so much worse than where she came from. She took her hood, cloak and high boots from the rack, ready to go out in the storm. Funny how this outfit almost made her look like her old self. Most times she hid it better, then again in this weather, with no people around, it made no sense to wear a disguise, and the hood and cloak were far more practical.

Shihari was physical very fit and agile. Not many people can climb on the roof of a swaying house in the pouring rain while



keeping enough balance to simultaneously hammer down a loose flap, she could. It felt strangely comforting to sit on the top of her roof in her hood, cloak, and boots. She decided to climb higher up, climb on a branch of the tree, just to be a bit closer. Closer to what? Home? That was a ridiculous thought. Home, that was so long ago. She was having more and more trouble remembering what it was like, but it was always in her blood. She could sense it in her veins. No matter how well she played her role, the homesickness was always there in the background, making her never really at ease.

She had dreamed again tonight, she tried to remember. It was important for her to listen to her dreams, but lately, it was getting harder and harder to remember them. Had she been away too long? Was she losing her abilities? Perhaps she should ask headquarters for a leave, to come home for a while, just a little break to freshen up again. But such requests were hardly ever granted.

The cloaked woman sat for a while in the top of the tree, watching the rain clouds being blown away and finally saw light appearing on the horizon. She was happy she did not have to go to work in her cover job today.

Her dream came back to her again, her old friend Hekate was in it. The images were not clear but even in her dream, there had been heavy clouds and rain. She should contact Hekate, one of the few friends she had, the result of moving around a lot, never living in the same place for long. Due to her real work, she never really had time to settle down. Well, it was not possible anyhow. It would show, wouldn't it? Hekate was the only one she ever confided in, the only one she told about her real lineage, where she actually came from. It had been a mistake. When headquarters found out, they first demanded that she 'solved the problem' as they put it. She could not do it, but made sure Hekate became essential to their goal. Thus she saved Hekate's life. She often wondered if that had been the

wisest decision. Hekate always kept the secret, but her life had not been easy ever since, and Hekate had paid a high price for it. She was looking forward to contacting Hekate again. She might even go up to her new place for a visit. Nobody knew Shihari around there, just as she preferred. But Hekate would be glad to see her, despite the fact that she had grown old, and Shihari still looked as young as she was on the day they first met.

## *Eliza*

'So, are we going to the police station?'

'No, I'm sorry, we've to go a little further. I'm afraid we are driving to Wateron. Your mother is in the morgue.'

Of course, that would make sense. The nearest hospital was in Wateron, the most logical place for a morgue. Eliza was looking out of the car window, staring at the copper beeches that gave the area its name. She had admired the big cultivated trees with their beautiful purple leaves when they moved into the Purplewood Area. It gave the place something special.

'So, you weren't close to your mother?' DS Rylan asked.

'No.'

'Any idea why your mother was here? The address we found, after running her ID through the computer, is not local.'

'No, I don't know. I mean, I don't know what she was doing here.'

'When did you last see your mother?'

'About fifteen years ago. Please, do we have to do this now? I don't like to talk about my mother.'

'We've questions, we need answers...'

'Yes. I understand. And yes I will answer them if you like, but please, later.'

'Just one more question, did you and your mother have a row?'

'Oh yes, we had, many rows, and arguments and fights, but not recently. I'll tell you all about it, later.'

DS Rylan looked back over his shoulder, expecting to see anger on her face, but all he saw was fatigue, so he decided to let it rest for a while. After all, the woman had just heard that she had lost her mother. In his experience, that was always hard to take in, no matter what the relationship was. It was the acknowledgement that you are the next generation up.

Eliza tried to take her mind off her childhood and concentrate on the scenery. She had always done that when confronted

with issues that reminded her of the hard life with her mother. The landscape was becoming more flat as they approached the city, and it polluted her view, she thought. Why was every city surrounded by ugly buildings?

In the morgue they took her to a little chapel or something similar, Eliza did not really know. The room was nice enough. At first, she did not relate to the corpse displayed on the table. It was just a dead body. But then she looked at the woman's face, and she was sure. Oh yes, this was definitely her mother, Betsy Birkenhead. The years had not been kind to her. The hard lines in her face had grown even harsher. She might have had a hard life, but bad health habits like nicotine, fast-food and alcohol had made it even worse. She did not seem to have given that up. Not that she had always been on alcohol, just on and off. She had some makeup on her face and in contrast to what Eliza was used to, she appeared to be well-dressed.

For a moment, Eliza imagined her mother opening her eyes again, to see those dark brown eyes spit fire at her once more. Her mother had had a temper. She was unpredictable.

Sometimes she was nice, soft, but those were the times when little Eliza always was extra careful. It often would not take much to wake the devil in her mother, as she used to call it. She shuddered. Memories came back. 'No', she said to herself. This was not the time or place for them, and she pushed them back by looking up at DS Rylan.

'Yes, this is my mother,' she shivered a bit. 'Can we go now?' 'Certainly, please come this way. What about a cup of tea?' 'No, I'd rather go home now please.'

DS Rylan was surprised she did not ask what happened. That was the standard question, but Eliza did not seem to care. Did she already know? He could think of only one good reason for Mrs Birkenhead to come down to Purplewood, to visit her daughter. Had she confronted her daughter with something from the past? Or perhaps Eliza had invited her, in order to