

# Mobio 6151

## I

It was quiet sitting by the river, and Dan liked quiet. He exhaled slowly, as he'd been taught, letting his shoulders relax and his gaze wander. The far bank was still a jungle of nettles and cow-parsley, with clumps of reeds here and there; but under the deep shade on this side, the leaves had begun to pile up in browns, yellows and despairing greens. And shiny black. Shiny black?

He rose from the bench and scuffed among the leaves with his foot. Reaching down, he picked up a mobile phone, a slim rectangle with silver edging, leaf-mould adhering to its glossy surface. He felt it, squeezed it. He'd been learning how to make contact with nature, how to value it, appreciate it; but now he found that the phone said something more to him. Something seductive. He blinked, then shrugged his shoulders. 'Someone's dropped their phone,' he said out loud, to reassure himself. A car hissed over the bridge to his left. Everything seemed normal.

Sitting down on the wooden bench again, he stared at the phone. They'd moved on a bit in the years since he'd owned one: the buttons were flatter, the phone was smaller, it had a colour display. The case itself was of a semi-translucent deep blue that felt warm to the touch.

There'd been a time when he'd never wanted to hold a phone again; but now that he had one in his hand he felt only curiosity. Did the phone still work? Who did it belong to? He pressed the 'on' button. Yes! the display faded into life. A picture of sunflowers.

Sunflowers? He scratched his head. That rang a bell. Oh, yes. Jen – she'd had a sunflowers poster in her kitchen. Well, she *did* have, six years ago. She'd had a phone, too. They liked to call each other, talk about how the day had gone, arrange to meet up, decide what to do at the weekend.

Then the phone trilled, and he jumped. "1 new message", it told him. Of course. Nothing more natural than for the owner of the phone to be getting a text message. So why was his scalp prickling? Why did he have an urge to read the message?

The menu seemed easy enough to work. Click, click. Here it was: Read Messages – New. The screen changed, and words appeared. *So sorry about last night. I want to talk. Please call.*

For a while he forgot the bridge, the nettles, the evening sunlight on the river. But he'd learnt how to handle the memories; now he just felt sad. He saw the party, given by the Chief Exec. to celebrate their landing that Saudi contract. The champagne had flowed, and someone had made a speech praising Dan and his hard work, all the extra hours he'd put in. Dan had had to toast himself, then everyone else in sight. But inside he was empty. They'd got the contract – *he'd* got the contract – but now it was done, finished. So what?

Suddenly, he'd seen Jen dancing, dancing with that Swede – Rolf? Ralf? – whatever his name was. Then the Swede (tall, blond, blue-eyed, like in the stories) had

stroked Jen's face. Dan was in amongst them in an instant, shouting, screaming. He hadn't lost her when he shoved the Swede out of the way and swore at him. He hadn't lost her when he began screaming, his spit vaporising in the space between them. But he had lost her when he'd swung a slap at her. It didn't matter that he'd stopped before he made contact. No, it was the look in her eyes – fear, sorrow, despair – *distance* – that had made him stop, and made his insides crumple up like a ball of paper. Drunken comrades drew him away, shoved him in a taxi. Back in his flat overlooking the harbour, he'd hurled his phone out of the window. Then he'd stripped to his underclothes, curled himself into a foetus and lain on the mock-tile kitchen floor with his thumb in his mouth, sobbing.

Yep, it was okay. Dan looked around, up and down the river. A couple of ducks splashed down a few yards upstream. Everything was still the same, and Dan knew he'd survived again. Those memories used to drag him down, but now he was their master. He'd forgiven himself, forgiven the Swede, forgiven the world. He didn't think about Jen these days.

He shoved the phone in his pocket and made his way back into town, giving the Oxfam Shop a friendly nod as he passed. It was good to have something to do, and he was grateful. He liked the work, and there was usually someone to talk to. The Meeting-House, too – warm chats with Friends on Sundays... Sometimes Dan wondered if it had been a good thing that he'd fallen off the world's radar for a few years.

His present flat was not quite as big as his old kitchen, but a lot cosier. The day's post lay on the mat: a bill, two attempts to seduce him into credit cards, and a postcard from an Oxfam colleague. Where had he gone? Ah, yes, Amsterdam. The card showed a picture of Van Gogh's "Sunflowers". Sunflowers!

Dan turned, suddenly, but no-one was there. No, he said, I can manage this. There's nothing to worry about. But then he found himself sitting down, pulling the phone out of his pocket. Calling up the message again. Licking his lips, he hit the "reply" button. Furtively he typed in his message. *Sorry I'm late. I still love you.*

Once he'd sent the text his insides lurched. What have I done? he asked himself. It's not Jen I've sent that message to – it's a complete stranger. I could be done for – for harassment or something...

He exhaled. Breathe in slowly, out slowly. Repeat. Become aware of your thoughts. Lying flat on the floor, he closed his eyes. That's better. As you breathe out, feel the toxins flowing out of you ...

Then he gave a yelp and sat up. The phone was ringing.

## II

She closed the suitcase and sat next to it on the bed, her hands loose in her lap, her eyes fixed somewhere beyond the Van Gogh print on the wall. She shook her head and sighed. Poor Mike – it was a shame, but she'd had to do it. It was better for them both. He'd get over her in time; he'd have to. She bit her lip. Mike was a lovely man, but so – so vulnerable inside. And she'd seen it happen before: girl meets boy, girl likes him, marries him – then realises she doesn't love him, and has to choose. All too often, she thought, the girl chooses to stay, to live on in a loveless marriage, slowly drowning...

She knew that wasn't fair; many couples made do with what they'd started out with. But she couldn't help it; Mike had had to go. She'd done it properly, face to face, neutral ground. Hoped they'd always be friends. Please don't call. And the pleading note in his voice – 'Oh Jenny, no, not after all this time' – hadn't shaken her resolve. Instead it had convinced her. She couldn't help feeling sorry for him, though. After all, he'd been such a help after Dan walked out, after that endless night all those years ago.

She stood up, easing out her back, and crossed to the dresser. Somewhere in here was her old phone, with its ancient black-on-grey display and its lumpy corners. This one had worked for nine or ten years, now – better than the stupid new Motorola that had packed up on her only yesterday. Prising the cover off, she slipped the SIM card into place then plugged in the charger.

She'd stopped remembering that party, now. It was no use. She'd hated everyone for a while, after that. She'd hated the year before the party, watching Dan getting more and more stressed as he spent all his time on the phone, working longer and longer hours. Then she'd hated Dan for putting up with it, and hated herself for not rescuing him sooner. The night of the party, he'd lost it completely – shouted at her, shouted at that man she'd been dancing with – a Norwegian, she thought he was – and then vanished. She'd phoned him, texted him, but he didn't reply. Then she thought he'd want to be left alone for a few days; but when she eventually called, nothing echoed behind his door. Mike had helped her, even then – poor Mike! He'd contacted Dan's landlord, who knew nothing; called Dan's father and made discreet enquiries, so as not to frighten the old man. Then, after a month of fruitless searches, he'd persuaded her to drop it. Leave it, he'd said. If Dan wants to come back, he'll do it in his own time.

How was that phone doing, she thought? Ten minutes should be enough to charge it for now. She dropped the phone into her handbag, coiled up the charger and stuffed that in, too. Then grabbing her suitcase she closed the front door behind her, double-locked it, and took the lift down. It was a lovely evening for a drive. Dan used to like taking her out on nights like this, with the clouds like gaudy roses and a deep blue growing in the east. They'd cruise the lanes and find an old country pub, and hold hands while they told each other of their plans and dreams. Then home to the flat, and coffee, and lovemaking...

Throwing the case into the Polo's tiny boot, she paused and frowned. *Home. Home to the flat.* That's what had been, hadn't it? Home. 'Stupid,' she said out loud, and slammed the door as she climbed in.

The schools had gone back weeks ago, and the Friday night lemming-rush out of London wasn't too bad. Soon she'd left Maidenhead far behind as the M4 flew beneath her wheels. Good idea this, a weekend at Laura's empty flat in Devon. Take the watercolours, maybe do some sketching. She let herself breathe out, long and slow, while Classic FM told her everything was all right, the container lorries got out of her way and the stars came out above the downs...

The stars. The headlights in her mirror. The fire in Dan's eyes as he'd told her she was a slut and begun to yell like a rugby team. The punch that he swung but never landed; his tears dripping on the parquet floor as Mike and the others dragged him away. Poor Mike, poor Dan...

She remembered herself, as she was that night. After they took Dan away, she walked home – walked the streets on her own, in heels too high and clothes too thin. She'd wanted to throw herself on the bed and sob, because her heart was leaving her, like Dan. She'd lost him months before, she decided; but that didn't make it easier. Setting her jaw, she'd tidied her flat and washed the dishes through the small hours. She drank strong coffee as a siren fled through the streets, and she tried not to wonder if Dan had hurt someone, or maybe hurt himself. While she ran a bath she stood in the bedroom and slowly undressed, hanging things up or draping them tidily on a chair. She felt the rough carpet and cold lino floors under her bare feet, then sank herself into the deep fragrant bath. And then in the steam she'd cried, sobbing so hard that she made waves in the lavendered water, and salt ran to her lips.

It wasn't good to feel like that when driving. She pulled into a services near Bristol and dabbed her eyes, before climbing out of the car and taking a few lungfuls of cold night air. A bottle of cold water from the shop, maybe. Fumbling in her handbag, she found the once-familiar phone and checked it. No messages, that was good. Then she frowned. This was the very phone she'd used when those tears had got too much, and she'd leapt out of the bath, spilling water everywhere, and stood dripping while she tried to phone Dan. She thrust it back into the bag.

The night dragged on, and the M5 seemed endless. Then more roads, narrowing to lanes; then the poorly-lit town square with its Spar and its charity shops, then, at last, Laura's flat. Exhausted, she climbed the stairs and struggled with the key. Her head was hurting and she felt hot behind her eyes. Then she remembered she had some Nurofen in her bag, so she tipped its contents out on the table. Pop the tablet out. Swish a cold glass of water from the tap, swallow the tablet, gulp the rest down. She splashed her face with cold, wetting her blouse and feeling the drips running down her neck. Poor Dan.

The phone lay on the table. She picked it up and flicked between the displays. Yes, Dan's old number was still there. Something made her press the button. She could hear the ring tone.

'Oh my God!' she cried, stabbing at the hang-up button, first missing it, then almost crushing it back into the casing. She'd nearly rung Dan's old number! She knew that, after all these years, he wouldn't answer – he'd gone, gone for good, and no-one knew where. So why had she been so scared?

### III

Sitting behind the counter, Dan sipped his morning chamomile tea and let his gaze wander over the racks of second-hand coats, the assorted books and the ancient video tapes. He nodded to himself. The people who'd passed these things on to Oxfam were clearing out their old lives, making way for the new; and that's just what he'd done. He was new, and he was content.

The electronic door chime didn't even make him jump. He'd got over last night's phone business, glad it had stopped ringing when it did. He felt equal to anything now. 'Morning Alice, morning Ted,' he called to the stooped old couple who'd just come in, each with an arm supporting the other. 'I've had some nice gloves come in, Alice. Just yesterday. Over there, in the basket.'

Fantastic, he thought. Those two must be nearly ninety, and still they come here every week, pottering round and picking up the odd bargain. He wondered how long they'd been together. It must be nice to have a companion, someone to go home with in the evenings. He put his hand in his pocket and felt the phone. At lunchtime, he'd take it along to lost property.

Seagulls. That's what she hadn't reckoned with. Jen winced as another one swooped past her ear, intent on someone's sandwich. There were half a dozen of the bleeders altogether, and they were beginning to spoil what was otherwise a lovely morning for sketching. Just here the river hurried along the yellow stone channel that the town's tradesmen had made, long ago, for landing their cargoes on their way up from the estuary. The sun flickered through the willows on the far bank as they swayed and whispered in the breeze, while along the water's edge discarded leaves had huddled together in browns, yellows and pale greens. At the quayside, a flock of dinghies and miniature cruisers bobbed and swayed, and rattled their halyards. Lovely. The page fluttered under her thumb as the pencil skated across it, this way and that. She blinked and stared again at the scene, trying to fix the colour and the light in her mind. I'll turn it into a painting, she thought. It'll be a lovely picture when it's done, and I can hang it on the wall at home. Not that there'll be anyone there to admire it, now that Dan's gone. No, not Dan – wasn't it Mike she'd just broken up with?

'Eeeurgh!' she screeched. 'Oh God! Oh you – oh you *bloody* bird!' Something white and runny was now dripping off her shoulder and soaking into her lambswool jumper. The stuff had splashed all over her sketch, too, and the paper was beginning to rumple.

'God,' she said, slightly less loudly. The people sitting at the nearby cafe-tables made sympathetic *um* and *ah* noises; someone offered to help. 'Thanks, no – I'm all right, it's just my favourite jumper – spoilt – no, I've got some tissues here...' She wrestled the jumper off and rummaged in her bag. Lipstick, purse, pointless notebook, mirror – phone. She paused. Why had she got so worked up about that phone last night, she wondered? Ah, the tissues...

The whole packet had gone in the bin, and still the jumper stank. Worse, the crusty white outline stubbornly clinging around the shoulder was now augmented by snowy flecks of tissue. The breeze from the river was stronger now, and she hunched herself against the chill. Well, she thought, I'm not going to be stopped by a stupid incontinent seagull.

'Excuse me,' she asked the helpful onlooker, 'is there anywhere I can buy a warm jumper or something? Anywhere nearby, I mean?'

'Well,' said the woman, 'there's the Oxfam shop, up on the square. Opposite the Tourist Information Centre. Reckon you might get something in there.'

Dan sighed. Not long till lunch. It was often quiet in the shop, but this morning it had been like waiting for Godot. He'd once seen that play; with Jen. He couldn't remember much about it now, except that there'd been a lot of waiting.

I know, he thought, I'll go and tidy those books. Try and get them into some sort of order. Humming to himself, he edged out from behind the counter and sauntered over to the bookshelves, beyond the coat rack.

Jen looked the shop up and down. She'd been to the local Oxfam back in town, of course, but only to donate stuff. Fancy actually wanting to buy something from here! But, she reflected, it wasn't like she needed to be stylish – just warm. She pushed the door open.

*Northanger Abbey?* thought Dan. Yes, you can go here, with *Villette*. *Motorcycle Sidecar Maintenance* – with the DIY books? Hmm... The door-chime rang, and Dan thought it sounded deeper, more hollow than usual. Like a big bell in an old tower.

'Be with you in a minute,' he called.

'No hurry,' said a voice from behind the coats. 'Just looking at these jumpers.'

Dan stopped, and swallowed, and put *Motorcycle Sidecar Maintenance* down. And then he jumped. In his pocket, the phone was ringing.

Jen frowned. She held the jumper up to the light, telling herself she was checking its size; but it was difficult to concentrate because there was a feeling like static between her shoulder blades. She shook herself. *Bloody* seagull. *Bloody* little town. *Bloody* Oxfam shop. Then she jumped. In her handbag, the phone began to ring.

'Hello?' said Dan. He clamped the phone to his ear, to stop his hand shaking. 'Hello? Who is this?' Just inside the shop door, somebody else's phone was going off, so that he had to cover his free ear. 'Hello?' He emerged from behind the coats.

'Hello?' said Jen. 'Who is it? I'm sorry, I can't hear you. It's a bit noisy in here. I'll just go outside...' Whose voice *was* that? she thought, as she emerged from behind the coats and pulled the shop door open. The doorbell chimed, and she paused.

'Who's there?' said Dan, loudly. Then, without warning, the phone began to smoke, and glow. It grew hot – so hot that Dan felt his hand burning. He cried out, dropping the phone with a clatter.

At the noise, the woman who was just leaving the shop turned, and he caught her eye. They stared at each other for a long moment, not noticing as the remains of the phone slowly turned to dust, and blew away into the world.