

## DORIS

Doris was dead. No question – the policeman who found her thought so; the paramedic was sure; the coroner ruled so. She was dead. She was dead and buried. I know that because I went to her funeral. Just as well – I was one of only three people there – me and a neighbour and the duty vicar, who did his best, but really didn't know anything about her. Nor did I really, I had only met her twice.

It was more than twenty years ago. I had just qualified as a solicitor and was starting as a very junior member of a large practice in my home town of Bristol. How lucky I was to be there. My parents had adopted me because they had been told they couldn't have any children of their own. Then, three years later, to their surprise, Mary was born. After that I was very much in her shadow. So I was grateful that they let me go to university, read law and qualify. My appointment rated a small announcement in the *Western Daily Press* and it was there that Doris had seen my name. Her parents had recently died and she wanted a will drawn up. Why ask for me? She had read of my appointment and thought that a young solicitor was most likely to outlive her and be there to act as her executor. She was then in her mid-fifties and the next time I saw her she was turned seventy, and I was now a senior partner in the firm.

She knew that her health was deteriorating and she handed me two sealed envelopes. One was to be opened after her funeral and the other a year after her death. So I went back to my office after seeing her into her grave, retrieved the first envelope from my safe, opened it and read the neatly written document it contained. She had quite a story to tell:

*I was an only child. When I was just 15 I became friendly with a foreign sailor off one of the ships that called in to Avonmouth. One day I took him home, but my parents were out and he raped me. My parents returned while he was still in the house and, when they realised what had happened, my father went for him with his fists – he was a large, strong man – then with a cricket bat. He killed him! I was sent to bed and only later discovered what my parents had done. They took up some of the stone floor in a corner of the basement and buried him there. He wouldn't be missed – the ship's captain presumably thought he had simply jumped ship and sailed away without him. After my parents died I dared not sell the house in case he was discovered, so he is still there.*

I did what I had to and immediately called the police. Sure enough they went to the house, lifted several of the flagstones in the cellar and found the gruesome remains. Naturally the story made headlines in the local press and featured briefly on the local *Points West* television news. But by the time the anniversary of Doris's death came round the story had been overtaken by other local sensations and largely forgotten. The time had come to open the second envelope. Like the first it contained a sheet of paper with her own neat handwriting:

*I have followed your life with great interest. I am so pleased you have had a successful career. After being raped I became pregnant. My parents sent me away to have the baby, but wouldn't let me keep him, so he was adopted by a couple who gave him a good home. Please think of me from time to time. I do not expect to replace your parents in your affections, but know that you have always been in my thoughts to the last.*

*Your mother, Doris.*