

The house he was looking for was somewhere up in the hills between New Haven and Old Saybrook. From a rise, the view opened up to the crescent sweep of the coast and the plain rivers, and further, to the Sound itself, where a container vessel and a twin-masted rig were bearing south. Having driven for twenty minutes, he was peering out at secluded clapboard houses and concrete driveways twisting steeply out of sight.

He was concerned about a client referral. A woman housebound with an illness had called up the social work agency and asked for a member of the team to visit. The appointment had been abruptly cancelled by the woman's son. Follow-up calls and emails had been ignored. He had decided to head over to the house to check whether anything serious was going on.

A storm swept in as he drove up the hills. At times he had to strain ahead as the wipers swilled off the rain that slapped across the windshield. Occasional walkers leant forward, their umbrellas swerving and straining in the face of the wind. He drove slowly, looking out at mailboxes, wending his way down another street, and came to the right address just as the weather relented. He parked and stared up at the old house, two storeys, with pale-blue cladding, a bare sycamore in the sloped front lawn, a flowerbed filled with a wet mash of dead leaves. A car in the driveway. There were brief brightenings when the street dazzled, a flaunt and flash amidst gleaming drifts of rain. He got out. In the wind, matted leaves peeled off asphalt, skipped to the bases of power poles and letterboxes and gathered in overflowed grates. He went up a little path to the front door, knocked and waited. Wet bracken stirred along a fenceline. A stray aluminum can from a waste bin rattled in half circles on the neighbour's driveway. Finally, the shape of a person loomed at the grimy, frosted pane in the door. A sense of wariness, of the other person making whatever appraisal they could. The door opened a little. A man in his early twenties, lean, surly, not meeting his gaze.

'Hi, my name is Clayton, I'm from the Hallworth social work agency. I think you might be familiar with us.'

'OK,' the man murmured.

'May I speak with you, sir?'

The eyes moved in restless saccades. 'Alright.'

He asked the young man's name and then confirmed that he was the son of the woman who had placed a call to the agency.

‘I understand, from talking with a member of my team, that your mother lives with chronic fatigue syndrome, and that she’s been a client of ours in the past?’

‘Yes.’ The young man opened the door a further few inches, to interact a little easier, whilst also seeming to forestall any notion of opening it properly and inviting Clayton in.

‘From what I gather, you called up the agency straightaway and cancelled the visit on her behalf?’

‘Sure, I called up.’

The word straightaway seemed to linger and insist in the little silence. He was right to have come around. The man hadn’t shaved for a day or two. He was still holding the inside door handle. Even in the chill air, and with the obscuring door, there was a hint of pot. Faint yellow stains between fore and middle fingers. A few glazed streaks on the sweatshirt cuff from a wiped nose. He tried to get a sense of the hallway beyond: a pair of shoes, a side table with a ceramic bowl full of coins, rings and keys, some junk mail flyers withered by the elements. Beyond that, there was only gloom. The young man saw him looking, and for the first time raised his eyes to meet Clayton’s: intelligent but furtive; then his gaze slipped away again.

‘OK,’ Clayton said, ‘I just thought I would pass by as a courtesy to maybe get a sense of what was happening at the time, and what might have prompted you to act on her behalf.’

The young man seemed affronted by this. His eyes flickered down to the company logo on Clayton’s work jacket. He looked away again. ‘She was fine.’ Under scrutiny, seeing this probably wasn’t enough, he added: ‘She overreacts sometimes. It wasn’t that big a deal.’

‘Sure. Do you recall getting a couple of follow-up emails from us? We thought it might be advantageous to check in on you, to see if we could offer any assistance, or advice.’

The man seemed to weigh up several possible answers. A bird rustled in the bracken by the fenceline.

‘I guess I probably got those emails. I don’t really remember.’

Clayton was beginning to feel a little self-conscious. The man had been as forthcoming as he needed to be. He was staring blankly at Clayton’s shoulder. Clayton was already pushing things with this impromptu visit, and had no particular rights or authority. Nevertheless, people were unfamiliar with the regulations and statutes, and there were ways to play with their

uncertainty, to convey a sense that he could exert some influence, set some intrusive process in motion, if he felt there were cause to do so.

‘Is your mother in at the moment?’

The man leant his weight onto one foot and again seemed to range through several possible responses. ‘She’s not here.’

This was plausible. There was a car in the driveway. No evidence of, or really any space for another. It was possible, but didn’t seem likely, that another car was regularly parked down in the street. The garage looked dormant, possibly locked. It seemed a little dubious that a woman with such a condition would be out at this time of day.

‘She’s out shopping,’ he prompted, ‘or seeing friends?’

‘Something like that.’

‘Well, it’s great that she’s able to be so active.’

This drew a glare. The man said, ‘Anything else I can help you with?’

‘No, I think that ought to do it.’

‘OK, then.’

Clayton made a quick, courteous nod. ‘I’ll leave you be. Thanks for allowing me to speak with you.’ He stepped down from the shallow concrete step. He paused. ‘You know, if something similar happens, you could always reach out to me directly, if you’d find that more convenient,’ he said, and then put in the word he’d just avoided, ‘or more comfortable.’

‘OK,’ the man said. He tightened his fingers around the door handle and readied to withdraw back into the gloom.

Some instinct made Clayton add, ‘Maybe next week I could check in again, if you’re mom’s around, maybe say hello to her, see if there are any subsidies or support she’s missing out on, that kind of thing. Just for her benefit.’

The man was about to disregard this, but his impatience to be done with the encounter got the better of him. He murmured, ‘Sure,’ and then he drew the door shut, and the shape of him, distorted by the convexities in the glass, receded from view.