

The Family Affair, by Sophia Curtis

Families seem so close; nothing can tear them apart.

Right until someone is dead.

And one of them did it...

Inspector Travis drove up the windy road, screeching to a stop.

"I should really get that checked out" she muttered to herself, sighing in the winter morning air. She slammed the door behind her, eyes fixed on the ominous path ahead - seemingly leading straight to the scene of a murder. It was a grand mansion well maintained with vibrant flowers spread out across the lawn. Such a beautiful home – apart from the body awaiting inside. She put her hands inside her coffee-stained trench coat pockets and began her ascent up the steps. She knocked on the door. In those five seconds of waiting, she braced herself for the tears and breakdowns that the victim's family was bound to unleash.

A tall, slender man opened the door, gesturing for her to come in with a wave of his hand. His eyes were bloodshot, and dark bags sagged beneath them. Travis followed him into a room when a gathering of people turned their heads towards her.

A feeble, shrivelled lady with white hair stood up her lips curling up into a smile "I'm Rachel Stevenson," she shook Travis's hand, "Would you like some tea or coffee?"

Travis noted how oddly cheerful she seemed considering someone had been murdered in this very house.

"Detective Inspector Anna Travis, and no thank you, if you could just show me the way to the body, I'll make a start."

Travis pulled her scarf up over her nose, fighting the overwhelming sting of bleach that seemed to seep into her lungs. The pungent odour clung to the air, sharp and chemical, and it was impossible to ignore. It led her eyes to the pale, still figure of a woman lying on the floor, slumped awkwardly behind a wooden table.

The body looked unnervingly stiff, unnatural, as though the life had been drained out of it. She crouched down slowly, inspecting the body for any abnormal changes. Her stomach turned as the silence pressed in, leaving only the sound of her own shallow breath in the heavy air. She turned over the body to find the abdomen area of the shirt smeared in a dried dark red stain: blood.

Noticing a glimmer by the victim's hand, she reached over grabbing her left hand to find a shiny, silver ring on the fourth finger; it appeared that this woman was engaged. She got out her tattered notebook and started scribbling down notes from all the observations she had made. As she returned to the living room, she addressed the family calmly but with a firm edge in her voice.

"She was murdered by a stab wound," she said. "The problem is the killer can only be one of you. Unless someone confesses now, I will find out who did it." An eerie silence filled the

room, horrified faces staring at each other. Then, a sudden uproar of voices filled the room like an earthquake shattering glass. Travis observed everyone's reactions and took some mental notes. Even though, everyone was shouting and arguing with each other there was a young woman perched on a chair with a blank expression; She looked up and met Travis' gaze but looked back down before Travis could say something. She sighed and headed back to the body where she'd make the call for the coroner to come and prepare an examination for a more detailed description of how her victim had died.

As she read through her notes, she realised that she needed to start referring to her victim as Madeline—or, as her family called her, Maddie—to avoid causing even more anger and sadness throughout the family.

"Anna, if you'd like I can show you to your room," Rachel pondered startling Travis who had already snapped her book shut.

"Yes please," she replied, grabbing her glass of water, "and it's Inspector Travis" she added with a stern one. She followed Rachel down the hallway letting her know that the interviews would start tomorrow, and she should let everyone know that everyone needs to be up reasonably early so she can start; Rachel pointed to a door and walked off in the other direction. As Travis opened the door, she noticed a yellowish stain on the carpet, she kneeled smelling a faint smell of bleach.

Whoever did this had had to of gone down this hallway.

She went into her room settling down for the night; tomorrow would be a busy day.

Travis had been up early and was already ready when there was a knock on the door, looking at her watch she was surprised that someone had listened, normally when she told other clients early, they woke up around nine; thankfully, they were taking this seriously. She picked her notebook up and opened the door; there was a grey-haired, tired but put-together man waiting with a nervous smile. She assumed that this was Rachel's husband from his appearance.

"Everyone's up and ready for you," he told her in a slightly mumbled voice. She followed him into the front room, scanning the room, observing who was here. Everyone but the young girl she saw the previous day was waiting for her to say something. Before she could ask where the woman was, she stumbled into the room shouting,

"Sorry I'm late, my alarm didn't go off!"

Rachel muttered under her breath, Travis only catching "stupid" and "Casilda" out of it. Well at least she had the girl's name.

"Now I've got everyone, I'd like to start off with some interviews, I'll be in my bedroom doing them, but everyone must remain in here or the kitchen until I say so. She would know if anyone didn't obey her orders as she had put cameras in the kitchen and front room the previous night when everyone had retired to their rooms. "I expect one of you to see me in about 5 minutes," she told them, turning around pacing quickly back to her room.

Just in time, there was a knock on the door; it was the old man who had knocked on her door before. "Come in," she stepped aside allowing him to enter. "I do apologise but I don't think I ever got your name," she softly said with a warm smile.

"Michael," he told her, relaxing in one of the chairs Travis had moved to her desk.

"When did you see Maddie last?" she asked, writing whilst speaking.

"I hadn't seen her since breakfast, but I had heard her talking to my wife, Rachel, in the kitchen." he shifted in his seat,

"When was this?" she asked leaning forward.

"Probably around one o'clock, it wasn't long after lunch."

"Where was she at lunch?"

"I don't know,"

"Where were you to hear them talking?"

"I was in my bedroom, which is right by the kitchen,"

"What were they talking about?" She leaned forward.

"You see my son, Christopher, and Maddie were supposed to be getting married, but my wife hasn't always liked her and thought she was only in it for the money, so she was questioning her about it. I think it lasted for only a little while, then Maddie left."

"And what were your opinions on the engagement?"

"I wasn't too bothered to be quite frankly honest, she was a nice girl, mature for her age and if my son was happy then that was good enough." he paused sipping some water that she had poured in a glass for him. "he's been quite shaken up about all of this," lifting his arms, "but Cassie, his best friend, has been supportive but I think she's been rather quiet."

"Has she always been close to the family?"

"Yes, they've been friends since childhood."

"Who found the body?"

He hesitated before answering, "Robert did, I don't know why he was looking for her though,"

"Ok, well that will be all for now and thank you for your cooperation, if you could send in Rachel, please."

He nodded giving her a smile, "are you sure it was one of them who did it, it really couldn't be anyone else?"

"I'm sorry but as this area is so isolated and the timing of death there really is no one else that could have done it other than one of you." He gave her a disappointing look but continued out of the room telling her he would send in Rachel. Travis didn't think he was capable of murder and his story was pretty good, but she had to keep her options open, until she had certain evidence.

Travis turned one of her notebook pages, waiting for Rachel's arrival. She hoped she would tell her about the argument and that she wouldn't have to bring it up; Most likely scenario, she would. She took a sip of her coffee, looking out at the clear sky. If she had the chance, she might have a look round and have a walk through the woods. Travis heard steps outside before a loud knock was heard on the door.

"Come in," she said to Rachel who had opened the door before she even finished her sentence, plonking herself on the chair. Travis knew who had the manners and respect in this relationship.

Rachel poured herself a glass of water, "I've really got to start breakfast so can we be quick?" she asked in a rushed voice.

"I'm sure that if anyone starts starving to death, they'll make themselves something." Travis told her sternly. She started the same way she did with Michael.

"When did you last see Maddie?"

"I saw her in the kitchen shortly after Lunch," she told her, sipping some of her drink.

"What was she doing?"

"She just poured herself a glass of wine and was sat on the chair staring at her phone grinning at the screen, I suspected she was talking to my son," she said this with a disapproving look.

"Did you speak to her?"

"Yes, but it was after I tried looking at her phone, she shouted at me and told me who she was talking to was none of my business, she was very dramatic and rude about it."

"Michael told me you didn't approve of her,"

"I thought she was only in it for the money and that she didn't love him, she was also very disrespectful to me." she seemed betrayed that her husband told Travis what her opinions were.

"Did you start an argument with her on this matter?"

"She bloody started it, not me," she moved about in her chair.

"Who ended the argument then?"

"Suppose it was her, too much of a coward to defend herself, she might as well of told me I was right."

"Where'd she go after she left?"

"Don't know, are we done now I really do need to make breakfast now?" she stood up, ready to leave.

"Sit back down!" Travis snapped, "I'm not done yet, how did you feel once you found out she died?"

"I don't understand how that has anything to do with this, I am going to make breakfast, and you'll have to wait to speak to whoever you'd like too next after!"

She walked out slamming the door with a loud bang. Travis thought she was either upset about the death-which she very much doubted- or she was just an arrogant woman. She put her coat on, grabbed her coffee and slid her notebook into her pocket, she would take a stroll to clear her mind and think about who she would interview next.

She was walking down one of the pathways when she saw a bench, she sat down and pulled out her notebook.

So far all she knew was that Maddie had died between the hours of 12:30 and 2pm. She was engaged, her soon to be mother-in-law didn't like her because she thought she was a gold digger, Michael was a nice man, but his wife was very arrogant. There are still people she needed to interview, she reminded herself. Plus, there was that argument, but she didn't think it was much because they probably had loads before. She pulled out her phone and checked the cameras, wow was this family boring; they were eating or on their phones. She couldn't spot Rachel or Michael, but it had been an hour, so she began walking back.

When Travis arrived back at the house, she found Michael but still no Rachel.

"She went to the toilet," he told her, avoiding eye contact.

She waited, fidgeting in her seat, they would get nowhere if she just sat here. She sprung up and barked at Christopher "Come!" She would proceed with these interviews and finish dealing with this by the end of the week.

"What were you doing between 12:30 and 2pm?"

"I think I was in the games room," he said blankly.

"You think? I need reliable answers Chris, were you or were you not in the games room between 12: 30 and 2:00 in the afternoon?"

"Yes, I was in the games room with my brother, Robert."

"How was Robert with you if he was the one who found the body?"

"He was with me for probably an hour but then he left, he said he had 'plans.'"

"What so called plans were they?"

"Well I don't know, whatever plans that involved him and Maddie," he told her angrily.

"I know this must be difficult for you, but I really need you to think back at what happened. Can you do that for me?" she asked him in a calm, kinder voice.

"I just can't believe she's gone, we had a whole future together," he put his hands over his face and started crying, which made a muffled sound behind his hands.

Travis had a mortified face and slowly patted his back; she reassured him everything would be fine, and she would find out who had done this. They sat there until finally he relaxed and told her to carry on with her questions. She gave him a slight smile and continued

"How long was Robert gone for?"

"He was gone for probably 10 minutes, that's when I heard him shouting,"

"Who else was there when you got to your fiancé?"

"Everyone except Cassie, who appeared soon after me, she seemed out of breath but when I asked her about it she told me she had ran. Then everything is kind of a blur from there."

"Who called the police?"

"My mum I think," he started to get upset again so she ushered him out of the room, telling him to go get his brother and to let her know if he remembers anything else.

Why was Cassie running? And why didn't Rachel say she was the one to phone the police? Questions spiralled through her head. She sank into the chair, drained and weary; Taking a deep breath, she reminded herself to stay calm- this was a difficult time for the whole family. But still, their behaviour was maddening, and she couldn't help but feel a growing frustration. She checked the time, it read 11:23; how was she with Chris for over 20 minutes? She only needed to find out one thing from Robert, that answer would either lead her nowhere or an end to this investigation. Travis barely had time to gather her thoughts before a knock sounded on the door. She looked up to see Robert standing stiffly in the doorway, his hands shoved into his pockets. His face was drawn, eyes hollow.

"You found Maddie," Travis stated, watching his reaction carefully.

Robert nodded. "Yeah. I – uh – I was looking for her because I wanted to talk. We had a fight the night before."

Travis raised an eyebrow, flipping to a fresh page in her notebook. "What about?"

Robert exhaled sharply, dragging a hand down his face. "I saw her texting someone, and she got defensive when I asked about it. Said it was private."

Travis's pen stilled. "Was it?"

"I don't know," he admitted. "But she was acting weird. And then, yesterday, I saw her slip away into the woods after lunch. She looked like she was waiting for someone."

Travis's mind whirled. "Who?"

Robert hesitated. "I couldn't tell. But later, I checked her phone - Maddie had sent a message to Cassie." Travis's stomach clenched. Cassie.

She dismissed Robert with a curt nod, already reaching for the door. As she stepped into the main room, she swept her gaze over the gathered family members. Michael sat with his hands folded, staring blankly at the floor. Rachel paced near the window; her mouth drawn into a thin line. Christopher hunched forward; his face hidden in his hands.

And then there was Cassie, perched stiffly on the armrest of a chair, staring at nothing. Travis cleared her throat. "Cassie, I need to speak with you."

Cassie looked up, blinking as if dragged from a trance. "Me?" "Yes."

Cassie stood slowly, smoothing her sweater with trembling hands. She followed Travis back to the small room where the interviews had been taking place. As soon as the door shut behind them, Travis gestured to the chair opposite her desk. "Sit."

Cassie hesitated before lowering herself into the chair, her arms folded tightly across her chest.

Travis remained standing, flipping open her notebook. "Where were you between 12:30 and 2:00 p.m. yesterday?"

Cassie licked her lips. "I was... in my room."

Travis set the notebook down. "No, you weren't."

Cassie's breath hitched. "What?"

Travis leaned forward, hands resting on the desk. "When you arrived at the crime scene, you were out of breath. You claimed your alarm didn't go off, but I don't think that's true. You weren't in your room at all, were you?"

Cassie's fingers tightened around her arms. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Travis's tone remained steady. "Robert saw Maddie go into the woods yesterday after lunch. You were the last person she texted." She paused, letting the weight of her words sink in. "Did you meet her there?"

Cassie stiffened. "No."

"Then why were you running when you got to the crime scene?"

Cassie's lips parted, but no words came out. A long, thick silence stretched between them. Travis sighed and reached into her coat pocket. She pulled out her phone and turned the screen toward Cassie. The live footage of the house flickered. The family still sat in the living room, Rachel now wringing her hands.

"I placed cameras in the house last night," Travis said. "Do you know what I noticed when I checked the footage this morning?" Cassie didn't move. "You were the only person unaccounted for at the time of death."

Cassie's breath came quicker now, her chest rising and falling in uneven jerks. "That doesn't mean -"

Travis cut her off. "Maddie was killed by a stab wound. But when I went into the room, I noticed something odd - the strong smell of bleach. That means she was moved." Cassie's jaw tightened.

Travis leaned in. "The hallway carpet had a bleach stain, too. The same hallway leading to your room."

Cassie inhaled sharply through her nose. "I -"

Travis's voice softened. "Cassie, what happened?"

Cassie let out a shuddering breath. Her fingers dug into the fabric of her sweater. Then, finally, her shoulders slumped. "She didn't deserve him," she whispered.

Travis remained silent, waiting.

Cassie's voice cracked. "She was playing him. Stringing him along. I saw the messages on her phone - she was planning to leave him after the wedding and take as much money as she could. She didn't love him."

Travis's stomach twisted. "So, you confronted her?"

Cassie nodded, staring at her lap. "I met her in the woods. I told her I knew. I begged her to call it off - to be honest with Chris." A sob caught in her throat. "She laughed. Said I was pathetic. That Chris would never love me the way I loved him."

Travis frowned. "So, you pushed her?"

Cassie's hands curled into fists. "She pushed me first! I just... I pushed back. She fell. Hit her head on a rock." Her voice wavered. "I swear, I didn't mean to."

Travis exhaled. "And then?"

Cassie wiped her nose. "I panicked. I dragged her back inside. I - I tried to make it look like a stabbing. I thought if I could pin it on someone else, no one would question it." Her breath came in shuddering gasps. "But I didn't mean to kill her."

Travis felt the weight of the confession settle in the room. She straightened, pulling out her handcuffs.

"Cassie, I'm placing you under arrest for the murder of Madeline Carter."

Cassie closed her eyes as tears spilled down her cheeks. The house was silent when Travis led her out. The family watched in horror - Rachel gasping, Christopher frozen, Robert shaking his head in disbelief.

Travis didn't linger. She guided Cassie outside, the cold morning air biting at her skin. She let out a long sigh, running a hand through her hair. "Damn," she muttered, "I really need to get my brakes checked."

With that, she shut the car door behind Cassie, watching the mansion disappear in her rear-view mirror - another case closed, another family shattered.

And the world kept turning.