



KATHERINE
JOHN

MIDNIGHT
MURDERS

MIDNIGHT MURDERS

First published as *Six Feet Under* by Hodder
Headline 1995

This edition revised and updated by the author
Copyright © 2006 Katherine John
published by Accent Press 2006

ISBN 1905170270

The right of Katherine John to be identified
as the author of this work has been
asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright,
Designs and Patents Act 1988

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be
reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in
any form or by any means, electronic, electrostatic,
magnetic tape, mechanical, photocopying, recording or
otherwise without prior written permission from the
publisher, Accent Press, PO Box 50, Pembroke Dock,
Pemb. SA72 6WY

Printed and bound in the UK
By Cox and Wyman Ltd, Reading, UK

Cover design by Emma Barnes

The publisher acknowledges the financial support
of the Welsh Books Council

FOR
RALPH SPENCER WATKINS

PROLOGUE

The clouds hid the moon. The only light in the garden came from the muted glow of the street lamps above and outside the high walls that enclosed the grounds. Their rays cast an eerie, pyrotechnical tinge on the tips of the Victorian iron spears that crowned the brickwork. A cool night breeze rustled the spring buds on the trees, and rattled the skeletons of the dead leaves deep in the undergrowth that had escaped the gardener's rake.

Buildings loomed, a massive Gothic silhouette surrounded by rectangular blocks of ebony; black cut-outs in a world of grey shadows. Occasionally, a pencil-thin line of light glimmered from beneath a blind and at the end of long rows of gleaming blank panes, squares of soft amber shone in kitchens, bathrooms and ward offices, testimony to those who had to work through the hours of darkness.

A phantom rippled through the garden. Softly, stealthily, it floated within the shadows that fell from the trees and the encircling wall. Occasionally it paused, but always close to a tree, or in the shelter of bushes that masked its presence. Its spine was curved into a hunchback. The shade it cast, malformed, a swollen mass crowning gangly legs. It continued to drift, bush to bush, tree to tree and when it was motionless, there was a sense of ears and senses strained to their utmost.

A clock struck, its chimes crashing raucously, disturbing the rustles of field mice and voles. A barn owl swooped low, screeching when it missed its prey. A dog barked somewhere on the suburban estate outside the wall, that sprawled on what had, until recently, been hospital land.

A car engine roared on the road outside the wall followed by the siren of a police car. The phantom crouched in the undergrowth, waiting for the clamour to die. Later – much later – it inched forward, faltering on the outskirts of a patch of gleaming lawn. A low hillock of soil loomed to the left. In front of it, the lip of a puddle, blacker than any ink, wavered as wind blown trees swayed above it.

Hesitation, caution, then a quick scurrying movement. The hunchback stood poised. It leaned forward, bent double, and was hunchback no longer. It stood tall and broad on the skyline. The stencil of a shovel protruded from the mound of earth. The phantom stooped, took it, and began to transfer the earth from the hill into the pit, with steady, rhythmic movements.

Silver light bathed the scene in frigid wintry beauty when the moon edged out from behind soft, grey billowing clouds. The phantom worked faster, pausing only to pass its left arm across its brow. The mound began to diminish at the right-hand edge, and still the figure worked. Ever alert, ever watchful. Pausing between each load, listening and waiting.

The bottom of the pit was dark, damp, and colder than ice.

The air stank with the mouldy reek of rot and decay. A figure bound rigidly in a sheet, resembling more giant chrysalis than human, stared relentlessly upwards. Only its eyes remained within control. It was a strain to keep them unblinking and open, gazing at the oblong of textured blue night sky, misted by clouds and punctured by the pinpricks of a million tiny stars. In the left-hand corner shone a brilliant segment of silver light. Pitted and scarred it had to be the moon. To the left Orion shone

down, recognised from schooldays and the one astronomy lesson that had graced the entire geography course.

Cold – and something else – paralysed. No matter how strenuously the brain willed limbs to move, they remained limp and leaden; log-like appendages to a lifeless body where only the mind roamed free, painfully and acutely alive. All strength and power that remained was focused, concentrated desperately, but in vain. The paralysis that reigned supreme denied the body even the dubious comfort of shivering.

The mind worked feverishly as the eyes stared upwards, collecting thoughts, arranging them in a logical, coherent order. The last memory was of walking from the consulting room to the gate. Feet sinking into fresh, glutinous tarmac; the smell had come too late to give warning. Newly laid, and softened by the spring sunshine, the sticky black substance had ruined brand new green leather shoes. But, as well as anger over the spoiled shoes, there had been exhilaration.

The final appointment had come and gone. The gate symbolised freedom. The walk ahead was towards liberty and independence. The depression that had resulted in incarceration, if not totally cured, could be dealt with while life was lived in the outside world.

Walking towards the gate – a shout – a cry... iron-tinged, icy darkness. Confinement by something other than paralysis and constricting cloth. Blazes of light, pinpricks that hurt overly sensitive skin, darkness... more darkness... then sky. Exquisitely beautiful, crystal-clear night sky.

A shower of earth fell, dry, dusty, powdery, rattling against the taut, drawn cloth. The sound triggered a single, devastating flash of realisation – and panic. Another shower came. There was a fierce struggle to force open

glued lips, to formulate a scream; but the lips, gummed tightly shut, refused to obey, and no sound was born in the throat, not even a whimper.

The frantic effort, conceived in the mind, withered and died. Terror crawled, dry, insidious, and foul-tasting. Snakes of fear slithered from the spine, saturated with the certainty of impending death.

This pit had to be *somewhere*! Perhaps people were close by. People who couldn't see the hole, but would hear a cry.

Force, concentration – skin ripping noisily, agonisingly, from raw lips. The pain diminished with the realisation that the body had finally succeeded. The mouth opened. A large damp clod fell into it, weighing heavy on the tongue. There was no more thought of sounds, only a frenzied struggle to draw breath. Tongue and teeth heaving to spit out chunks of earth. Lungs burning, bursting, with the need for air. But dirt lay crushing, choking, against the back of the throat.

Had to remain calm – had to fight – stay calm – live. Hysteria subsided as air inflated scorching lungs: air that travelled in through the dirt beginning to pack the nostrils. Another shower of fine dust was followed by yet more moisture-laden clods, they blanketed one eye, stinging, searing – filled the nose – dry – suffocating...

Someone would come. They had to. If only they would hurry. There was no air, no breath... couldn't breathe... couldn't...

Then a silhouette. Tall, wide, wielding a spade, it blocked out the light and the stars. Blackness hovered in the pit, darker than any night; its depths wavering with a rich red glow, smouldering with an intensity that scoured ineffective lungs.

The figure moved back. Another shower followed – and another – and another –

For the first time since that walk along the newly tarmacked path, there came warmth. Warmth and comfort. There was no more fight for air – for anything. Only a quiet drifting. Floating on a soft grey cloud of down that gently caressed and enveloped. Carrying the whole body downwards into deep, relaxing sleep.

The spade once again stood upright in the earth. The mound had lessened but not so much that a careless glance would notice, particularly the glance of a disinterested trainee. A few scuffs of the shoe, a few pats to loosen and spread the drier topsoil over what was left of the mound. One more studied glance down into the pit. There was only darkness, stillness and silence. No gleam of white betrayed the sheet that lay hidden beneath the earth.

The phantom flowed back towards the trees. A triangle of light shone briefly across the lawn, dimming when the door that had been opened closed in a room in the nearest block. Its glow had burned only for an instant, but it had been long enough to outline the figure of a woman. A woman who stood stiff and straight, hands planted on the glass pane before her, one on either side of her head. The phantom in the garden looked up, and saw.

As did the woman. And even when the light faded behind her, the white lace nightgown could still be seen by someone who knew she was there.

An unseen hand pulled down the blind. It was easy to imagine the nurse gently leading the protesting patient back to bed. A patient who had seen – how much? All? Enough to talk? Enough to – the phantom smiled as it once again retreated into the shadows. Who would believe

the woman? Or any other patient who reported seeing strange happenings in the night.

Psychiatric nurses and doctors were obliged to listen to their patients. They were paid to. But sooner or later they learned to ignore the inmates. Patients who resided in Compton Castle frequently had difficulty in distinguishing between reality and fantasy.

Even if that particular woman hadn't claimed to have seen visions and apparitions before, there was always a first time. After all, she was mad. And who'd believe anything that a mad woman had to say?

CHAPTER ONE

Peter Collins thumped his horn impatiently at an old man who was dithering between the left and right turns at the entrance to the hospital visitors' car park. Hearing the horn, the elderly man panicked, pressed his foot down too hard on the clutch and stalled his car. Cursing loudly, Peter accelerated swiftly. Mounting the kerb, he drove across a neatly trimmed bank of lawn and executed a fast, furious, perfect three-point turn, which landed him in prime position to make a quick getaway once visiting was over.

Picking up two plastic carrier bags from the passenger seat of his car, he slammed the door, locked it and stormed off towards the main building, noting with grim satisfaction the queue of irate motorists building up behind the old man. Short tempered at the best of times, Peter was seething and not only because of the driver. Despite his hatred of the place, here he was visiting Compton Castle Psychiatric Hospital – yet again.

He loathed hospitals, sickness – anything that reminded him of his own mortality and potential weakness. And as he'd discovered over the past few weeks, he had a particularly strong aversion to psychiatric wards; but a nagging sense of guilt and loyalty to his long time colleague and friend, Trevor Joseph, drove him to this place whenever his free time coincided with visiting hours.

He'd been dragging himself to and from hospitals for a long time – too bloody long. He jumped over a low wall to take advantage of a short-cut across the lawns. He'd sat beside Trevor's bed while Trevor had hovered close to death during three long weeks in the intensive care ward.

He'd visited daily while Trevor had spent four and a half months on the Neuro ward in the general hospital with dedicated nurses willing and able to care for his every whim, let alone need. And despite regular visits from a *very* shapely, blonde physiotherapist, and a pretty brunette psychologist, Trevor had still failed to pull himself sufficiently together to avoid a transfer from the General to what their superior in the force, Bill Mulcahy graphically, if tactlessly, referring to as the 'The Funny Farm.'

Granted, it wasn't Trevor's fault that he'd had his head hammered to a pulp by a psychopathic serial killer, but to play the Devil's Advocate, if it had been him, not Trevor who'd faced the murderer, he was confident that he would have had the sense to handle himself differently. And fractures, even skull fractures, and infected wrist fractures, heal given time and expert medical care and Trevor'd had more than enough of both. Most injuries could be overcome if the person concerned made a determined effort to pull themselves together. Which in Peter's opinion, Trevor wasn't.

He passed the gardener and a boy who were planting a newly dug flowerbed with rose bushes. The lawn around the bed was thick with soil, and he remembered a crumbling stone cupid that had stood there when he had first visited Trevor in the Castle – was it really only three weeks ago?

He wondered where the cupid was now. It was the sort of thing he wouldn't have minded putting in his garden, if he'd had one. Home, when he went there, was a flat in a crumbling Edwardian terrace next to the sea.

'If it isn't my favourite man. Sergeant Collins, how lovely to see you.' Jean Marshall, the sister in charge of Trevor's ward, greeted Peter in the hearty voice she used

to address everyone in the hospital – patient, visitor and doctor. It was a voice that reminded Peter of knots, campfires and brisk girl guiders, and it invariably set his teeth on edge.

‘How is he today?’ he jerked his head towards the door of the private room Trevor occupied, courtesy of his status as injured policeman rather than clinically ill patient.

‘Good.’ Jean nudged his ribs and he caught a heady whiff of Estee Lauder. ‘He went to Spencer’s art class this morning.’ She left the word “therapy” out before art. ‘Perhaps he’ll show you what he’s done.’ She frowned at his plastic bags. ‘Is that a clanking I hear?’

‘Non-alcoholic beer and crisps. Trevor needs decent nourishment to counteract the junk you feed him.’

‘Just as long as it is non-alcoholic,’ she warned.

‘Do you want to check?’ He gave her his most winning smile.

‘And if I say yes?’

‘I’ll owe you one if you say no.’

‘I’m still waiting for you to buy me that drink in the Green Monkey, you promised me the last time I turned a blind eye.’

‘One day I’ll surprise you.’

‘Make sure you take the empties with you,’ she murmured, before running after Vanessa Hammond who was wandering down the corridor in a scarlet negligee. Peter knew from past experience that Vanessa was apt to act out the oddest bedroom fantasies.

Jean was a smart, imposing woman. She’d once mentioned a son at university, so Peter put her age at roughly forty to forty-five, but she looked younger. Tall, well built, with a majestic figure, red hair and green eyes, Peter could not deny that she was attractive. And she’d

made it clear that her attractions were at his disposal. Divorced and frequently lonely for female company, he rarely turned down the kind of signal that Jean was transmitting, but something about her put him off. Possibly her efficient manner coupled with the hint of hospital antiseptic that invariably overpowered her perfume. Or, the overwhelming confidence she had in her power to attract, which took away any hint of chase or conquest.

Either way, he flirted mildly with her when she made overtures in his direction, but was careful never to go near the Green Monkey, the pub opposite Compton Castle, where the staff congregated in their off-duty hours, unless he knew she was working.

Turning his back on Jean, Peter pushed open the door to Trevor's room. To his dismay Trevor was sitting in exactly the same position he'd left him after visiting two days ago. In fact, if Jean hadn't mentioned that Trevor had gone to art that morning, he could have believed that Trevor had remained slumped in the chair for two days and nights. The beard growth certainly suggested it.

Trevor was painfully, almost skeletally thin, and was wearing the crumpled pair of once black, faded grey slacks he had worn every day since he'd been told to dress. His navy sweatshirt had unravelled at the cuffs and neck, and would have been rejected as a donation to a charity shop. Peter couldn't recall Trevor ever dressing so down-at-heel, even when they'd worked undercover in the down-and-outs and junkies' habitat of Jubilee Street.

'Brought you beer.' Peter dumped the carrier bags on Trevor's lap. 'It's cold. Straight from my fridge.'

'Thanks,' Trevor murmured mechanically.

'Open the bag,' Peter badgered. 'There are crisps in there too. Smoky bacon.'

Trevor fumbled with the top of the carrier bag.

‘Not that one.’ Peter snatched the bag irritably. ‘That’s your clean washing. I got my woman to do it for you.’

‘Thanks.’ Trevor didn’t look up when Peter opened the wardrobe door and threw the bag on to the floor.

Peter took two of the four cans he’d thrown on to Trevor’s lap. He ripped one open, and drank. ‘Can you open yours, or do you want me to do it for you?’

‘I can manage.’

‘Can I watch?’ Peter questioned caustically.

‘Can you what?’

‘For pity’s sake man, I’ve come to visit. I’ve brought a goody bag...’

‘Thank you,’ even Trevor’s voice sounded distant.

‘It’s not your bloody thanks I want, it’s your companionship.’

‘I’m sorry. I’m not feeling very sociable these days.’

‘I can see that,’ Peter retorted, before polishing off half of his can in one thirsty gulp. ‘So, don’t you want to know what’s happening down at the station?’

‘Not really.’

‘Doesn’t the thought of rejoining the drug squad in a week or two excite you?’

‘No.’ Trevor showed the first sign of animation Peter had seen since he’d been injured. He even ripped the ring pull back on his can. Perhaps the threat of work was what was needed to get him going.

‘We’re doing the clubs this month. Good beer, good whisky, sex-starved divorcees throwing themselves at any and every male in sight, music that’ll deafen you, and all on expenses. What more could a man want?’

‘A quiet life.’ Trevor’s gaze flickered towards a sketch pad that lay face down on the cabinet next to his

bed. Peter leaned over and before Trevor could stop him, picked it up.

‘Florence Nightingale out there told me that you’d been to art.’

‘That doesn’t mean I want you to see that,’ Trevor snapped.

It was too late. Peter had already peeled back the cover. He let out a long, low whistle as he studied a sketch of a woman with large sad eyes, and long hair that tumbled around her face.

‘The girl of your dreams?’ He tossed the book contemptuously on to the bed. ‘Isn’t it time you grew up and started looking at real life women who can kiss back?’

‘Always got to reduce life to the lowest common denominator, haven’t you?’ Trevor retorted savagely.

Peter was elated, but was careful not to show it. After months of trying, he’d elicited a response. Maybe not the one he wanted, but a response nevertheless. ‘And the lowest common denominator is the pub. How about I persuade the warden out there, to let you out long enough to enjoy a quick one with me.’

‘No.’

There was a firmness in Trevor’s refusal Peter hadn’t detected since Trevor’s incarceration in hospital.

‘Everyone at the station sends their regards. Bill told me to tell you that he’s saving the best jobs for when you come back.’

‘I might not come back,’ Trevor threatened.

‘Haven’t you heard? There’s not enough jobs to go round for well-qualified, intelligent people, let alone ex-coppers who were stupid enough to get themselves mangled in the line of duty.’

‘Here, drink up.’ Peter emptied his can. ‘So what’s new around here?’

‘Not a lot.’

‘I spoke to Harry Goldman about you.’

‘Why?’ Trevor demanded suspiciously. His opened can remained untouched in his hand.

‘Because your brother and mother are stuck in Cornwall and haven’t the time to come up every weekend. And, because they asked me to keep an eye on you. Whether you like it or not, doctors do not like assuming total responsibility for their patients. They like to discuss their charges with someone. Family, friends, and, unfortunately for you, in the absence of anyone better, me.’

‘What did Goldman say?’ For the first time since Peter had entered the room, Trevor raised his head, and met Peter’s eye.

‘That you’re fit enough to go out. All you need is a push in the right direction.’

‘And I suppose you volunteered to do the pushing.’

‘You can’t hide in here forever, with,’ Peter jerked his thumb at the sketch pad, ‘memories of what might have been.’

‘I still get headaches. I’m weak...’ Trevor repeated the catalogue of excuses he’d been reciting for months, but for Peter, they’d long lost any validity.

‘When was the last time you left this room?’ Peter went to the window and opened the curtains, flooding the gloomy cell with bright afternoon sunlight.

‘You know I went to Spencer’s art class this morning,’ Trevor screwed his eyes against the light.

‘Big deal, you walked down two corridors,’ Peter mocked. ‘Come on, you and me are going out, mate.’

‘No.’

‘Yes.’ Peter looked at Trevor’s worn carpet slippers, opened the wardrobe door and lifted out a pair of canvas trainers. ‘Put them on.’

‘No.’

‘I’m not taking you to the pub, only a turn around the grounds. There’s no one out there,’ he lied, eyeing a procession of patients and visitors as they walked down the lawn.

‘I can’t stand sunlight.’

‘Borrow these.’ Peter pulled a pair of dark glasses from the top pocket of his blazer, pushed them on to Trevor’s nose and yanked the door open. ‘Either you walk out of here, or I carry you out,’ he threatened. ‘And given your present state of health, I could do it with one hand tied behind my back.’

Trevor stared at him for a moment. Peter thought he’d lost yet another battle, when Trevor slowly kicked off his slippers and reached for the trainers. However, Trevor’s reaction was anything but positive. Lacking the energy to fight Peter’s bullying tactics, Trevor had decided to take the easy way out and capitulate. After all, the man never stayed long. And when Peter left, he’d be able to return to his room, his chair, his sketch pad, and – most important of all, his “memories of what had never been” as Peter had so scornfully put it.

‘One more step and you’ll actually be somewhere other than this cell.’ Peter laid a hand across Trevor’s shoulders and propelled him out of the room.

‘I need my stick,’ Trevor cried as he staggered precariously on his right leg, fractured, healed, but weak from lack of exercise.

Peter took the cane from behind the door and thrust it into Trevor’s hand. Much to his annoyance, he stepped out of Trevor’s room only to find he’d pushed Trevor into

a physical altercation between Jean and the petite, sharp featured Vanessa, whom he chiefly remembered for her constantly changing hair colour. Today it was black, but it had been auburn on his previous visit and blonde before that.

Jean was lecturing Vanessa in the firm matronly voice she tended to employ whenever one of the patients was being difficult, which if his visits were anything to go by, was more often than not.

‘You can’t go outside until you’ve changed out of that negligee, Vanessa. If you walk down the ward with me I’ll help you choose something...’

Vanessa slithered out of Jean’s clutches. Before Jean could stop her, she pushed open the door to a narrow, shelved storeroom where a drugs trolley was being stocked by Lyn Sullivan, a stunning, six-foot, slim student nurse whom Peter lusted after and regretfully left alone on the premise that teenagers, even those heading for their twenties, were too young for him.

‘Out of there, Vanessa,’ Jean commanded.

‘You can’t order me around, bitch,’ Vanessa retorted.

‘No one is ordering you around, Vanessa.’ Lyn clasped Vanessa’s arm. ‘We’re concerned for you and we don’t want you to get hurt.’

‘You think I’m stupid’ Vanessa peered into Lyn’s face. ‘You think I don’t know about you and my Ian. You’re all the same. Bitches!’ Vanessa’s eyes rolled in her head as her final words pitched high, ending in a screech. She flailed her arms wildly. Catching the edge of the trolley she flung it back against a shelf, forcing Lyn into a corner. Sweeping her hands over the trolley, she picked up and threw everything she could lay her hands on. Bottles and jars flew into the air, landed on the tiled floor and

shattered in a crescendo of splintering glass, pills and potions.

Lyn tried to duck past Vanessa and out through the door, but she wasn't quick enough. An enormous jar filled with small white pills thumped between her shoulder blades. She fell heavily, crying out in pain when she landed on the carpet of broken glass.

Laughing crazily, Vanessa grabbed a set of cast iron scales. Long since obsolete, they'd been relegated to the back corner of the shelves, but she found them. She waved them above Lyn's head. Peter and Jean both ran towards the cupboard and, like a bad comedy sketch, jammed alongside one another in the doorway. It was left to Trevor to crawl between their legs and offer a helping hand to Lyn. She grasped his fingers, but he gripped her wrist and heaved her forward, ignoring her cries as shards of glass sliced into her flesh through her thin uniform.

When Jean stepped back to allow Lyn through the doorway, Vanessa quietened. She stood for a moment in the midst of the wreckage, surveying the havoc she'd created. Peter seized the opportunity to make a move towards her.

'I know what I saw,' Vanessa whispered, staring at him.

'I don't doubt you do.' He reached out, preparing to take the scales from her.

'Come on, Vanessa,' Jean crooned, easing her way into the doorway. 'You're tired. You'll feel better after a lie down.'

'I don't want a lie down.' Vanessa lifted the scales higher. 'She's there I tell you. In the flowerbed. Planted in the garden like a tulip bulb. All of that earth on top of her. Shovel-full after shovel-full. She won't be able to move,' she assured Peter gravely. Her eyes grew rounder, the

whites more pronounced. 'Do you think he wanted her to grow into a people tree?' she burst into mirthless laughter. 'She's dead,' she said finally with a sudden eerie calm. 'She would be with all that earth on top of her. Dead as mutton. She's dead and not one of you cares enough to move her to the cemetery. That's where they put dead people. I know.' She lunged towards Peter and he succeeded in sliding one hand on to the scales. 'I wanted to put my Ian there, but they... ' she glared at Jean and Lyn, who'd been helped to her feet by Trevor, '... they stopped me. If I'd put him there,' she moved closer to Peter and he took advantage and laid a second hand on the scales. 'I'd have him where I'd want him. He'd still be mine because he'd have to stay there and wait for me to visit him with flowers, wouldn't he? He wouldn't be able to do anything else.'

She heaved her hands back, intending to hurl the scales at Jean, but Peter wrenched them from her hands.

'You're in league with those bitches.' Snatching the one remaining pill bottle from the trolley she flung it in his face. Holding on to the heavy scales Peter ducked, but not low enough. The bottle hit his cheek bone, splitting the skin.

'Ian's probably still with the whore, but not the whore I found him with,' Vanessa rambled. 'She wouldn't be pretty enough for him. Not after what I did to her... '

'Vanessa!' Peter commanded. 'Look at me.' Staring into her eyes, in an effort to hold her attention, he fumbled blindly for the shelf at his side and deposited the scales on them. As soon as his hands were free, he moved like lightening. Grasping Vanessa's wrists he hauled them behind her back. 'Where do you want her?' he asked Jean.

‘Out of that damned dispensary for a start,’ Jean said hollowly, sickened by the chaos Vanessa had wrought in the secure drug cupboard.

‘You should have locked it.’ Peter yanked Vanessa into the corridor.

‘The lock jammed three months ago. When we asked for it to be repaired they put a padlock on the outside, which is a fat lot of good when you’re working inside. I’ve complained every day for three months and got absolutely nowhere.’

‘I phoned security, they’re on their way. I’ve also asked for a couple of porters and an extra nurse,’ Lyn whispered from the open door of the ward office. Trevor had helped her into a chair and she was sitting, dabbing ineffectually at the glass-studded cuts on her arms and legs with a handkerchief.

Jean studied her with a professional eye. ‘Phone for an ambulance to take you to casualty in the General.’

‘I’m fine,’ Lyn sipped the water that Trevor had brought her from his room.

‘No arguments, telephone now. I’ll check how “fine” you are as soon as I’ve dealt with this. Can you keep a grip on Mrs Hammond, Sergeant Collins?’

‘I’ll manage.’ Peter tightened his grip as Vanessa tried to kick his shins. It was an ineffectual gesture given that she was wearing slippers.

‘I thought everyone was in the garden.’ Lyn apologised.

‘It appears everyone was, except us and this lady.’ Peter gave Vanessa a crocodile smile.

Jean retrieved the key to the padlock from the debris on the floor and pushed the door to the drug cupboard over the carpet of broken glass. ‘Talk about bolting horses and stable doors.’

‘I’d rather not think what could have happened if any other patients had been here, or you hadn’t.’ Lyn handed the glass back to Trevor.

Peter sensed Vanessa becoming restless under his grip. He saw her staring at a security guard, two porters, and a male nurse who were making their way up the corridor towards them. Jean snapped the padlock shut.

‘Bring Mrs Hammond into the treatment room please, Sergeant Collins,’ Jean asked.

Peter pushed Vanessa inside. The male nurse joined them.

Jean continued to speak softly while the male nurse primed a syringe behind Vanessa’s back. The moment the syringe was ready, she pulled up Vanessa’s sleeve. Vanessa quietened within seconds and Jean had no difficulty in leading her out of the room into a four bedded ward.

‘Here we are, Vanessa, a nice clean bed. All we have to do is draw the curtains and you can take a nap,’ there was more than a hint of irony in Jean’s voice.

‘I don’t want to sleep,’ Vanessa slurred. ‘You bitch... you bloody bitch...’ she fell silent and Jean joined Peter in the corridor.

‘Thank you, we couldn’t have managed without your help.’ She led him back into the treatment room.

‘Any passing visitor would have done the same.’

‘Most visitors wouldn’t have been able to keep a hold on her. If you come in here, I’ll put something on that cut on your cheek.’

‘Shouldn’t you see to Lyn Sullivan first?’ Peter was reluctant to allow Jean near him.

‘She needs more attention than I can give her here. Besides, I wouldn’t dare encroach on Karl’s territory.’

Peter looked into the office and saw the male nurse bending over Lyn while Trevor stood ineptly by, still holding the glass of water. He ran his fingers over his left cheekbone and when he withdrew them he was surprised to find them covered in blood.

‘It always looks and feels worse than it is, when it’s on the face,’ Jean commented.

‘I’ve discovered that the hard way.’ Peter allowed her to clean up the cut and cover it with a plaster.

‘Vanessa would have to choose visiting hours on a Sunday afternoon to go berserk,’ Jean complained when she washed her hands. ‘Weekend cover is barely half of normal, and a quarter of the few staff we have are on tea break at this time of day.’

‘Sod’s law.’ Peter winced as the cut stung viciously back to life.

‘Do me a favour?’

‘I didn’t see or hear anything. I wasn’t even here.’

‘It’s not that I want to deny you a medal, but I’ll never see the end of the paperwork if they find out that I allowed a visitor to manhandle a patient.’

‘What visitor?’ Peter wasn’t slow in demanding a return favour. ‘Can I come back later with a take-away for Trevor? He looks as if he hasn’t eaten for months. He used to enjoy late night suppers in the station.’

‘It will be a miracle if he eats it.’

‘I’d like to try.’

‘Be my guest.’ She led the way out of the treatment room and locked it with one of the keys that hung from a belt at her waist. They passed the storeroom, where the porters were clearing the mess of broken glass and spilt drugs under the supervision of the security guard. ‘As ward sister it’s not my place to say this, it’s Mr Goldman’s. You do know there’s nothing we can do for

Trevor. He's depressed, but not clinically so, at least no more than anyone who's been through what he has is entitled to be. And certainly no more than anyone who's capable of reading the daily papers from cover to cover. But he's become institutionalised. It's long past the time when he should have returned to the real world. Mr Goldman's been suggesting short solitary afternoon outings since the second day he was admitted. As far as the front gate would be a start. If Trevor doesn't make an effort and take his advice soon, we'll be putting the boot behind him.'

'We were on the way out when you distracted us,' Peter said.

'I appreciate you trying to help, but the effort has to be his, not yours,' Jean halted when they reached the office.

Peter looked inside where Trevor was still hovering behind Lyn's chair. 'He did drag Lyn Sullivan out of the cupboard.'

'So he did.' Jean watched Karl bandage Lyn's leg. 'It could be the first small step.'

'I'll give him the push he needs to make the second.' Peter felt better about Trevor than he had done since the day the doctor in intensive care had told him that his friend was going to live.

'Make sure you come in with that meal before I go off at eight,' Jean warned, artfully. 'The night sister isn't as accommodating as me.'

'I'm on duty myself at nine, so I'll probably make it around seven.'

Peter's reply wiped the smile from Jean's face. If he'd come at the end of her shift she had hoped to inveigle him into the Green Monkey.

It had been almost four years since her scrap metal dealer husband had left her for a beauty queen less than half her age. She'd picked her lawyer well and paid him enough to ensure that she'd come out of the divorce financially sound. Her share of her husband's assets included their luxurious four-bedroomed apartment on the marina, a five-berth yacht, and enough gilt edged securities to make work a pastime she could give up any time she chose.

But she had discovered that money was no substitute for emotional and sexual satisfaction. She was tired of singles groups, the bridge club dominated by obscenely happily married couples, and sleeping alone. Peter Collins was a hard man, but he was physically fit, more than passably good-looking in a clean cut, military way, and she had a shrewd suspicion that if she ever succeeded in enticing him into her bed she'd find his soft centre.

She didn't doubt that he had one. In her opinion, all men did. It was just a question of the right handling. All she had to do was make the initial breach through his defences.

CHAPTER TWO

‘Take this wheelbarrow and shovel,’ Jimmy Herne, the chief gardener at Compton Castle, thrust the implements at Dean Smith, his seventeen-year-old trainee. ‘Proceed to that point beneath the willow tree, where I’ve marked the turf with lime,’ he continued. ‘You listening to me, boy?’ he bellowed.

Dean shrugged his shoulders, which irritated Jimmy even more. Dean was used to being screamed at, and not only by Jimmy Herne. His parents had done so for as long as he could remember, and as soon as he was old enough to go to school, his teachers had followed suit. As a result, he was immune to any display of anger from anyone in authority.

He lived for the hours he spent shooting aliens and outwitting commandos in the gaming arcades, and ogling girls while downing pints of illicit beer with his mates in the Little Albert – the only bar in town that catered for under-age drinkers.

‘I’ll check on you in ten minutes,’ Jimmy threatened. ‘And if you haven’t finished lifting the turf, and digging out a good couple of inches by then, you can look out. You hear me, boy?’

‘Yes, Mr Herne.’ Dean threw his spade into the barrow and trundled to the willow tree. He poked the spade half-heartedly into the grass, and gingerly lifted the turf he’d cut. If he didn’t trim the edges neatly, it would set the old geezer off again, and that would mean sweeping leaves and clearing gutters for the rest of the week. He and Jason Canning, the other trainee assigned by the council’s horticulture department to Compton Castle, constantly vied with one another for the dubious

privilege of being the lowest common denominator in Jimmy Herne's bad books. Fortunately for him, today was Jason's turn. Jimmy had caught him chatting up Mandy Evans in the kitchen when he should have been bedding out geraniums, so it was Jason who was doing the dirty work.

Dean lifted out four square inches of turf, laid the tiny sod in the centre of the barrow, leaned on the shovel and rested before lifting out the next section. A fat, pink worm was oozing back into the darkness of the soil. It didn't ooze quickly enough. Dean chopped it in two with his spade, and watched both ends writhe.

'Here, boy.'

A prod in the back with the pointed end of an umbrella diverted Dean's attention from the worm.

'Dig over there.' The umbrella swung in the direction of the flowerbeds he'd dug out the week before.

The woman was short, with a beaky face that reminded him of a teacher who'd taught him in primary school. But she was wearing a white jacket. And that put him on his guard. Only doctors wore white jackets, and even Jimmy Herne listened to doctors.

'I dug out those beds last week, miss.' He lapsed into the jargon of his recent schooldays.

'I don't care when you dug them out. You will dig that one out now!'

The "now", coupled with her air of authority, made Dean jump to it. Throwing his spade into his barrow, he wheeled it to the flowerbed.

The woman reached the spot before him. She ground the heel of her shoe into the loose earth, and pinpointed the place where she wanted him to dig. 'Here, and put your back into it.'

Dean lifted his spade from the barrow and pushed it into the earth. It slid in easily. The soil was loose, crumbly and fairly dry.

‘Don’t put what you take out in the barrow, idiot. A deep hole’s needed here, for a – tree. There’ll never be room for everything you take out in there, and I don’t want you wasting time carting it around. Pile it up on the grass.’

‘It won’t be easy to clean up afterwards. Mr Herne...’

‘Mr Herne nothing,’ she dismissed. ‘All you’ll need to clean it up is a stiff brush. Pile it up. I want to see a hole deep enough for a mature beech in ten minutes.’

Dean wanted to ask why the rush, when he couldn’t see a tree, but he didn’t dare. The woman stood over him, while he dug slowly downwards. Occasionally she looked over her shoulder, scanning the garden as though she was expecting someone. Dean presumed it was the someone with the tree. And, in between, she chivvied him as though her life depended on his progress.

‘An old man of ninety could dig faster than you, boy. Put more swing into it. There’s no time for that.’ She clouted him on the arm with her umbrella when he rested momentarily on his shovel. He glared at her. Not even Jimmy Herne had dared hit him, but he pushed the shovel back in the hole, which in his opinion was already deep enough for any tree.

‘What the hell do you think you’re doing, boy?’ Jimmy Herne thundered over the grass towards them, a look of fury darkening his wizened monkey face.

‘He’s working for me.’

Dean continued to dig, happy to delegate the explanations to the woman.

‘A deep hole needs to be dug here, for a tree. And it needs to be dug this minute.’

‘First I’ve heard of it, and this is my garden,’ Jimmy asserted. ‘This here is a flowerbed, not a tree site, and it’s been dug out enough. All it needs is a barrow or two of manure and it will be right to plant out the roses.’

‘Not before this hole has been dug.’

Something in her manner rang a warning bell in Jimmy’s mind. ‘You’re one of *them*, aren’t you?’ He laughed and slapped his thigh. ‘Boy, have you been had. Had, good and proper.’ He grinned at Dean, who was staring white-faced into the hole he’d dug.

‘Mr Herne, look at this.’ Dean stared at Jimmy through dark, frightened eyes. The gardener stepped forward, and peered into the hole.

Locks of blonde hair had clumped and bunched around a single eye set in a segment of grey face. It stared upwards from the earth in blank, blind terror. Jimmy gripped Dean’s shoulder.

‘Inside, boy. Tell them to call the police. Tell them I said so.’

The woman in the white jacket was dancing and skipping around the pile of earth heaped on the grass, chanting, ‘I told them so – I told them so – I told them all, but they wouldn’t listen.’ She clutched at Dean’s shirt when he passed her. ‘But you listened, didn’t you, boy? You listened, and you found her.’ Her face loomed close to his. He could see hairline veins of red in her eyes, deep pores that pockmarked her skin, her make-up caked into creases that lined the valleys of her wrinkles. ‘You hit the jackpot, boy.’

Her cackles of laughter followed him as he ran headlong into the main building.

Spencer Jordan, the resident art therapist at Compton Castle, was respected and liked by both patients and staff, but everyone conceded that it took time to get to know him. New patients were intimidated by the sheer size of him. Six-foot-seven, with the slim, strongly muscled frame of a basketball player, a physique he'd put to good use during the year he'd spent after art college, studying textiles in a Californian university. His hair was long and neatly trimmed, as were his beard and moustache. He was quiet, softly spoken, and dressed casually in jeans or black slacks with sweaters – and his sweaters were the first thing that people noticed about him.

They were wild, colourful affairs, some mirrored abstract modern art; others illustrated with animals and scenery. The one he'd chosen to wear that Monday morning depicted ferocious-looking black and white rabbits gambolling over a background of bright-red grass, sprinkled with green and purple daisies. And the most amazing thing about Spencer Jordan's sweaters was he knitted them himself, between art classes.

'Good sketch, Trevor.' Spencer glanced over Trevor's shoulder as he stood silently rubbing pastels on to an easel propped in the darkest corner of the room. 'I like the background colours. I take it that's the same lady we've seen before, long dark hair, grey eyes. Am I allowed to know who she is?'

'A figment of my imagination.' Trevor picked up a grey pastel to darken the clouds above her head.

'Pity. She looks like the kind of person I'd like to get to know.' Spencer stood behind Trevor for a few moments, inviting further conversation. When none came, he moved on to the next easel, where his youngest male

patient, Michael Carpenter, was working on a chocolate-box picture of a country cottage. Straw-thatched roof, roses climbing around a peaked wooden porch, small leaded-glass windows and, sitting dead centre of the picture, an auburn-haired girl clutching a bunch of bluebells on her Laura Ashley clad lap.

Just as Trevor Joseph always sketched dark-haired women, so Michael Carpenter always painted girls with short auburn curls. Spencer knew Trevor was a police officer suffering from depression after receiving life-threatening injuries. He had no idea where the dark-haired lady fitted into his past, if indeed she did, but he knew about Michael's lady.

Michael's sole topic of conversation was Angela and Angela was the reason he was in Compton Castle. Michael had been a bank clerk with no interests other than work, his girlfriend Angela, and building his model railway. When Angela told him there was someone else in her life and she wanted out of their relationship, he couldn't take it. He began to stalk her and her new boyfriend. He took to camping out at night in her parents' garden whenever she stayed in. Threats and warnings from her family and the police, the supportive concern of his own family – none of it had any effect.

One night, an hour after the last light had been switched off in Angela's house, Michael had cut a hole in the dining room window, set fire to rolls of newspaper he had brought for the purpose, and pushed them through the hole so they'd land on the carpet close to the drapes. The room had been ablaze in a matter of minutes and, if it hadn't been for the timely intervention of a retired police officer neighbour who had seen the flames through his living room window, the family would have burned to death in their beds.

Michael had arrived at Compton Castle, via the courts, prison, and an order that he undergo therapy. But Spencer was beginning to doubt whether the treatment Michael was receiving offered a solution to his problem. Michael had been attending his art class for six months, and he was still drawing idyllic cottages with his ex-girlfriend sitting in the garden. Sooner or later Michael had to accept that Angela was no longer part of his life – and wouldn't be, ever again. While he continued to reject that concept, he may as well resign himself to living out the rest of his life in an institution.

'Spencer, look at my work please.' Alison Bevan, a professional mother suffering postnatal depression after the birth of her ninth child, the result of her fourteenth "serious" relationship in as many years, fluttered her sparse eyelashes at him. Spencer walked over to her easel. She'd drawn a childlike picture of children at play. No figure had arms or legs of the same proportion and all their mouths were fixed in upturned grins. In the left-hand corner were the outsized figures of a man and a woman. The woman's face bore the same determinedly bright smile as the children, but the man's face was devoid of features.

'Isn't he happy, Ali?' Spencer pointed to the matchstick-like figure.

'He wouldn't be,' Alison retorted. 'He's a man, and everyone knows men have to do the work and bring in the money.'

'So he carries all the responsibility.'

'Isn't that what it's like for you, Spencer?' she questioned artfully.

'No, Alison, it's not.' A warning note crept into Spencer's voice. 'I've only myself to consider.'

'You must get lonely then,' she persisted.

‘Your picture’s coming on.’ He ignored her final comment. ‘I like the touch of the flowers on the ground matching those in the children’s hands.’ He moved on to Lucy Craig, a plump, nervous seventeen-year-old, who had cracked under the pressure of studying for her A Levels.

‘Look, Mr Jordan.’ Despite Spencer’s prompting, Lucy could never bring herself to use his Christian name. ‘There’s a police car driving on the lawn. It’s churning up Mr Herne’s turf. He won’t be pleased.’ She glanced at Spencer, but he was watching Trevor. Head down, Trevor was diligently smudging pastels, evincing no interest in what was happening outside. Spencer wondered how much truth that lay behind the maxim, “Once a policeman, always a policeman”.

Constable Michelle Grady stood twenty yards from the hole Dean had dug in the flowerbed. The stubby heels of her walking shoes had sunk into the turf, and her uniform was hot, prickly and stuffy in the warm spring sunshine, but she didn’t move an inch from her post. She’d heard a number of stories in Police College about rookies allowing crucial evidence to be destroyed at a crime scene, and she was determined that no one would be able to accuse her of negligence.

Her trained eye had spotted flecks of earth amongst the blades of grass, some distance from the pile of earth Dean had heaped up. She smiled at the thought of pointing this out to her superiors, then imagined Sergeant Peter Collins’ voice, loud in contempt.

“Of course the hole must have been dug out more than once you stupid woman. If it hadn’t, the damned body couldn’t have been buried there in the first place.”

She rocked back on her heels. She must be careful not to state the obvious. Sergeant Collins wasn't the only superior officer in the station with a sharp tongue.

She wrenched her heels out of the soil and stamped up and down. Waiting was the worse part of every day – waiting for her superiors – waiting for the serious crimes squad – waiting for the pathologist. Didn't *anyone* care about the poor victim lying at the bottom of the hole?

'There's no need to stamp your foot, Constable. Whoever's down there isn't going to complain about being kept waiting.' Dan Evans, an inspector in the Serious Crimes Squad, appeared behind her.

'Inspector.' She nodded. Dan Evans was a mountain of a man who'd been an international weightlifter. At six-foot-four, heavily built and twenty stone, he towered over everyone in the station. Before he'd joined the force he'd been a farmer, and she knew his family still worked land around Carmarthen, which explained his lilting Welsh accent and his exasperatingly slow speech.

'When you've dealt with as many cases as I have, you learn to take your time. Rush and you're apt to make mistakes.'

'I can't stop thinking about that poor woman...'

'How do you know there's a woman down there?' His drawl, coupled with his nitpicking, irritated her.

'Because she has long blonde hair. She's also wearing bright-blue eye-shadow.'

'Could be a gay,' Dan countered.

'It looks like a woman, and as she's been murdered...'

'Murdered,' Dan mused. 'How did you come to that conclusion?'

'Because she's buried here, in the hospital grounds. Someone wanted to hide the body from the authorities.'

‘Or someone couldn’t afford to pay for a funeral. They’re getting pricier every day. Mint?’ He thrust a crumpled paper bag under her nose.

‘No, thank you,’ she refused stiffly.

‘You should learn to relax, constable...’

‘Grady. Michelle Grady, sir.’ She drew herself up to her full height of five-foot six-inches, but she still felt like a child next to him

He pushed his fingers through his fair, thinning hair and looked at a battered blue estate car edging its way through the gates.

‘Here’s the pathologist. Ever meet Patrick O’Kelly?’

‘Not to talk to, sir.’ She’d heard a lot of stories about Patrick O’Kelly, and all of them had been reinforced by the compulsory post mortem that she, and every rookie, had been forced to attend.

‘You’re in for a treat.’ Dan Evans pushed another mint between his lips, before stepping forward to open O’Kelly’s car door, as it drew to a halt on the lawn.

‘What have you got?’ O’Kelly left the driver’s seat and heaved a battered wooden case from the back of the car.

‘A face, partially uncovered in fresh-dug earth,’ Dan replied shortly, ‘although our constable here thinks it could be murder.’

‘Could be someone wanting to avoid funeral costs.’

‘That’s what I told her.’

‘Police ambulance here?’

‘Not yet.’

‘I’ll make a start anyway.’ O’Kelly glanced from the hole to the lawn around them. ‘Who’s been tramping over this site?’ He peered suspiciously at Michelle.

‘The trainee who dug the hole,’ Michelle recited. ‘The patient who ordered him to do it. The gardener. And myself.’

‘What patient ordered the trainee to do what?’ Dan asked.

Michelle pulled out her notebook and flicked through the pages. ‘A Mrs Vanessa Hedley insisted she saw someone bury a body in the garden the night before last. When she told the staff on her ward, they wouldn’t believe her; and when she persisted in repeating her allegations, they sedated her. According to the hospital administrator, Mr Tony Waters, given her history they were justified in ignoring her. Mrs Hedley wasn’t allowed out of her room until this morning. She found and dressed in a white jacket in the hope that she would be taken for a doctor. Then she came out and ordered one of the trainees to start digging...’

‘And he obeyed an inmate?’ O’Kelly questioned incredulously.

‘He thought she was a doctor,’ Michelle reminded him.

‘I’m confused,’ Dan chipped in. ‘Who exactly is in charge of this place?’

Patrick pushed his glasses further up his nose, and snapped on a pair of rubber gloves.

‘I stepped in the footprints of Mrs Hedley and Dean Smith, the trainee,’ Michelle continued. ‘Since I arrived I have succeeded in keeping everyone away from the site.’

‘Coming with me, Dan?’ O’Kelly stepped across the lawn.

Dan followed Patrick to the lip of the hole. A few seconds later Patrick shouted for a spade and Michelle handed him the one Dean had abandoned. When she returned to her post, she stared disapprovingly at the

crowd of patients and domestic staff who were teetering on the edge of the lawn, and shooed them back. She enjoyed wielding the authority that came with her uniform. When she'd forced them to retreat a couple of token feet, she returned to her post and tried to listen in on Dan Evans' conversation with Patrick O'Kelly. But all she could make out was a succession of 'Steady's', 'There she goes', and 'Look at that', none of which proved enlightening.

A second police car arrived with her immediate superior, Sergeant Peter Collins. As he directed the erection of canvas screens around the site, she continued to stand her ground. Within minutes the entire area around the hole was shrouded off, much to the disappointment of the crowd of onlookers.

Peter Collins stepped back, stood in the crowd for a few moments to test the efficiency of the screens then joined Michelle.

'I hear you were first on the scene.'

'I was,' she answered.

'What's the run-down?'

'A trainee gardener uncovered part of a face in the flowerbed...'

'Just a face, or is it attached to a body?'

'I think it's attached to a body,' she ventured, suddenly unsure of the facts.

'Stupid place to put a body,' he observed, 'where a gardener's going to dig it up.'

'He wouldn't have, if a female patient hadn't ordered him to do it.'

'Have you asked the patient how she knew there was someone buried here?' he enquired.

'She claims she saw someone burying a body in the garden the night before last.'

‘Saturday night.’ Peter recalled Vanessa’s ramblings during the rumpus on Trevor’s ward. Instinctively he fingered the cut on his cheek. What had Jean Marshall called her? – Hedley – that was it. ‘Vanessa Hedley,’ he said aloud.

‘You know about her?’ Michelle was crestfallen at relinquishing her edge on the case.

Peter didn’t hear her. ‘Well I’ll be damned,’ he muttered. ‘Some lunatics aren’t so mad after all.’

For the first time since Spencer Jordan had taken over the art therapy classes, the patients grew restless before the end of their allotted time. They abandoned their sketch pads, pastels and easels for the greater attraction of the police cars and the mysteriously veiled area on the lawn. Only Trevor remained apparently indifferent to the drama being played out in the grounds.

Spencer allowed the group to disperse ten minutes before time. When everyone except Trevor had left, Spencer moved quietly around the room, collecting portfolios, gathering together pastels and picking up the odd pencil that had fallen to the floor. The whole of the time he was clearing up, Trevor continued to work diligently and silently in his corner. The hands on the clock crept around to one o’clock, and still Trevor remained engrossed in his sketch.

At five minutes past one, Spencer lifted down a rucksack from a peg behind the door. Picking up a chair, he carried it over to a table close to where Trevor was working.

‘Sandwich?’ Spencer opened a packet wrapped in greaseproof paper.

‘No, thank you,’ Trevor replied distantly, without looking up from his drawing.

‘They’re salad and goat’s cheese. A friend of mine made the cheese, and I mixed the salad. Guaranteed organic, no chemical, no fertilisers – unnatural fertilisers, that is.’ He pushed the packet closer to Trevor.

Trevor looked up, stared at the sandwiches for a moment, then, after dusting off his hands on his sweatshirt, took one. ‘Thank you.’ His voice sounded strange, rusty from disuse. He opened the sandwich and peered inside the twin slices of rye bread.

‘No butter,’ Spencer apologised. ‘I try to eat healthy.’

Trevor closed the sandwich and took a small bite.

Spencer produced a bottle of mineral water from his rucksack, and a paper cup. He filled the cup and handed it to Trevor, forcing him to take it. ‘Harry Goldman told me you’re allowed out for short periods. Would you like to have a drink with me in the Green Monkey this afternoon? They do a nice line in non-alcoholic wines that don’t interfere with medication.’

‘No, thank you.’

Spencer took a sandwich, and bit a chunk out of it. ‘You’re going to have to make that first move sometime soon,’ he cautioned. ‘You don’t realise what you’re missing until you go outside. I know. It’s not that long since I was sitting where you are now.’

‘You were a patient?’ The question was timidly phrased, but it was still a question, and Spencer understood what a profound step forward that represented for someone in Trevor’s depressed state of indifference.

‘Yes, I was a patient. In America first, then here.’ Spencer ran his fingers over the scars that radiated from the glass eye in his right socket. ‘I’ll tell you about it sometime.’ He hoped Trevor wouldn’t press him. If he put him off, it might close the chink he’d just made in Trevor’s defensive armour, and that could prove

disastrous to a man teetering on the brink of re-establishing communication with the rest of the world. But...

The “but” was the agony that Spencer had failed to live with for nearly three years. The present – including Trevor – faded as he remembered California. A sun-drenched sidewalk in the pedestrian-only area of Main Street. The beat of popular music echoing from the fashionable boutiques that catered for the young and well-heeled, drowning out the classical music from the art gallery behind him. He saw again the gilded window that held a selection of his originals, and glimpsed the walls inside, hung with limited and exclusive signed editions of his prints.

The smart set, the wealthy smart set – Alfredo, who owned the gallery, checked the bank balances of his clients before their titles and social standing – smiled at him as they made their way into the gallery. Spencer had returned their smiles. He’d had reason to be grateful to his patrons. His house had been Californian redwood built on stilts on a fashionable hillside that commanded a sweeping view of a breathtaking wooded bay. It had glass walls designed to frame the scenery. It had been furnished with designer Italian furniture, designer linen, designer crystal – in fact everything he owned and wore was the best that new and up-and-coming talent had to offer.

It would have been churlish and miserly of him to stint himself and his family, when the world’s wealthy were queuing to buy his signed prints at five thousand dollars a time, and his originals at anything from fifty thousand dollars upwards. He had all that a man could possibly want. The sun, the lifestyle to go with it, a sweet beautiful wife, sweet, beautiful babies...

‘Spencer Jordan, isn’t it?’

Still back in California, Spencer stared blankly at the cropped hair and steel grey eyes of the man who appeared suddenly in front of him.

‘Spencer Jordan?’ the man repeated. ‘I’m Peter Collins. Sergeant Peter Collins,’ he emphasised. ‘I’d like a word with Trevor.’

Spencer wrenched himself out of the past. He’d promised himself that he would never allow himself to drift back. It was too raw, too painful. And here he was again, only this time in broad daylight. He didn’t even have the excuse of insomnia, loneliness and darkness. What had prompted it?

Trevor – he’d told Trevor that he’d been a patient.

‘Use this room, Sergeant Collins.’ He rose from his seat. ‘I have things to do in the staff room.’ He turned to Trevor. ‘See you later?’

‘Thank you for the sandwich.’

It was difficult to judge who was more astounded by Trevor’s response; Peter Collins or Spencer Jordan.

CHAPTER THREE

After Spencer had retrieved his rucksack and left the room, Trevor moved from behind the easel and sat in a chair in front of the window. Peter pushed aside a mess of paint pots, jars and brushes on a table and perched on it, facing Trevor.

He studied Trevor critically, making no allowance for sentiment or friendship. Depression was etched into every inch of his sagging body, from the lank, greasy hair that straggled, badly in need of a cut, over his forehead and collar, to the limp colourless hands that lay inert and lifeless in his lap. Thin at the best of times, Trevor was gaunt. His pale sunken cheeks were covered with black stubble and he was dressed in the same faded, threadbare clothes he had worn the day before.

‘I looked in on your flat,’ Peter said. ‘After I dropped in the take-away. Did you eat it?’

‘Yes.’

‘Good fish and chips?’

‘It was curry.’

‘Just testing. It’s the same mess as usual – your flat,’ Collins explained. ‘No burglar has been in to tidy up. Frank was locking up the shop downstairs. He’ll be glad to see you back; the local kids have been giving him hell for the last couple of months. It didn’t take them long to realise no one was sleeping in the building. Frank’s window has been smashed in three times since Christmas, and his cigarette and chocolate machines have been vandalised so often he’s had to take them down.’ Peter took a packet of cigars from his shirt pocket. ‘Anyway, Frank said to tell you he’ll call in to see you. Probably on a Sunday afternoon, because that’s the only time he can

afford to leave the shop.' He lit a cigar and puffed a cloud of smoke. A year ago Trevor would have protested mildly or strongly, depending on his mood. Now he sat passively breathing in tobacco fumes.

'Your mother phoned me. I lied and said that you were making progress, and that you'd write or phone her soon. Do you think you could manage that?'

'Yes,' Trevor answered absently.

'You noticed the rumpus outside?'

'Yes.'

'Aren't you interested in what's happening?'

'No.'

Peter rose, turned his back, and walked to the window. After witnessing Trevor's earlier animation, it was as much as he could do to curb his instinct to pick him up and shake him. Despite the doctors' explanations, he ascribed Trevor's continuing depression and monumental indifference to lack of effort.

If Trevor had ranted and raved against the injustice of a fate that had broken his arm, legs and head, he would have sympathised with him. But Trevor hadn't ranted and raved; instead he'd withdrawn into a monosyllabic melancholy that had erased the personality of the old Trevor, replacing him with a stranger he no longer knew nor liked.

Trevor's detachment hung between them, threatening to smother what little remained of their close, if fraught relationship. Peter contemplated the human wreckage hunched before him. Trevor had been a good friend; probably the only real friend he'd ever had. He couldn't sit back and allow him to drift into nothingness. For the first time since Trevor had been hospitalised, he let rip, allowing emotions he usually kept tightly reined to erupt.

‘I never thought I’d say this, but work is a swine without you. That damned girl guide Bill’s dumped on the squad is bloody useless. She’s got a degree in anthropology. Do you mind telling me what bloody good a degree in anthropology is to the Drug Squad? A degree in fortune telling would be better. God only knows, it’s difficult enough to cover your own bloody arse in this filthy business without having to watch out for a useless female as well.’ He turned from the window and paced back to the table. ‘So, the sooner you get off your backside and out of here, the better it will be for all of us. Then Bill can push Mary Poppins into a quiet corner where she can sit behind a desk and anthropologise – or whatever it is that females like her do. And you and I can get on with the job.’ He confronted Trevor. ‘What do you say to that?’

‘I told you, I might not be coming back.’

There was a sharp rap at the door, and Michelle Grady stuck her head around the door. ‘Sergeant Collins, Inspector Evans is asking if you’d go to the administration office, to check if there are any plans of this place.’

‘I’ll go in a few minutes,’ Peter barked.

She shut the door.

Trevor wanted Peter to leave, so he could be left alone with his portrait, but Peter continued.

‘A body is buried in the grounds of this place under your nose, and you saw bloody nothing when even the craziest female nut on your ward saw it happen. Where were you? Dead, or off the planet?’ He walked away in disgust, slamming the door behind him.

Trevor continued to sit on his chair. After five minutes, he raised his eyes so he could once again look at his portrait.

*

*

*

‘What’s the verdict, Dan?’ Superintendent Bill Mulcahy had been on site for less than five minutes, and already the constables and rookies were acting more alert, snapping to attention whenever he passed, trying to look as busy as any officer can who has nothing more to do than control a passive crowd.

‘Patrick’s still down there. We’ll know more when he’s ready to tell us what he’s found.’ Dan pulled a crumpled handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his hands. ‘But, for the moment, I can tell you she’s young. Early twenties, Patrick thinks, and she was probably buried alive.’

‘Alive? Is he sure?’

‘Her mouth had been glued. Probably with one those bond-in-seconds, stick-anything jobs, and her nose and her throat were jammed with earth. Patrick thinks she struggled for breath until the last minute.’

‘Poor bitch.’

Dan inspected his fingernails. ‘It couldn’t have been pleasant for her.’

Bill suppressed his dark thoughts. ‘You’ve begun interviewing hospital staff and inmates?’

‘Yes, but I need to draft some good coppers on to my team.’ Dan looked hopefully at his boss. ‘Do you have any to spare?’

‘Do I ever? There isn’t a section that isn’t pushed to the limit.’ Bill stared at the sky, as though he hoped to find a solution in the heavens. ‘You can have Constable Grady, she’s a rookie, but she’s keen. And Peter Collins has become impossible since I transferred her to the Drug Squad as a short-term replacement for Trevor Joseph.’

‘Is Trevor still sick?’

‘Sick and in here.’ Mulcahy didn’t even try to keep the contempt from his voice.

‘Is he, now?’ Evans rubbed his chin reflectively. ‘That could prove useful.’

‘Don’t pin any hopes there,’ Bill recalled the false premise that the murderer always returns to the scene of his crime, and studied the crowd gathered behind Michelle. ‘Trevor’s cracked; nutty as a fruit cake.’

‘I thought he had depression.’

‘It amounts to the same thing.’

Evans debated whether it was worth arguing the point, and decided against it. ‘I’ll take Grady, and anyone else you can spare. ‘I’d like to have at least twenty men working on this by the end of the day.’

‘You’ll be lucky, but I’ll look around and see who I can come up with. I might be able to lend you Peter Collins for a while.’

‘I thought the whole idea was to separate him from Grady?’

‘He needs separating from the rest of humanity. Trevor Joseph is the only one who could put up with his bloody moods.’

‘I’ve a feeling there’ll be enough legwork on this one even for the prima-donnas,’ Dan returned his handkerchief to his pocket.

Peter Collins sat in the office of Tony Waters, Compton Castle’s chief administrator. Dan had asked him to check the layout of the building, but a quick glance at the plans had told him everything. The place was a nightmare from a policing and a security point of view.

‘As you see, Sergeant Collins,’ Tony Waters waved his manicured hand over the papers on his desk; he was a tall man, six-foot-one or two, in Peter’s estimation, with

startlingly white-blond hair and pale-blue eyes, ‘the whole place is a mishmash of bits and pieces from every building that’s been erected on this site since Norman times.’

‘It looks that way.’ Peter noted the ruins of the outer wall of the Norman castle on the southern boundary and the sketched-in blob of masonry marked “Folly.” He jabbed his finger on it, with a questioning look at Tony.

‘It’s down as Victorian, but the foundations are Norman, like the name of this place. It was easier for the Victorian architect to dovetail the solid Norman bits into the building than demolish them.’

‘You sound as though you know what you’re talking about,’ Peter allowed grudgingly.

‘I take an interest in my surroundings, Sergeant,’ Waters smiled without warmth. ‘If you look at these contours,’ he ran his thumbnail over the plan, ‘you’ll see the remains of the old moat.’

Collins noted a steep-sided depression on the northern edge of the old hospital, before turning his attention to the main building. The mid-Victorian edifice was an example of Gothic architecture at its most ornate and, in Peter’s eye, most horrendous, housing a vast network of narrow passages and steep staircases that led to communal wards the size of ballrooms and servants’ attics that were mouse holes in comparison. There were cavernous storerooms, towers and turrets that seemed about as useful as the stone gargoyles that decorated the main facade of the building.

The rabbit warren of rooms extended from a vast cellar, which had been partitioned off to hold the incoming electrical supplies and central heating boiler, to the fourth floor attics originally designed as accommodation units for live-in skivvies.

From what Peter had seen on his way to the administrator's office, only a few cosmetic changes had been made in the old building since Queen Victoria had sat on the throne. Scratched and stained vinyl tiles lay over whatever flooring the Victorians had walked on, but the walls were still covered to shoulder height by brick-shaped dark-green tiles topped by a strip of oak dado; and if the sickly yellow paint that darkened the walls from dado to ceiling wasn't the original, it should have been.

'Are all these wards?' Peter pointed to the first, second and third-floor plans.

'No, all the wards have been moved to the ground floor. The first and part of the second-floor house the administration department of the local Health Authority.

'And these.' Peter indicated units that had been erected behind the hospital. Units he knew were connected to the main building by tunnels of opaque Perspex.

'Therapy units,' Tony informed him. 'They're demountables that were erected as a short term temporary measure in the 1970s, and have never been replaced.' He shrugged. 'Financial constraints. You know how it is.'

Peter didn't comment. He turned back to the plans. As if the buildings weren't headache enough, the grounds were vast. Laid out in a park of lawns, wooded areas and shrubberies, they could have concealed a battalion, let alone a solitary killer carrying a single body.

'These gates?' Peter indicated four openings marked in the external wall that surrounded the grounds. 'Are they locked at night?'

'All but the main gates fronting on to the main road. We leave those open in case of emergency.'

'Are they manned?'

‘They used to be, until our security budget was halved.’

‘So anyone can walk in and out of here during the night?’

‘The grounds are patrolled by a guard with a radio transmitter, and the entrances to the hospital blocks are manned at individual reception areas. This building is locked at night.’

‘Do you have a problem with prowlers?’

‘Frankly, yes,’ Tony replied.

‘Now that we’ve established any lunatic can walk in here off the street, what about the ones already here?’

‘I presume you mean our patients?’

Peter sensed Tony Waters’ temper rising, but that didn’t deter him from pressing his point. ‘Could they walk out of their wards at night and take a stroll around the grounds?’

‘I told you, the reception areas in the ward blocks are manned.’

‘Continuously? By more than one man?’

‘Obviously not by more than one. The hospital budget...’

‘Doesn’t stretch to cover him when he goes for a pee, or to fix himself a cup of coffee.’ Peter pushed the plans aside. ‘What you have there, Mr Waters, is a bomb waiting to explode. The only wonder is it didn’t go off sooner.’

Tony Waters insisted on accompanying Peter when he left the office. They walked through the long corridors and out of the back entrance, entering one of the perspex tunnels that connected the administration block with the wards. Neither spoke. Tony was preoccupied with thoughts of the paperwork the discovery of the body in the grounds would

generate, and Peter was too busy mentally filing his initial impressions of the place to make polite small talk.

Peter Collins was not a sensitive man. He relied on logic to take him through life, but even he felt uneasy as they entered the perspex tunnel. Its floor and walls were white. No image penetrated the opaque arched walls, only an intense, eerie light. He felt as though he had stumbled into a surrealist painting. And, almost as soon as they entered the tunnel, it curved sharply. He turned his head and looked back. All he could see behind him was the tunnel disappearing into itself. Ahead, the same thing. He was beset by the most peculiar sensation, of being disembodied in time and space.

‘If you’re not nuts when you come into this place, you could well be nuts by the time you leave,’ he observed caustically.

‘You don’t like our tunnels, Sergeant Collins?’ Tony asked.

‘Do you?’

‘They’re cheap, and secure. No one can get into them from the outside, except by the exit and entry points, which have been kept to a minimum; and they provide a dry, direct route from the wards to the therapy blocks. The staff can send patients through them with confidence, knowing they will turn up safely at the other end.’

‘Always supposing they aren’t blinded before they get there.’

‘The company that installed them are experimenting with other colours, including mottled-green.’

Peter noticed how the strong white light drained what little colour there was in Tony Waters’ face and white-blond hair, and he reflected that a mottled-green face might look even more bizarre.

*

*

*

‘Peter, and?’ Bill greeted Peter as he and Tony strode over the lawn towards him.

‘Tony Waters, hospital administration,’ Peter introduced his companion to his superior.

Bill extended his hand. ‘We need to set up a system for interviewing your staff and patients as soon as possible, particularly...’ Bill flicked through his notebook, ‘Vanessa Hedley, the patient who ordered the gardener’s boy to dig here.’

‘I can organise a rota for you to interview the staff, but you’ll have to consult Harry Goldman before you interview any of the patients. He’s the chief psychiatrist. Patients’ welfare is his responsibility.’

‘Where can I find him?’ Bill asked.

‘At the moment, in court. He’s giving evidence in a case involving one of our patients.’

‘Then we’ll begin with the staff.’ Bill saw Dan and Patrick’s shadows moving behind the screens. ‘Peter, you and Michelle begin with the nursing staff working on Vanessa Hedley’s ward. You’ve no objections Mr Waters?’

‘None, Inspector...’

‘Superintendent Mulcahy,’ Bill corrected tersely.

Peter pulled his notebook from his pocket and strode across the lawn towards Michelle Grady. Dan and Patrick emerged from behind the screens. Patrick peeled a pair of rubber gloves from his hands, as he studied a sheaf of Polaroid photographs Dan held in front of him.

‘We’re ready to move her out, Bill.’ Dan turned to one of his subordinates. ‘Get this crowd shifted back, and the ambulance up.’

‘Right away, sir.’ The young officer ran off.

‘Inspector Dan Evans, Patrick O’Kelly, pathologist, Tony Waters, hospital administration,’ Bill made the introduction impatiently.

‘Perhaps you can help us, Tony,’ Dan began.

‘I’d be delighted, but, as I’ve already explained to Superintendent Mulcahy, I can’t authorise access to the patients. You’ll have to wait for Mr Goldman’s permission.’

Dan offered Tony a selection of the polaroids. ‘I realise this is a long shot, but do you recognise her?’

Waters accepted the photographs gingerly. He held the first one and squinted at it.

‘Blonde hair, blue eyes, five-foot six-inches tall, well nourished – you could say plump,’ Patrick chipped in. ‘No distinguishing marks as yet, but I may uncover some in the lab. Early twenties. Strike a chord?’

‘We have over four hundred nurses here, between the day and night shifts, and that’s without the auxiliaries, administrative and domestic staff. Not to mention the patients. But, I spend very little time out of my office. Could I make a suggestion?’ Tony handed the photographs back.

‘You could,’ Bill agreed.

‘Don’t show these to the nursing staff, if there are patients around. Some of their minds are delicately balanced.’

‘We can agree to that. We’ll also try to arrange a better photograph back in the lab.’ Dan studied the picture of the contorted face. Patrick had scraped away the earth, but the features were smudged with dirt, and the skin was grey, disfigured by livid blotches.

‘We’ll check her description with our missing person’s files and put out an appeal to the media. Do you have any nurses or patients missing, Tony? Any who

haven't turned up for work during the last couple of days?' Bill asked.

'All our nurses are reliable. If they're sick for a day, they're meticulous about phoning in, because they're aware of the strain their absence will place on their colleagues. Patients,' Tony shook his head. 'The voluntary patients come and go because whatever the doctors' diagnosis, we have no authority to keep them here. In any given week, at least half a dozen discharge themselves.'

'And disappear?' Dan asked.

'As far as our records go. Some don't even bother to go through the formal procedure of discharging themselves from the wards, and that's not to mention those in the halfway houses –'

'What houses?' Dan interrupted.

'We have three halfway houses,' the administrator explained. 'Six-bedroomed units we use to accommodate and support patients the psychiatrists consider fit enough to be returned to the community. They're located just outside the walls, on the west side. Each patient has their own room, but they share kitchen and bathroom facilities. Some have been found sheltered job placements or training by their social workers.'

'Is a check kept on their movements?' Bill asked.

'There's a warden in each hostel, and staff sleep in on a rota basis, so we're aware if any patient stays out all night. They also have to keep an appointment with their own psychiatrist once a week.'

'These hostels are outside the grounds?' Dan checked.

'Yes.'

'There's no way the people living in them could enter the hospital buildings at night?'

‘I suppose they could come through the main gate, if they wanted to,’ Waters conceded.

Bill looked at Peter who’d seen Dan handling photographs of the victim and returned to get one.

‘You haven’t heard the half of it, sir,’ Peter took a Polaroid from Dan, Oblivious to Waters’ angry glare, he summoned Michelle Grady and they walked back towards the wards.

Peter had worked on the Drug Squad for ten out of the fifteen years he’d spent on the force. Drug Squad work was dirty, occasionally dangerous, often boring, wet and cold; but he operated in familiar territory. Usually he had a reasonable idea of what he was up against, and what he was looking for. Most of the time, interviewing people was straight-forward. His questions were centred on what, when, how, and where they’d seen, sold or handled illegal substances.

A murder enquiry was entirely different. This wasn’t the first time he’d been drafted into the Serious Crimes Squad, but prior knowledge of what was required of him didn’t make the task any easier. He hated interviewing people when he didn’t know what he was looking for. At best, all he could hope for was a few scraps of information that might prove useful. Scraps that wouldn’t even be recognised as useful until they were pieced together back at the station, along with fragments of gossip that his fellow officers had picked up.

He sat on a hard wooden chair in Jean Marshall’s office, and stirred a cup of mud-coloured hot water the duty domestic had assured him was coffee. Michelle sat across the desk from him, nervously crossing and uncrossing her legs. They weren’t wonderful legs. Too thin for his taste, but she was another body; and he hoped

her presence would protect him from Jean's more blatant overtures.

In the event he needn't have worried. When Jean arrived, she had Lyn Sullivan in tow, and both were carrying bottles of mineral water.

'You are brave.' Lyn's smile lit up her face, and Peter found himself smiling back, in spite of the frustration welling inside him.

'I didn't think it showed.'

'Not many people will drink that.' She pointed at the coffee. 'Heaven only knows what Josie puts into it. The latest theory includes powdered laxatives.'

'Now you tell me.' He changed the subject. 'Run the events of Sunday past me one more time.' he said to Jean.

'You were there.' She lit a cigarette.

'When exactly did Vanessa Hedley start talking about bodies buried in the garden?'

'She told me about the body when I came on duty at eight on Sunday morning,' Lyn volunteered.

Peter glanced at the expanse of thigh displayed beneath Lyn's short skirt. He hadn't seen a pair of legs as good as hers in a long time.

'Didn't you think to question the night staff about her story?' Michelle looked daggers at Peter.

'None of the staff would consider a patient's ramblings worth discussing.' Jean blew smoke in Michelle's face. 'This is a psychiatric hospital. Most of our patients, including Vanessa, have difficulty differentiating between reality and fantasy.'

'Has she said anything since?' Michelle persevered.

'Only as many variations as she can think of along the lines of "I told you so",' Jean answered.

'Do you think she really did see something?' Michelle asked.

‘It’s bloody obvious she did,’ Peter snarled. ‘She must have done, to be able to pinpoint the exact spot where the body was found.’

An uneasy silence fell over the room.

‘Sorry we can’t be more help.’ Jean poured water into a glass, ‘but you know what this place is like. Or you should do after the time you’ve spent visiting here. Trevor’s a simple depressive, which is understandable considering the physical injuries he’s had to cope with, but most of the other cases on his ward are more complicated. It’s difficult for laymen to understand that paranoid delusions and fantasies are as real as these four walls to some of our inmates.’

‘I hear what you’re saying.’ Michelle’s jargon irritated Peter. ‘Any one else reported odd happenings in the night lately?’

‘Lyn’s the one who works two weeks on, two weeks off, on night shift. I’m days, regular.’ Jean stubbed her cigarette out in the ashtray. ‘If there’s nothing more, I have to get back to the ward. You know where to find me if you want me.’

‘Patients are always imagining they’ve seen something at night. Only last week we had to physically restrain and sedate Vanessa to keep her from running outside,’ Lyn Sullivan recalled. ‘She was convinced her lover was waiting for her in the grounds.’

‘Has she ever managed to get out?’ Peter asked.

‘Not since I’ve been here. To be honest, at night she’s usually too heavily sedated to move one foot in front of the other.’

‘We try to keep the more difficult ones under control,’ Jean rose from her chair.

Michelle raised her eyebrows. ‘By knocking them out with a chemical cosh?’

‘By tranquillising them so they can’t leave the safety of the ward and harm themselves,’ Lyn corrected.

‘Was she tranquillised on Saturday night?’ Peter pushed his coffee away in disgust.

‘I assume so. There’s nothing in her notes to suggest the contrary.’

‘Then how do you explain her being up and awake in the small hours?’

‘Patients develop immunity to most drugs after they’ve been using them for a while,’ Jean lectured.

‘Then you need to increase the dosage to gain the desired effect?’ Peter asked.

‘Yes.’

‘And Vanessa hasn’t had her dosage increased lately?’

‘Not according to her record card,’ Jean said flatly.

‘We halved Mrs Hedley’s medication last Saturday,’ Lyn admitted in embarrassment. ‘The pharmacy was closed, and we’d run out of the sleeping pills she’s written up for.’

‘Lucky for us that you did.’ Peter had his first piece of concrete evidence; the reason for Vanessa’s wakeful night. It wasn’t much, but it was a beginning. And all investigations had to start somewhere.

CHAPTER FOUR

‘I’m Harry Goldman. Inspector Evans, isn’t it?’

Dan shook hands with the diminutive man. Dr Harry Goldman was the caricaturist’s dream of a psychiatrist: just under five-feet tall, with a mop of unruly brown hair, weak eyes half hidden behind gold-rimmed glasses, he had a scrawny inadequate body that looked too fragile to support his oversized head.

‘I’m sorry I wasn’t here this morning,’ Goldman apologised. He looked across the gardens to the screened-off area of lawn. ‘I was in court. One of our patients has applied for access to his children.’

‘We need to question all of your patients and one in particular, as soon as possible,’ Dan left no room for refusal.

‘Tony Waters met me in the car park. I have no objection to you questioning Vanessa Hedley, or any of our patients, as long as either I or one of my senior colleagues is present. But I must caution you to treat any information you gather circumspectly. Because of the nature of their illnesses, some of our patients will be unreliable witnesses.’

‘There’re as many disturbed people wandering around outside this hospital as there are inside, Mr Goldman, and a fair proportion seem to find their way down to the station. Our officers are trained to interpret the information we glean. But we’d be grateful for assistance that you are prepared to give us.’

Goldman looked towards the screened-off area of the lawn. ‘Given the upset this has generated, and not only among the patients, we’ll be happy to help in any way we can.’

‘The sooner we make a start, the better,’ Dan said briskly.

‘Tony Waters also mentioned that you’ve requested a tour of the hospital. I’ll take you round myself. I’d like to show you the areas you can have free access to, as opposed to the wards where the patients’ welfare is paramount. There are also sections that you’ll need to gain the permission of the staff before entering and others which are out-of-bounds for good reason. If you need to search them, it will have to be done under the staff’s supervision.’

‘I appreciate your co-operation, Mr Goldman,’ Dan replied blandly.

The doctor looked for sarcasm in Dan’s voice and found none.

‘Shall we start by interviewing Vanessa?’ Dan headed for the building, leaving Harry no choice but to follow.

They made a detour to pick up Peter from the room where he was interviewing staff with Michelle. Aware of Peter’s reputation, both as a competent detective and one who didn’t pay lip service to the rules, Dan asked him to sit in on his session with Vanessa as an observer. In the absence of any other senior officer, he had no choice but to use Peter as a deputy, but Dan wanted to make it clear from the outset that he was leading the investigation.

Rightly or wrongly, more than one officer at the station blamed Peter Collins for Trevor Joseph’s injuries, and Dan was determined to ensure any notions Peter entertained of schoolboy heroics remained off his beat.

They went to Harry Goldman’s office, a large, square room decorated in warm shades of yellow, its sofa and chairs upholstered in a restful shade of pale-green. Typical

psychologist's decor, Dan reflected when Harry offered him the use of his desk and chair. Peter sat in the most unobtrusive corner of the room, behind the door. Harry picked up a stacking chair and sat down alongside Peter.

Vanessa Hedley was brought to the door in a wheelchair. She was escorted by Lyn and Harry's assistant Dotty Clyne, a large, fair-haired, masculine woman with a ginger moustache. Lyn helped Vanessa out of the chair and she tottered into the office leaning on Lyn's arm. She was dazed, disorientated, obviously heavily sedated and dressed in a blue floral outfit that would have looked more at home at a Buckingham Palace garden party.

'Vanessa, you remember Peter Collins, don't you?' Lyn asked.

'I do,' Vanessa snapped with surprising vehemence, considering her heavy eyes.

'And here's Mr Goldman.' The young nurse guided her away from Peter towards the psychiatrist.

'I'm Inspector Dan Evans.' Dan held out his hand in an attempt to break the ice, an attempt that backfired when he rose from his chair.

Vanessa shrank back and screamed. 'It's him! The man I saw in the garden.'

'This isn't the man you saw, Vanessa. This is a police officer,' Lyn contradicted.

'Did he look like me, Vanessa?' Dan asked. 'Was he my size?'

'You're him.' Vanessa fought Lyn as the girl tried to prevent her leaving the room. 'I know you're him.'

'How do you know, Vanessa?' Dan asked, less urgently this time, in response to a warning look from Harry.

'Because I know – because I do – '

One of the joys of being a copper in a smallish town is knowing the history of most of the characters the town had to offer. Dan had been in the station the night they'd arrested Vanessa. It had been eight or nine years ago, but he had known of her before then. Her husband had owned the biggest, plushiest and most popular hotel on the seafront, and Vanessa had been the right person to help build up trade, with her attractive face, trim five-foot-two figure, designer clothes, and memory like a seasoned CID officer for guests' names, faces, likes and dislikes.

Suspecting that her husband was having an affair with one of the barmaids at the hotel, one night, Vanessa had followed him when he drove the staff home at the end of their shift. She'd tailed the hotel minibus in her Porsche, at a discreet distance, not that her husband had been looking for her. He'd been too busy dropping off all his staff – but one.

Vanessa had followed him and his remaining passenger to a car park on the cliff top, and waited; when her husband and the barmaid had finished and were about to turn back, Vanessa revved her engine and crashed her car into the minibus at full speed.

The first coppers on the scene almost cried. Some talked about nothing else for days. The spectacle of a two-month-old Porsche turned into a lump of written-off scrap metal was more than most grown men could bear. Miraculously, Vanessa walked away from the wreckage without a scratch. Her husband and his lover weren't so lucky. Neither had bothered to fasten their seatbelts, and the barmaid, who was fixing her lipstick at the time, in order to allay any suspicions her new husband might have about her late return, had been thrown through the windscreen of the minibus. To quote the duty sergeant who'd interviewed her in casualty, "her face had looked

like a jigsawed Picasso". When Dan saw her a couple of months later in court, her scars hadn't healed well.

Vanessa's husband still ran the hotel – from a wheelchair. And it hadn't been just his legs that had gone. Vanessa had laughed so much when the court had been told the full extent of his injuries, she'd had to be tranquillised.

'You're him!' Vanessa's screech brought Dan Evans sharply back into the present. She looked from Dan to Lyn to the two men sitting behind the door. Realising she had an audience, she played the scene for all it was worth. 'You didn't believe me,' she screamed at Peter. 'You patronised me.' She tossed her head. 'Not one of you,' her gaze lingered on Lyn, 'has ever been interested in anything I had to say. And it was all true.' Her voice dropped. 'Every word, and now you know it's true, you want to talk to me. Well I don't want to talk to you. Not after the way you treated me.'

'I can understand that, Vanessa.' Peter's tone was muted, apologetic.

Dan stared at him, dumbfounded. He'd never heard Peter speak softly before.

'I know what I saw.' Vanessa repeated. 'You buried her. You – ' she pointed at Dan.

'Not Inspector Evans, Vanessa, but someone who looked like him,' Peter broke in. 'And we know about it because, thanks to you, we found her. You were right, and we were wrong. But she's found now, and we'd like you to tell us what you saw. Will you, please?'

'He buried her right there. Right in the middle...' she began to repeat what she'd said before, then, without warning, she said something that galvanised Peter and Dan's attention. 'It wasn't like last time.'

'What last time?' They asked the question in unison.

‘The last time he buried one.’

‘Where, Vanessa? Where did he bury another one?’ Peter asked.

‘Not telling you.’ She clammed her lips shut, and turned her back on him.

Harry shook his head in warning when Dan moved to rise from his chair.

‘Vanessa?’ Peter left his chair and offered it to her. ‘Won’t you sit down?’

‘No.’

‘Please, take my chair.’

She hesitated for what seemed like hours, before finally sitting down. Harry eased himself out of his seat. Peter took it and faced Vanessa.

‘Vanessa, you told me that I didn’t care enough to give the body in the garden a decent burial. I promise you, I do care. And I care about the other one as well. Won’t you tell us where we can find it, so we can bury that one too?’

‘It’s in the garden.’

‘It’s a big garden, Vanessa.’

She whirled around and pointed at Dan. ‘He knows. He buried them. Ask him.’

Peter reined in his irritation. ‘Vanessa, that’s Inspector Evans. He’s a police officer.’

‘He did it. And I’m not going to tell you any more.’ Vanessa turned her face to the wall.

Harry touched Peter’s shoulder and shook his head.

Peter left his chair. ‘I’m going now, Vanessa.’ He stood in front of her, but she refused to look at him. ‘I’ll come back and see you later.’

‘Sergeant Collins is going now, Vanessa, but you can stay and have a chat with me, if you like,’ Harry suggested. ‘Shall I send for tea and biscuits?’

‘I’m tired.’ She closed her eyes.

‘Later perhaps?’

‘I want to go to bed.’

Lyn nodded to the porter, who wheeled the chair forward.

Dan followed Peter out of the door. ‘Ring the Station and tell them to call out the helicopter and heat-seeking cameras. I want every inch of the grounds photographed,’ Dan ordered as soon as they were out of earshot of Harry’s office. He fell silent as the porter pushed Vanessa’s wheelchair up the corridor.

Harry joined them. ‘You can’t believe what Vanessa said about a second body being buried in the garden. She’s had so much attention lavished on her since this morning I suspect she’s simply seeking more. You wouldn’t be doing her any favours by paying credence to anything she said.’

‘The problem is, Mr Goldman,’ Dan turned to Harry, ‘after what we uncovered following her last bout of attention seeking, we dare not ignore any information she volunteers. I’m afraid the risk of not “doing her any favours” is one we have to take.’

Trevor stood poised in the doorway that separated the familiar, secure world of his ward from the frightening, unknown world of the outside. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and put one foot on the doorstep. Leaning on his stick he dragged his other foot forward. Stepping down on to the path, he opened his eyes again.

He swayed, overwhelmed by the noise and people rushing around. He shrank back, afraid they were on a collision course with him, although the nearest person was over ten yards away. Fighting nausea, he struggled to take another step, sideways this time, so he could remain close

to the building. An officer ran past from behind, so close, Trevor could smell the sweat from his serge uniform. A group of patients walked towards him, heading for the screened-off area on the lawn. Panic stricken, he froze.

He felt as though he were surrounded by uniformed police and people in white coats – although there were less than a dozen within sight. He heard a screech and turned. Alison Bevan was leaning out of a window in the therapy block, laughing at a porter who'd dropped a sandwich into a flowerbed.

He took another breath, and turned away from the police activity to the rest of the garden. But the normally tranquil grounds were full of lines of officers, beating the bushes and combing the lawns. The drive was strewn with police cars, ambulances, and the overflow from the car parks which were jam-packed with television journalists' and reporters' cars.

Reaching blindly, he groped for the door-handle behind him; as soon his hand closed over it, he turned on his heel, swung his stick, and in his eagerness to return to the cocooned security of the ward, slammed the length of his body painfully against the edge of the door.

Bile rose into his mouth as he fought to push the door open. But all he succeeded in doing was thumping the full weight of the metal-framed UVPC door in his face; hitting the bridge of his nose, and almost knocking himself out. He reeled backwards, dropping his stick and falling to his knees, but still retaining his grip on the door-handle.

'Trying to get in, Trevor? Let me help you.' Spencer Jordan's strong hands closed over his elbows. Easing Trevor to his feet, he opened the door, and helped him in. 'Your stick.' Spencer retrieved it and handed it to him. 'First time is always a bitch,' he lapsed into American jargon. 'I remember it well.'

Trevor only just made it to his room in time to vomit the goat's cheese sandwich into the toilet bowl of his private bathroom. Spencer held his head and sponged his face with cold water. Used to nurses ministering to his needs, Trevor saw nothing odd in Spencer's actions. When he finished retching, Spencer helped him back into his room and steered him into a chair.

'As I was saying, the first time out is a bitch.' Spencer smiled. 'But you did it. And on your own.'

'I turned and ran,' Trevor muttered, shame-faced.

'You wouldn't have if there had been fewer people around.' Spencer pulled a packet of cigarettes from his pocket. 'Smoke?'

'I don't.'

'Neither do I.' Spencer returned them to his pocket. 'I keep them for patients who do.' He fingered the packet. 'Sometimes I wish I did. It gives you something to do with your hands.'

Trevor managed a small smile.

'Feel better?'

'Yes thanks,' Trevor said diffidently. 'I don't want to keep you if you've a class.'

Spencer walked to the window, moved the curtains, and looked outside. 'I haven't a class for another hour and a half, but if you'd rather be left alone, I'll go.'

'I don't want to be a bore and monopolise your time, when you have something better to do.'

'You're not a bore and I've nothing better to do,' Spencer answered easily.

'Just one more job in your crowded day,' Trevor said dryly.

'You're not a job.' Spencer looked him in the eye. 'You remind me of myself, of where I was a few months ago. In fact, until you came along, I was beginning to

wonder if I'd made any progress at all.' A ghost of a smile hovered at the corners of his mouth. 'Then, when I saw you, I realised I had moved on.'

'So, I'm good as a progress indicator, if nothing else.'

'You're different from the others. Your depression stems from your physical injuries and sometimes doctors are too ready to dismiss the havoc that severe physical damage can do to the mind, as well as the body. It's all very well for them to tell you that you're fit enough to start again where you left off, as though nothing had happened. You and I know it's not that easy. First, you're weak as a kitten because you've done nothing except lie around hospitals for months. Second, while you've been gone, the world has become larger, noisier and more threatening. Even simple everyday things like getting up in the morning, washing, dressing, talking, walking out through one door and in through another, take more effort than they did before; and that's without taking crippling pain into account.'

'You really have been through it, haven't you?'

'Yes.' Spencer went to the door. 'But today you took your first and biggest step. You went outside of your own accord.'

'But I panicked...'

'And next time you'll pick a better time, when there are fewer people around. You'll walk two or three steps more than you did today before you turn back. The day after, it'll be further. One day you'll reach the gate. And sometime after that you'll get on a bus.'

'You really think it will be that easy?'

'It won't be easy because every step and every move will take enormous effort. But as I said, you took the biggest and most painful step today. Nothing will ever

take as much effort again. Keep reminding yourself of that, not the panic that drove you back. But that's enough of me lecturing. Want to come down to my room, and finish the drawing of the mysterious lady with the dark hair?"

'No, thank you.'

Spencer didn't try to persuade him. 'Perhaps later. I'll be there all afternoon.'

'Perhaps,' Trevor echoed before Spencer closed the door.

You took the biggest and most painful step today. Nothing will ever take as much effort again.

Trevor wanted to believe Spencer, but at that moment all he wanted to do was crawl into his bed, pull the sheet over his head, curl up, and never emerge again.

'There are six modern single-story ward blocks. Corridors straight down the centre linking with rooms on either side; toilets, bathrooms and sluice rooms, at the far end. Kitchens, linen cupboards and day rooms at this end; patients' double, single and four-bedded rooms in the centre. The single rooms tend to be reserved for difficult patients.'

Peter listened to Harry, recalled Trevor's single room, and suppressed an urge to thump the diminutive psychiatrist.

'This particular block is for people suffering from Alzheimer's... ' the roar of a helicopter hovering overhead drowned out Harry.

Dan looked at Peter. 'Headquarters hasn't wasted any time.'

'... They are very confused...' Harry continued.

Peter peered through the glass wall of the day room. Twenty elderly men and women were sitting in a circle.

The room was neat, clean, and sterile, the furniture upholstered in green vinyl, the walls decorated in the same shade of yellow as Goldman's office, and hung with a series of pastel landscapes. Two nurses were trying to evoke the patients' interest in books of old photographs.

'I hope they shoot me before I get to that stage,' Peter muttered to Dan.

'Something I can help you with, Sergeant Collins?' Harry enquired.

'I hope not,' he replied.

'As I was saying, each block accommodates patients with various symptoms, some severe, some mild – although we try to treat most of the mild cases as outpatients. We do, however, try to group like with like. It simplifies the arrangements for therapy. The ward that your friend Trevor Joseph is on, for instance, principally houses patients who have been admitted for observation, alongside those who are clinically depressed. The block across the way,' Harry pointed to a parallel block, 'is where we place the majority of our phobia cases. The one directly in front of us caters for manias. The block behind us is the drug and alcohol dependency unit. We also have a block for women suffering from postnatal depression. It is slightly larger than the rest, as it has a nursery for the children.'

'If you group like with like, how come Vanessa Hedley is on Joseph's ward?' Peter asked.

'I said that we try to organise things that way, Sergeant Collins. Unfortunately, we don't always succeed. Because we try to treat as many patients as possible as outpatients, especially those with depression, your friend's ward tends to be the one with the least pressure on its resources. Vanessa is being evaluated at present, and as there was a bed available on that particular ward... '

‘How long has she been here?’ Dan interrupted.

‘On the ward or in the hospital?’ Goldman replied.

‘Both.’

‘I’d have to check the records. But if my memory serves me correctly, I’d say she’s been on the ward about two months.’

‘And in the hospital?’

‘Longer.’

‘Did she come here directly from prison?’

‘I really shouldn’t be discussing...’

‘It doesn’t matter.’ Dan knew he could find out all he needed from the records. He glanced at the plan he was carrying. ‘All six blocks are connected to the main block by perspex tunnels?’

‘They are,’ Harry concurred.

‘But not with one another?’

‘Not directly. You’d have to walk to the main block then retrace your steps down one of the other tunnels to reach a separate block.’

‘And all the therapy units lie in this area here.’ Evans jabbed his index finger over a large space set behind the old hospital building, in front of the modern blocks. It was dotted with the outlines of demountables.

‘Not any longer. We’re in the process of relocating the therapy units in the old hospital alongside the administration offices. Those blocks were purpose-built in the seventies. And, like most buildings of that era, they’re sadly lacking. Their roofs are flat and leaking, there are damp patches on the walls, the windows are metal-framed and draughty...’

‘In short, they are cold and wet with rotting fabric. There isn’t much you can tell us about buildings built in the seventies,’ Dan interrupted. ‘Our station is one of them.’

‘We all have our crosses to bear, Inspector Evans. All the blocks, apart from the postnatal depression ward, are identical, and our staff man them round the clock. If anything untoward happens in any of them, we know about it immediately. There’s little point in you looking over all of them. It would gain you nothing, and the patients would be upset at the intrusion. If you have to enter any of them I would appreciate it if you and your men were accompanied either by me or Dorothy Clyne.’

‘And where would we find you in an emergency?’

‘The switchboard can always reach us.’

‘We will have to visit them, if only to interview the patients, but I’ll bear your directive in mind, Dr Goldman. We are here to conduct a murder investigation,’ Dan reminded him.

‘Where do you want to go next?’ Harry asked.

‘The therapy units, then the old hospital.’

‘The therapy units, like the wards, are the province of the patients. I would appreciate it if you entered them only with a staff escort.’

‘You mentioned there were some areas of the hospital to which we could have free access,’ Dan said. ‘Perhaps now would be a good time to tell us where they are.’

‘The floors of the old hospital that have been taken over by the Health Authority’s administration unit, but it might still be as well if you cleared your movements with our administrator, Tony Waters.’ Harry looked at his watch. ‘If you’ll excuse me, I have an appointment with a patient. If you wait here, I’ll ask a porter to take you to Tony’s office.’

He left them in the corridor and disappeared into the ward office. Through the open door Peter saw a male nurse talking to an attractive blonde sister.

‘That sod doesn’t trust us,’ Peter informed Dan.

‘He has a hospital to run.’

‘Or something to hide.’

‘That’s what I like to see, Peter, coppers assuming everyone guilty until proven innocent.’

Harry Goldman returned with the blonde. ‘Sister Ashford has volunteered to give up a few minutes of her free time to take you to Mr Waters’ office. If you’ll excuse me gentlemen.’ Goldman wandered off down the corridor, then turned back. ‘You will keep me up-to-date with your progress, Inspector?’

‘If we make any you’ll be the first to know,’ Evans assured him.

CHAPTER FIVE

‘Dirt’s clogging the sink again.’ Patrick O’Kelly shouted to his assistant as he peered through the magnifying glass he was moving slowly, centimetre by centimetre, along the thighs of the body laid out on the slab.

‘I thought I’d got rid of it all,’ his assistant grumbled as he left the earth he was sifting, from one side of a body-bag to the other, through a fine mesh.

Patrick inched the glass upwards on to the torso. ‘Superintendent,’ he acknowledged Bill who walked through the double doors.

‘Anything for us yet?’ Bill surveyed the body stretched out on the slab and the body-bag opened out on the slab next to it.

‘I haven’t finished examining the body,’ the pathologist retorted irritably.

‘Sorry to press you, but at the moment we know absolutely nothing. A few basic facts might kick off our investigation.’

‘Like?’ Patrick asked, although he already had an idea what Bill was looking for.

‘Like who she was, and how and why she died?’

‘The “who” I can’t help you with. The “how” I told you on site.’ Patrick straightened his back, discarded his magnifying glass, and walked to the head of the corpse. Pushing back the eyelids with his thumb and forefinger, he prodded at the burst blood vessels that had flooded the whites with scarlet. He indicated the evidence of several smaller haemorrhages on the forehead. And those are just the ones you can see. I found more in the internal organs. Asphyxiation.’

‘She was buried alive?’

‘Even without the haemorrhages the build-up of dirt in the nostrils and lungs confirms it.’ Patrick pushed aside the bone-cutter he’d used to open the ribcage, and removed the square of tissue he’d used to cover the slit in the skin, not out of any finer feelings for the corpse, but from the need to keep contamination of the other body parts to a minimum. ‘Judging from the amount of earth and debris in the bronchial tubes,’ he palpated a tube he’d slit open, and crumbs of black dirt fell into his hand, ‘she struggled for breath until the last.’

‘How long would that have taken?’ Bill flinched at the thought of the young girl stretched out dead and naked before him, fighting for air, while being smothered by shovel-full after shovel-full of earth.

‘Impossible to fix an accurate time. A lot depends on whether he worked quickly or slowly. And, then again, he might have dumped her at the bottom of the pit some time before he buried her.’

‘How long would it have taken from the first breath that was more dirt than air, to the last?’ Bill pressed, refusing to allow Patrick to fob him off.

‘Going by what I’ve dug out of her tubes and lungs, I’d say somewhere between five and ten minutes; but she wouldn’t have been fully conscious towards the end.’ Patrick retrieved his magnifying glass and resumed his minute study of her skin. ‘I was right about the lips. They had been super-glued together. She managed to tear them apart, but not that long before she died, judging by the bleeding. Bingo!’ he shouted gleefully. ‘Puncture marks, upper right arm. A whole beautiful series of them. Some bruised and old, some fresher, and one very fresh.’ He spoke into the voice-activated dictaphone that hung above the slab before marking the sites with blue ink. ‘I’ve taken

blood samples, if it's detectable, we'll soon know about it.'

'How long has she been dead?'

'You know I hate that question.'

'And you know I have to ask it,' Bill replied.

'Body temperature was that of the surroundings when I examined her in the pit, so that puts death at least eighteen to twenty-four hours before, taking into account that asphyxiation causes body temperature to rise, not fall, immediately after death. No rigor mortis, little deterioration – that means your guess would be as good as mine.'

'I hate it when you say that.'

Patrick tore off his rubber gloves and threw them in the bin at the head of the table. He switched off the water that was rippling around the corpse, folded his arms, and leaned against the tiled wall. 'But there is something that might interest you. The stomach was completely empty, and the body dehydrated.'

'Which means?'

'She'd been starved before death. No food or water.'

'For how long?'

'After examining the small intestines, I'd say at least forty-eight hours – possibly longer.'

'Then she could have been taken and kept somewhere.'

'That's for you to find out.' Patrick looked at her face. 'Pretty girl.'

Bill looked at the corpse, really looked at it, for the first time. O'Kelly's assistant had combed the shoulder-length curls away from the face and brushed off the dirt. He had to agree, whoever she was, she had been a pretty girl.

'Have you taken new photographs?' Bill asked.

‘Digital print outs are in the office.’

‘Anything on her?’

‘No identification. Rings, one gold, set with a red onyx stone, one silver in the shape of a wishbone, a gold chain, crucifix and Saint Nicholas, all nine-carat, and a lot of good they did her. The patron saint of travellers must have been on tea break when she was being buried.’ Patrick nodded towards two piles; a small one of jewellery and a larger one of clothes heaped on a side table. ‘We found a key ring with two Yale keys in the pocket of her skirt. Everything has been dusted for prints, so they’re safe to handle.’

Bill picked up the key ring and fingered the tab, a miniature rubber troll with his thumbs in his ears and fingers extended.

‘The clothes have chain store labels, no name tags, no markings, and nothing except the keys in the pockets,’ Patrick continued, ‘I’ve taken dental X-rays. There are fourteen fillings, so she should be on someone’s records. No foreign fibres on the skin or clothes. The dirt, as you see, is still being sifted.’

‘Sexual assault?’

‘No signs of it. Clothes are soiled but appear undisturbed. Vaginal swabs tested negative for semen. There’s a tattoo.’ He took a small rubber sheet, wrapped it around the right leg and rolled the corpse on to its side. The back, thighs and calves were dark with stagnant blood. ‘Butterfly high on right thigh. Nice work.’

‘Age?’

‘Early twenties. Blue eyes, dyed blonde hair; the rest you can see for yourself. I’ve told you just about everything, but if you want to listen to the tape in my office you’re welcome. Word processing facilities being

what they are in this place, it won't be in print until tomorrow.'

'I can wait.'

'Coffee?'

'No, thanks,' Bill refused, as Patrick's assistant left the office with three specimen jars filled with murky beige liquid.

'Bring the chocolate biscuits, Alan,' Patrick called out.

Alan dumped the jars on an empty slab, opened one of the refrigerated body drawers, and removed a packet of chocolate wafers.

Bill had met O'Kelly the man after hearing about O'Kelly the legend. The first time he'd visited the mortuary he had walked in on Patrick, his assistant, and the senior surgeon from the staff of the General, sitting in a row on one of the slabs, facing an opened corpse while eating pasties and drinking cans of lager.

Patrick called it a "working lunch". They were trying to determine cause of death, but they were, as Patrick had delighted in telling him, spoilt for choice. The man had lung cancer, heart disease and liver failure. At first he'd thought that Patrick had set out to deliberately shock him, or any copper who dared to trespass unannounced on his domain. Ten years on, he knew better. The pathologist had lived with corpses for so long, he simply treated them as inanimate objects to be examined and studied with the same unemotional regard he bestowed on his instruments or the laboratory furniture.

'I'll let you know if we find anything in the dirt,' Patrick jumped up and sat on a spare slab.

'I'd appreciate it.'

'We'll carry on as soon as we've finished this.' Patrick held up his coffee.

Bill knew Patrick was dismissing him, but he lingered in the formaldehyde-ridden atmosphere. 'Lot of work on at the moment?' He glanced around the mortuary. There were no other bodies in sight, and apart from the slabs the body bag and victim were laid on, they were all clean and scrubbed, but Bill noticed that three-quarters of the mortuary drawers were tagged. And that either meant there'd been a rush for the pathologist's services, or one was about to start.

'The usual.' O'Kelly peeled the silver paper from his biscuit. 'Why?'

'We took aerial shots of the grounds of Compton Castle an hour ago.'

'Heat-seeking cameras?' Patrick looked warily at Bill.

'We can't be sure of anything yet.'

'How many sites have you earmarked to dig?'

'Three. But they could be buried compost rotting and generating heat.'

'Close to the kitchens?'

'No.'

Patrick looked to his assistant. 'Clean and repack my site kit as soon as we've finished break.'

'It's probably nothing,' Bill was afraid he'd said too much and made a fool of himself.

'I'm no detective, but even I noticed the compost bin outside the kitchen door.'

'The spots are in the flowerbeds.'

'Concentrated spots? Not a thin spread?'

Bill nodded. Patrick pushed the remainder of his wafer between his lips and finished his coffee.

'Get moving, Alan, we've work to do,' he mumbled through a full mouth.

‘As you see Sergeant, Constable,’ Tony Waters smiled at Michelle, who’d been foisted on Peter yet again, much to the sergeant’s disgust, ‘these attics haven’t been used in years.’

Tony halted on a landing above a steep, narrow staircase, and opened identical opposing doors, on to long, low-ceilinged galleries. Both were strewn with dust balls and decorated with spiders’ webs. Peter walked into the right-hand gallery and opened the door at the far end. Box upon cardboard box, all covered with layers of grey dust, were piled up in a long narrow room lit by a small, narrow window.

‘Old records?’ Peter asked

‘I presume so. I’ve only opened one box. They were here when my department moved into this building,’ Tony followed Peter into the attic.

‘It seems bizarre to build new blocks out in the grounds with all this space going begging,’ Peter commented.

‘The stairs are steep. The banisters have dry rot, and compliance with the county’s disabled access policy would mean ripping the fabric of the building apart to put in lifts. Even if we found the money, it would be wasted. Compton Castle was put on the list for demolition in the 1980s. We’ve been trying to run it down for the past ten years. If it hadn’t been for the cutbacks that held up the building of new psychiatric wards in the General, it would have been a pile of rubble years ago.’

Peter turned his back on Michelle and Tony and walked down the gallery until he reached another steeper and narrower staircase than the one they’d ascended.

‘There are three staircases on this floor,’ Waters informed him. ‘The central one we came up by, another like this that serves the left-hand side of the building and an outside metal fire escape at the back.’

‘Does each floor have access to the fire escape?’ Peter noticed that Michelle was writing down everything that the administrator was telling them in her notebook.

‘Yes, there’s an outside landing on every floor except the ground-floor.’

‘You do realise this is only a quick once-over,’ Peter informed him, ‘before we bring in teams to conduct a thorough search.’

‘As far as this building is concerned, you can search all you like. But we’d rather that you searched the ground-floor therapy units either late at night or early in the morning when they’re not being used by patients.’

‘We’ll bear your request in mind,’ Peter replied.

‘The only thing you’re likely to find on this floor is spiders.’ Tony hit a web.

‘And mice,’ Peter observed a pile of mouse droppings by the cardboard boxes.

Tony led the way back down a narrow staircase. ‘Built for the maids,’ Tony reached out to support Michelle’s arm when she caught her heel in a stair-tread.

‘Miniature maids,’ Peter grumbled, as his shoulders brushed both the left and right-hand walls.

When they reached the floor below, Waters opened a door directly in front of them, and led them through a series of high-ceilinged, wooden-floored old wards packed with computers, printers and office desks.

‘This looks strange,’ Michelle commented.

‘What?’ Peter asked.

‘Modern office furniture and technology in these surroundings.’

‘The furniture was bought for the new County Hall offices. We had to move out last year because of pressure on accommodation.’

‘God bless civil servants and the local authorities,’ Peter remarked irreverently. ‘You can always count on them to expand to fill every available inch of space.’

‘General office,’ Waters ignored his barbed comment, as he headed towards the centre of the building. He nodded to the clerks, mostly middle-aged women, with a sprinkling of young girls and boys. ‘Most of the assistant administrators are on the floor below; reception and my own office are, as you know, on the ground-floor.’

They walked through the administrators’ offices below the general office. They were housed in what had been one single vast ward. But the area had been subdivided by plasterboard and glass partitions to provide separate cubicles.

When they reached a door that opened on to a landing, Tony produced a key. ‘These rooms are kept locked. Our cleaning bill for this place is astronomical without opening up the disused areas.’ He unlocked the door and stood back to allow Peter to look in. ‘Old kitchens,’ he explained as Peter looked at a series of small rooms that still contained stone sinks and zinc-covered cupboards and tables. ‘And pantries and storerooms.’

‘These rooms lie empty, while the attics are full of boxes? Didn’t anyone think to tell the removal men they could have stopped off halfway?’ Peter noted the thick layer of dust that blanketed the floorboards.

‘Those records were put into storage in the fifties, when this was still being used. The papers in the box I opened dated back to the turn of the century.’

‘They could be worth a fortune.’

‘I doubt it – but I’ve notified the town archivist. When he has time, he’ll examine them. Shall we go down to the ground-floor?’

At the foot of the stairs Peter noticed a narrow passage behind the staircase. It led to a locked door that faced the rear of the building. He tapped on the door.

‘That leads to the old padded cells. They were ripped out twenty years ago, but they hadn’t been used for years.’

‘Can I take a look?’

‘There isn’t much to see.’ Irritated, Waters tried four keys in the lock before he hit on the right one. They entered a long dark passage lit by widely-spaced weak light bulbs. After twenty yards the corridor began to slope steeply downwards. Waters switched on another string of lights and halted before a row of six identical concrete cells.

‘No doors,’ Peter stared into the eight-foot-square, grey concrete boxes.

‘They were taken off when the padding was ripped out.’

‘And this door?’ Peter pointed to a steel door at the far end of the corridor.

‘Leads to the old laundry and mortuary. You can also enter them from the main corridor, but as we’re here, we may as well go this way. He fumbled with the keys again. After a couple of minutes of trial and error, the rusty lock gave way. He switched on the lights.

‘Are we at ground-floor level or basement?’ Peter asked. There had been no windows in the padded cell area, but the corridor ahead also loomed dark and forbidding, devoid of natural light.

‘Somewhere between the two,’ Tony flicked on another light. ‘It’s a half-level floor, built into a low mound at the back. You can see it on the plan.’

Michelle unfolded the drawing she was carrying.

‘This is probably the first time in years anyone’s walked through this area from the cells. We use the old laundry for storing rubbish before it’s burned in the incinerator.’

Peter looked at neat rows of bulging bright-pink plastic bags, boldly imprinted DANGER MEDICAL WASTE.

Tony selected another key and opened a wooden door. ‘This is the male mortuary.’

‘The what?’ Michelle repeated.

‘The male mortuary. The female mortuary is down there.’ Tony pointed down the corridor.

‘You separate male and female dead?’ Peter laughed. ‘What’s the problem? You afraid they’ll get up to something they shouldn’t?’

‘The Victorians built this place, not me.’ Tony opened the door to a surprisingly large, light and airy room, although all the illumination came from bubbled glass panes set close to the ceiling. Fully tiled in white wall tiles and black floor tiles, it contained two zinc-covered tables, the most enormous stone sink Peter had ever seen and, facing them, a bank of twelve body-size steel drawers.

‘Tin-lined.’ Tony pulled one drawer out after another. They moved stiffly, their runners warped.

‘I take it you don’t use this place any more, either?’

‘Yes, we do. But only for routine deaths that don’t require a post mortem. If there’s a problem with diagnosis or death certificates, we send the body to the mortuary in the General.’

‘And Patrick O’Kelly?’

‘Who?’ Waters stared blankly at Peter.

‘Patrick O’Kelly, the pathologist in the General. I thought as you worked for the Health Authority, you might have heard of him.’

‘No, I haven’t.’

Peter looked into a drawer. ‘So these are still used?’

‘Particularly when someone dies on the geriatric ward.’

‘Do you have a mortuary attendant?’

‘Not since we made the last one redundant two years ago.’

‘Who lays out the bodies?’

‘Usually a nurse. One or two of the porters can do it at a push.’

‘Can we see the female mortuary?’ Michelle asked.

‘Want to find out if they’re going to lay you out behind flowered curtains?’ Peter enquired.

Ignoring Peter, Michelle followed Tony into a room, identical in every respect to the male mortuary.

‘The laundry.’ When they emerged from the half-level Tony pointed out a hall dotted with sinks and enormous round boilers.

‘Disused?’ Peter asked.

‘Laundry was put out to tender years ago. Kitchens,’ Tony opened another door, this time on an area bustling with noisy activity.

‘Not put out to tender.’ Peter gazed at the white-overalled staff who were flitting between modern cookers and stainless-steel work surfaces.

They walked down the back staircase to the cellars and a boiler room that was fed on gas, the sub-station that housed the cables for the incoming electricity supplies and the generator back-up. Remembering another case he’d worked on, Peter lifted the iron plates that covered the

incoming supply, but he uncovered only thick black cables.

‘The incinerator was installed only last year.’ Waters pushed back a heavy sliding door and said hello to a man who was fiddling with rows of dials. Peter looked at the mass of pipes, cables, and small tunnels leading off into darkened spaces.

‘We’ve seen the whole of the old building?’

‘Yes.’

‘It’s a paradise for someone who wants to conceal a body,’ Peter mused. ‘And bloody murder for a policeman looking for clues. Absolute bloody murder.’

CHAPTER SIX

‘Anything interesting?’ Dan asked when Peter and Michelle walked into the administrator’s office.

‘Nothing obvious,’ Peter replied. ‘Only a nightmare of a building to search. Who’s organising it?’

Dan studied his fingernails and said nothing.

‘You can’t do this to me.’ Peter protested.

‘Drug Squad officers organise the most thorough searches,’ Dan flattered.

Tony spoke to his secretary in the outer office before joining them. His face creased in annoyance when he saw Dan sitting behind his desk, a notepad covered with scribbles in front of him, the telephone conveniently placed at his elbow. ‘Can I get you anything, Inspector?’

‘No thank you,’ Dan replied. ‘Your secretary has provided me with everything I need.’ He moved an empty coffee mug to the edge of the desk before rising from the chair. ‘And I won’t be inconveniencing you long. We’re moving a mobile HQ into the grounds.’

‘A demountable building?’ Tony asked warily.

‘More of a caravan,’ Dan looked through the window. ‘Perhaps you can advise us on a suitable site.’

‘If it’s space you’re looking for, there are rooms the size of football pitches going begging in this building,’ Tony said.

‘Our mobile HQ contains all we need, and we won’t get under anyone’s feet,’ Dan countered. ‘Where do you suggest we put it, Mr Waters?’

‘I’ll think about it,’ Tony put off the decision.

‘It’ll be here in an hour,’ Dan said shortly.

‘How about close to the main gate, so we can keep police traffic in and out of the hospital to a minimum.’

‘That’s too public,’ Dan stroked his double chin. ‘It will attract sightseers. I thought somewhere at the back of this building. Behind the tunnels?’

‘As you wish,’ Tony agreed, wondering why Dan had bothered to ask his advice when he’d already decided on the location.

‘I’m also expecting two teams of police,’ Dan warned.

‘To search the building?’

‘Later, first I want them to do some digging. The heat-seeking cameras came up with a few spots. They’re probably nothing, but to be on the safe side we’re going to excavate your flowerbeds.’

‘May I ask how long this digging is likely to take?’ Tony was beginning to wonder if his day was ever going to end.

‘There are two hours of daylight left. We’ll start as soon as they get here, which with luck,’ Evans glanced at his watch, ‘will be in the next ten minutes. But if we find anything unusual, we may work through the night.’

‘In the dark?’

‘We’ll bring up floodlights.’

‘I must protest. Lights would definitely disturb the patients.’

‘We may have no choice. One more thing before I go,’ Dan pulled a sheet of typed paper from his pad, and a photograph. ‘These came up from the station half an hour ago. Description and new photograph of the victim for you to circulate among your staff.’

Tony took the photograph, and blanched.

‘You knew her, Mr Waters?’ Dan asked.

‘It looks like – Rosie Tywford.’ Tony gripped the edge of his desk. ‘The hair’s right,’ he faltered, ‘but the face is all wrong. The skin’s too dark.’

‘It would be, Mr Waters. She was asphyxiated,’ Dan explained. ‘There’s a description; five-foot-six, dyed blonde hair, blue eyes, no distinguishing marks other than a butterfly tattooed on her buttock.’

‘I wouldn’t know about the butterfly, Inspector.’ Tony dropped the photograph on the desk. ‘But everything else fits.’

‘Who was she?’ Peter asked as Tony sank down in his chair.

‘She worked in this department as a clerk, before she had a breakdown. Then she became a patient.’

‘When was the last time you saw her?’ Dan demanded.

‘I can’t remember.’

‘Think!’ Peter ordered.

‘Sometime last week. Harry told me that he was discharging her as an outpatient. She’d been discharged from the ward weeks ago. He said she was thinking of visiting her parents in Devon before returning to work here.’

‘Where did she live?’ Peter pressed.

‘How should I know?’ Tony replied irritably. ‘A rented room or flat I suppose. I only spoke to the girl once or twice. If you want to find out more, I suggest you ask Harry or Human Resources.’

‘We’ll do that,’ Dan said. ‘Thank you for your assistance, Mr Waters. No doubt we’ll be in touch again soon.’

‘Where to now?’ Peter asked Dan as they left the administrator’s office.

‘Human Resources then Harry Goldman. Here.’ Dan handed Michelle the photograph and sheet of paper detailing the victim’s description.

‘You want me to do it, sir?’ she bristled with pride at the trust he was placing in her.

‘Be quick. I’ve a feeling these offices shut early, and it’s four now.’ Dan watched as she hurried down the corridor, her long-legged stride hampered by her narrow skirt. ‘Were any of us ever that keen, Peter?’

‘I can’t remember.’

Dan headed into a perspex tunnel. ‘What do you think of the administrator?’

‘He’s a stuffed shirt who might know more about that girl than he let on.’

‘We can’t build walls until we have foundations to lay them on,’ Dan mused. ‘I want you to oversee the staff interviews.’

‘Must I?’

‘I said oversee. That doesn’t mean you have to do them all yourself.’

‘But it means I have to co-ordinate the resulting information.’

‘As well as supervise the search of these buildings, but I’ll see to it that you have help. Bill’s bringing in a couple of teams...’

‘Shouldn’t we check if they’ve arrived?’ Peter prompted, before Dan could think of something else to unload on to him.

‘They can start without us. You do know that apart from the sites picked up by the heat-seeking cameras we’re going to have to scour every inch of garden that can be seen from Vanessa Hedley’s window?’

‘With probes?’ Peter suggested.

‘In every centimetre of ground,’ Dan warned.

‘Garden that size could take weeks.’

‘It could.’ Dan turned the corner, and once more he and Peter were locked in the strange, disembodied white

tunnel world. 'But now I intend doing something I've been trying to find time for all day. I'm going to visit Trevor Joseph, and as I didn't know him that well, I'd like you to re-introduce me.'

'He's a hopeless case.' Peter hated himself for declaring it.

'I'd like to see how hopeless for myself,' Dan walked towards the wards. 'You do know where to find him, don't you?'

As usual, Trevor was slumped in the chair in his room, but to Peter's surprise he had a book on his lap, and as it was the right way up, Peter had no reason to suspect that he hadn't been reading it.

'You remember Inspector Evans?' Peter walked in and sat on Trevor's bed.

'Dan Evans.' Dan held out his hand and Trevor shook it, but he refused to meet Dan's steady gaze, and continued to stare down at his book.

'Can we talk?' Dan asked.

'I suppose so.' Trevor moved his legs so Dan could sit alongside Peter on the bed.

'You heard we found a body buried in the grounds here?'

'Yes.'

'You don't seem very interested?'

'I'm not.'

'It's murder. A young girl, early twenties, buried alive,' Evans informed him. 'I was hoping that you could help us.'

'I'm on sick leave.'

'You're also in this place.'

'As a patient,' Trevor reminded.

'You're a trained detective,' Dan persisted.

Trevor left his chair, walked to the window and looked into the garden. It was the first time Peter had seen him glance at the outside world since he'd been injured, but he suspected that Trevor was only doing so to avoid looking at Dan.

'That last case of yours...' Dan paused. 'It could have happened to any one of us.'

'But it happened to me.'

Peter had to strain his ears to catch what Trevor was saying.

'I know what you must be feeling,' Dan sympathised.

'You can have no possible idea what I'm feeling.'

'You're right, Trevor,' Dan braved the silence that followed Trevor's outburst. 'That was presumptuous of me. I can't begin to imagine what you've been through.'

'Or what I'm still going through,' Trevor added.

'I wouldn't have come to you if there was anyone else with your qualifications and inside knowledge of this place. We need your help.'

'I'm not fit enough to work.'

'All I want is for you to tell us about some of the people here. You've a trained eye; you know what we're looking for.'

'These people have been taking care of me,' Trevor protested. 'I haven't been watching them with a detective's eye.'

'But you know them?' Dan persevered.

'Not as well as they know me, and not well enough to know if one of them is a murderer.'

'Won't you at least talk to me?'

'I wouldn't be any help.'

'You must know something, this Vanessa Hedley, for instance.'

‘She’s disturbed. She rarely sleeps. She’s always wandering around the place creating problems.’

‘And Sister Marshall – Jean Marshall?’ Trevor hadn’t said anything that wasn’t common knowledge, but Dan felt elated. Trevor was talking and who knew what else he might say?

‘She’s capable,’ Trevor said succinctly.

‘Nurse Lyn Sullivan?’

Peter thought he saw a flicker of interest in Trevor’s eyes.

‘She’s young, pretty, too vulnerable for a place like this.’

‘Spencer Jordan?’

‘He’s a good therapist. I’m not stupid. I know what you’re doing, but I’m not in a position to help you.’

As silence reigned in the room once more, Trevor watched squads of men in white overalls move into the grounds. A police dog-handler’s van pulled up in the “Doctors Only” parking bay. Bill Mulcahy in the centre of the lawn, alternately consulting the plan he was holding and an officer who hovered at his elbow.

‘How many more are buried in the grounds?’ Trevor asked.

‘Who said there were more?’ Dan replied.

‘It doesn’t take a detective to fathom what’s happening out there.’ Trevor continued to stare out of the window.

‘Time you and I went to work, Peter.’ Dan rose from the bed. ‘All right if we call in and see you tomorrow, Trevor?’

‘I can’t stop you.’ Trevor didn’t turn around as they left.

*

*

*

‘Is he always like that?’ Dan asked Peter as they headed for the main door.

‘You caught him on a good day. Today he answered your questions.’

‘Have you thought it might be him?’

‘Trevor?’ Peter questioned incredulously.

‘He’s in here. He had the opportunity.’

‘And what bloody motive?’

‘He’s depressed, disturbed – he’s here...’

‘As the result of being almost beaten to death,’ Peter broke in defensively.

‘I heard he became obsessed with one of the witnesses on his last case. A woman with long dark hair.’ Dan looked at Peter. ‘I saw that drawing on his bedside cabinet.’

‘They knew one another before the case – he – they – Bloody hell, this is Trevor Joseph you’re talking about!’ Peter exploded.

‘I shouldn’t have to remind you of the first rule of detection; keep an open mind.’

‘Even where one of our own is concerned?’

‘Especially where one of our own is concerned,’ Dan said firmly.

‘We’ve pinpointed the sites with markers, and surrounded them with screens,’ Bill announced as Dan and Peter joined him.

‘Patrick?’ Dan asked.

‘Standing by. He can be here in ten minutes if we need him. Peter, you work with the group closest to the building. Dan, take this one.’

Peter walked across the turf towards the group Bill had entrusted to his care. It was a beautiful early spring evening. For the first time in months he took time to listen

to birdsong. The sun hung, a blazing golden ball, low on the horizon; the air was redolent with the smell of magnolia and cherry blossom.

‘I joined this force to catch criminals, not to pass out parking tickets and shovel bloody shit!’

Peter recognised the lament of the rookie. He stepped behind the canvas screen. ‘What’s your name, boy?’

‘Chris Brooke, sir,’ the rookie snapped smartly to attention.

‘Shovelling shit is all you’re likely to do while you continue to moan.’ Peter thrust a spade into his hands, and stood watching while Chris Brooke pushed it into six inches of manured soil. ‘You,’ he shouted to a female constable standing on the public side of the canvas, ‘take the plants he digs up and lay them next to that tree.’

‘I haven’t worked in this garden, man and boy for forty years, to have a lot of flatfoot coppers wreck it in one night.’ Jimmy Herne strode across and grabbed the rose-bush Brooke was lifting over the canvas. ‘These were only planted last week. You’re disturbing the roots. One hard surface frost and they’ll be...’

‘How deep did you dig down?’ Peter interrupted.

‘The right depth for rose-bushes,’ the old man barged behind the low canvas screen and thrust his face aggressively close to Peter.

‘One foot? Two?’

‘Three foot. Always three foot.’ Herne snarled. ‘And then lace the digging with well-rotted manure. Any fool will tell you that.’

‘Thank you for that lecture,’ Peter replied.

‘It’s hard to keep this garden going when all you have is your own two hands and two stupid boys no one else will give house-room to, and now...’

‘Sorry, Grandpa,’ Peter apologised, ‘but it can’t be helped. We’ll put everything back the way we found it.’

‘As if you’d be able to,’ Jimmy mocked. ‘I’ve yet to meet anyone these days who can tell a daffodil bulb from a bloody onion. Look at her,’ he turned on the hapless female constable. ‘Just look at her, setting that rose down. You stupid woman, you haven’t a bloody clue...’

‘See that man over there?’ Peter pointed to Bill. ‘He’s in charge.’

Jimmy Herne stormed off towards Bill. Soon, his indignant screeches could be heard all over the garden.

Peter looked at the rookie. The mound of earth had grown, but the lad’s pace was slackening. ‘Change over,’ he ordered.

‘Thanks, sir.’ Chris climbed out of the hole, and passed a grubby hand over his forehead.

‘You were slowing up. I’ve no intention of spending the night here,’ Peter commented.

Chris passed the shovel to Andrew Murphy. Murphy was a rarity on the force; a constable close to retiring age. He had joined the force before Peter and Trevor, and had neither sought nor received promotion, preferring the responsibility-free life of an ordinary constable to the hassle of command. Hanging his jacket on one of the posts supporting the canvas screen, he stepped into the hole. Peter crouched on his heels, watching while Murphy dug steadily downwards.

‘Anything?’ Peter asked when Andrew stopped.

‘A bloody awful stench.’ Murphy had taught not only Peter, but also Dan the ropes, and he didn’t hold rank in the same awe as the rookies.

‘Proceed carefully.’

‘Too royal,’ Murphy muttered. ‘Damn!’

Peter saw a seething whirl of maggots shoot off the edge of Murphy's spade. He reeled back as the stench hit him; the foul, sickly-sweet, unmistakable reek of death.

'I've sliced the leg off a dog.' Murphy jumped out of the pit. 'A great big bloody hairy dog. And there's...'

'What?' Peter demanded as Murphy retched.

'A suitcase. A bloody suitcase. It's filthy, the top's cracked, but it's still a bloody suitcase.'

Head high, apparently oblivious to the admiring glances of the police officers who had nothing better to do than eye the nurses walking up and down the drive, Carol Ashford headed for the staff car park. She opened the door of her green, open-topped sports car, tossed her handbag inside, started the engine and drove slowly down the drive to join the flow of traffic wending along the main thoroughfare through the suburbs. She turned right at the foot of the hill, left the mainstream that was heading out from the town centre and raced out along the coast road.

It had been a long hard shift, and occasionally, like now, she regretted specialising in geriatric nursing. There were some rewards, like early promotion; but today had brought more problems than usual, probably because the patients had been unsettled by the police activity. Her oldest female patient had whined repeatedly that she wanted to go home; not the one she had shared with her husband for fifty years, but her childhood home that had been bombed during the war. Mr Greenway was so fascinated by events in the garden he hadn't made any effort to recognise his son and daughter-in-law when they visited. And Mrs Adams had managed to escape from the ward four times in as many hours.

Not for the first time, Carol wondered what she, or any of her staff were accomplishing by keeping the old

dears warm and fed, when most of them barely realised they were alive.

She turned off the road into the lane that led to the farmhouse she and her husband had bought and refurbished with money inherited from her parents-in-law. Slowing the car to a crawl, she listened to the birds and smelled the blossom on the trees. She turned a sharp corner behind a high wall and drove into a farmyard. An old barn, its grey stone walls cleaned and repointed, one wall replaced by glass, housed their indoor swimming pool. Behind the house they'd had a tennis court built within the walls of the old kitchen garden; and in front of her was the house itself, its arched windows handcrafted in hardwood, framing her William Morris print curtains.

The house was something she and her husband had dreamed of, never believing they'd be able to afford anything like it until they were into their fifties. But here she was, not yet thirty, the proud possessor of everything she'd ever wanted – including, and especially, her man.

She parked next to the kitchen door. There was no sign of her husband's car, but she was used to being the first home. Although she would never have admitted it, she didn't like walking into the empty house because it was so isolated. If anything happened she could scream until her lungs burst, but no one would hear. Even the burglar alarms and the two guard dogs offered little comfort. Burglar alarms could be cut, and dogs poisoned. It happened; she read about it in the newspapers.

She walked through the back door into the porch they'd built to hold their boots, walking and working coats, and the dogs, before unlocking the kitchen door. The dogs greeted her enthusiastically and she let them into the main house. Warm air belched out into the fresh spring atmosphere. No matter what the weather, the

kitchen was always warm, sometimes oppressively so. The Aga saw to that. There was a welcoming smell of food. She lifted the lid of the pot on the slow-burner. The chicken casserole she had prepared the night before was cooked to perfection. She opened the oven door and pushed the pot inside.

She whistled to the dogs and let them outside as soon as they had checked the house. It was the help's day for cleaning the brasses and oak cupboards. She could smell the polish. Dropping her handbag on to one of the cushioned bentwood rockers, she kicked off her shoes and padded barefoot around the ground floor, checking every room. The sitting room, more elegant than cosy with its hand-woven Brussels tapestries decorating the grey stone walls and its upholstered Parker Knoll chairs and sofas, was exquisite and untouched. The study, with its desks and book-lined walls, was dusty. It wouldn't be cleaned until Wednesday.

The dining room, cool and elegant with a massive period sideboard, striped upholstery, burnished silverware and a polished mahogany table that could seat twelve, yawned vacantly back at her. The den, with its media paraphernalia and pool table, was tidier than they'd left it. The litter of newspapers and circulars had been gathered up by the daily and returned to the magazine rack. And finally the morning room – the room she had claimed as her own, and furnished with pine bookcases, dressers, pretty chintz-covered sofas, and round occasional tables.

She stopped to pet her two Siamese cats, who divided their time between this room, the conservatory and the garden, before calling the dogs back in. Leaving them lying on the Persian rug in the galleried hall, she climbed the oak staircase her husband had bought from a builder

who'd salvaged it from a mansion that had been demolished to make way for the marina.

She looked into the four spare bedrooms, each with its own en-suite. All were furnished in Victorian antiques. Their floorboards were polished, the rugs that covered them handmade Turkish. Although she could see into the bathrooms from the bedroom doors, she made a point of checking each unit before stepping into the master bedroom.

She sank down on the chaise-longue. The four-poster bed, handmade to her husband's specifications, was hung with lace curtains, and covered with a matching bedspread. In the corner opposite it was an antique roll-top desk and captain's chair. This one room alone had cost a fortune, but it had been worth every penny, she reflected as she opened the door to her dressing room.

She stripped off her uniform and underclothes and threw them, together with her stockings, into the linen bin that was emptied by their cleaner. Naked, she returned to the bedroom, and studied herself in the cheval mirror. Was that a pad of fat forming over her hips? She turned her back and twisted her head. She resolved to eat less and exercise more. Her husband abhorred anything less than perfect.

She touched her toes with the flat of her hands ten times, before walking into her bathroom. Her husband had his own mahogany-lined dressing room and bathroom, leading off the other side of the room. She turned on the taps of the huge Victorian bath, another product of her husband's expeditions to the salvage yard, and tossed a handful of bath salts into the water.

Humming a tuneless ditty, she pulled the pins from her long blonde hair. It swung to her waist, before she caught and rolled it up, pinning it securely on top of her

head with a stick. Testing the water with her hand, she found it exactly as she liked it; stinging hot. Stepping in, she held her breath as the water burned her skin and turned it rosy pink. She submerged her body slowly, then, closing her eyes, she emptied her mind of thoughts, lay back and surrendered to the pleasure of the moment.

Without warning, the bathroom door flew open.

‘Tony?’ She called out, fighting the terror that rose in her throat.

‘Were you expecting someone else?’

Her heartbeat quietened, she turned and smiled when she saw him standing in the doorway, his blue eyes and white-blond hair misted by steam.

‘I brought you a martini. I’d hand it to you if I could find you.’

‘Follow my voice.’

He handed her an ice-cold champagne glass filled to the brim and decorated with an olive and stroked one of her exposed breasts teasing the nipple to a peak.

She sipped her martini and looked at him over the rim of her glass.

‘How about you get out of the bath?’

She rose from the water and he handed her a towel. She wrapped herself in it before stepping out. He took her martini and placed it together with his own on the windowsill.

‘The bed or the floor?’ he asked.

‘The floor’s wet.’

‘So are you.’ He stripped the towel away and flung it aside, before pushing her down on to her back.

Carol was used to Tony’s lovemaking. It was abrasive, devoid of gentleness and tenderness. When they made love during daylight hours, as they often did, he rarely even undressed. He never considered her or her

enjoyment, only his own needs. But as she lay back, the knowledge that he took pleasure in her body was enough for her.

She loved Tony passionately, with every fibre of her being, although she was careful never to allow the depth of her obsession to show, lest he regard it as smothering. Sometimes she felt as though she existed only as an extension of his being. But, she had to be so much to him; wife, lover, friend – and child. For when the tests following her failure to conceive had revealed Tony's negative sperm count, he had been devastated. She knew how much it had hurt his fragile masculine ego. He had built everything, the house, his career, even their friends, around the life he had wanted to provide for his children. And she also knew that if she had proved infertile, he would have left her. She knew it, because he had told her so, bitterly and frequently, during that first uneasy year when they had struggled to come to terms with their misfortune.

He left her abruptly, and rose to his feet. He zipped his fly, picked up his martini and drained it. Trembling, her breasts, thighs and buttocks stinging with pain, she returned to the bath and began to soap herself.

'As soon as I finish, we can eat. It's chicken casserole,' she ventured. Tony was often aggressive and always unpredictable after they'd had sex.

'I'll eat right away.' He wasn't asking her permission, and she knew it. 'I have to get back to the hospital.'

'Must you?' She failed to keep the disappointment from her voice. Mondays were special; the one night of the week they kept for themselves, when neither of them attended any of the committee meetings or clubs they

belonged to, or visited or entertained their wide circle of colleagues and friends.

‘The police are digging. They’re searching for more bodies.’

‘More?’ she echoed.

‘Let’s hope they don’t find any. One has brought me more trouble than I want to cope with. I may be late. Don’t wait up.’

Every time he said those words, she had visions of a flat, a mistress – someone young and beautiful like Lyn Sullivan; but she knew better than to allow her suspicions to surface. Their inability to have children had driven enough of a wedge between them, without her voicing the insecurities that had begun to plague her since she had first detected another woman’s perfume on his clothes.

Instead she forced herself to be charming, attractive, compliant and obliging. She knew that was the only way to hold Tony; to make him want her enough to return to her, no matter what escapades he indulged in.

She loved him enough to allow him free rein to hurt her. And she would continue to do so, no matter what it cost her, simply because life without him was unthinkable.

‘I’ll be down as soon as I’m dressed, darling,’ she called out. ‘Perhaps we can have coffee together?’

He didn’t hear her. He had already left the house.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Peter Collins supervised the lifting of the liquid remains of the dog, which unfortunately for his team had, as Murphy'd observed, been a large and hairy one, from the pit and into a body shell. As soon as the dog was disposed of, Peter returned to the hole, where Murphy was digging out the suitcase, which had been buried beneath the dog.

It was twenty minutes before Murphy managed to scoop the case on to a canvas stretcher, and even then Peter wasn't satisfied the hole had been properly excavated. He checked out the crater himself, crumbling the earth between his fingers, before switching Chris Brooke and Andrew Murphy again, ordering Chris to dig down another three foot.

He heaved himself out of the pit, and stood on the lawn, brushing clumps of mud from his trousers and breathing in the clean, sweet-smelling evening air. There was intense activity around the other sites. As soon as the light had begun to fade, Bill had ordered portable lamps to be brought up, and they were dotted around the lawns, shining spotlights into the shadowy puddles shrouded behind the canvas screens and casting silver shadows over the lawns.

'Anything?' Peter asked Dan as he walked towards him.

'Other than loose earth no, and we've gone down five foot.'

'The Super?'

'Same as here; the deeper they dig, the softer the earth.'

A whistle blew. Dan and Peter ran towards the site, as Bill's bald head emerged from behind a screen.

‘Phone Patrick,’ Bill shouted.

Dan pulled out his mobile.

‘Another body?’ Peter asked.

‘Call off the late meeting and reschedule it for tomorrow. Supervise Dan’s site as well as your own for the moment.’ Bill disappeared back behind the screen. Peter heard him shout at the hapless constable who was still in the hole.

‘Out, before you do any more damage. Leave it for the pathologist, boy.’

Peter recalled the times that he and Trevor had taken Bill’s flak. Before he had time to take a second step, another whistle blew. He whirled to the right and saw a young constable surface from behind the canvas screens that shrouded Dan’s site, green-faced and retching. Once again the ghostly twilight and perfume of the tree blossoms were overwhelmed by the pervasive, sickly-sweet stench of death.

‘Patrick’s on his way.’ Dan returned his mobile to his pocket.

‘I hope he brings a nightcap with him. Something tells me we’re going to see in the dawn on this one.’ Peter pulled two cigars from his pocket and offered Dan one.

Spencer Jordan saw the lights and the commotion in the hospital grounds from the kitchen window of his self-contained flat as he was preparing his evening meal. The flat was on the third-floor of a halfway house, and had been nicknamed “the penthouse” by the patients who lived in bed-sits on the floors below.

Pronounced fit to return to the community, after two years as an in-patient in psychiatric wards in America and Britain, and six months in a halfway house attached to Compton Castle, the thought of returning to “normality”

had terrified Spencer. Harry Goldman had suggested he apply for the post of art therapist at Compton Castle, and when he had been given the job Spencer had volunteered to take over his predecessor's role as warden of one of the halfway units. Wary of his recent illness, the Trust had turned him down citing as a reason his workload as an art therapist.

Harry Goldman had intervened again, and the Trust compromised. Spencer was given the post of assistant warden, which carried a rent-free flat, in return for two nights "sleep in" duty when he was required to supervise the residents and ensure that none of them stayed out later than midnight. Not that any of them ever tried. Recovering from phobias and depressions, their problem was being persuaded to relinquish the security of their unit for more than ten minutes, not getting them to return to it afterwards.

Although officially on duty only two nights a week, staff shortages frequently stretched the two nights to four and sometimes even six. Spencer didn't mind; he, like the residents he supervised, rarely went out in the evenings. He knew no one in the town other than the staff and patients, and there was nowhere he wanted to go. Art exhibitions, the theatre, and even the cinema conjured up painful memories he preferred to keep submerged.

Spencer's family and social life had ended in America; not even Harry Goldman could persuade him otherwise. Most evenings he returned to the soulless utility-furnished flat, to sit in an uncomfortable, institution armchair, and stare at his bare walls. The hospital authority had provided him with prints, but he had taken them down. He doubted he'd ever produce his own art again, but he remained enough of an artist to reject bad art when he saw it.

He made himself a salad, and broke a few ounces of the same goat's cheese he had used in his sandwiches into the lettuce, cucumber, grapes, peppers and tomatoes. Taking it and a bottle of mineral water, he went into the living room and switched on the television. He watched the news that catalogued the current series of global human disasters. The starving in Africa, abused orphans in the Balkans, finally ending with a series of photographs of the victims of a shoot-out between gangs in an American city; the mention of America, and the film of a city street with its familiar shop signs, hit too close to home. He changed channels and ate his salad to the accompaniment of a forty-year-old Hollywood musical.

Spencer had finished his meal and cleared up by six-thirty. The evening stretched ahead of him, an empty void to be filled – with what? He flicked through the evening paper he bought for its television page, and studied the available options. A documentary on the Dead Sea Scrolls, the third episode of a detective series he'd never seen, an American sit com, a film he'd enjoyed the first time around – and hated the fifth. He switched off the television and went to the window. Night had fallen, dusky, velvet-hued, but lights shone blindingly in the hospital grounds, casting eerie shadows over the white-clad figures scurrying between the lawns and the police cars.

An ambulance had driven on the lawn and parked next to one of the canvas screens. Two men walked around to its back doors, and began to unload body-bags and shells. Spencer drew his curtains and paced uneasily from the small living room to the tiny kitchen, the box-sized bedroom, the bathroom, and back.

He stared at the cheap, veneered sideboard and fought the urge to open its doors. He knew he wasn't

strong enough to look at its contents – not yet. If he opened them, he'd suffer, a few moments – moments of what? Not happiness, that was too a strong word, and afterwards there'd be so much pain...

The temptation proved too strong. He wrenched open the door, and removed a box of photograph albums. Fingering the scars that radiated from his glass eye, he sat at the table and gently took the top album into his hands. He opened it and stared at the first page. A wedding group outside a registry office in London. Himself, smiling broadly, wearing an outrageous scarlet silk suit, navy-blue shirt, and red and purple tie; his arm wrapped around Danielle, four months pregnant, in bright-green and blue cotton voile.

The reception... friends... he could taste the wine and strawberries, hear the toast; *LONG LIFE AND HAPPINESS!*

The house in California – a naked, fat, pink gurgling baby in his arms – then in Danielle's. More friends, gallery openings, another baby – and another – he slammed the album shut. Blinded by unshed tears, he stumbled to the sideboard and returned it to the shelf.

He sat with his back to the sideboard, but after a moment's hesitation, opened the drinks compartment. He wasn't on duty. It didn't matter what state he got himself into. He took out a full whisky bottle, unscrewed the top and filled a tumbler. He drank half of it without bothering to go into the kitchen to fetch ice. Holding the glass in one hand and the bottle by the neck in the other, he returned to his chair and switched on the television again. He'd watch the film for the sixth time. It was easier to cope with what he knew – than to face the past – the future – or worse of all – the present.

Bill, Dan and Peter were leaning against the bonnet of a police car, talking, when Patrick surfaced from the last pit, and walked wearily towards them. Peter had the inevitable cigar in hand, Dan was chewing peppermints and Bill was amusing himself by shouting at any rookie foolhardy enough to stray within his sight.

‘I’ve done what I can here. They’re all in body bags and shells. I’ll continue in the lab in the morning.’ O’Kelly tore off his rubber gloves.

‘It is morning,’ Peter said.

Patrick glared at him. ‘Not until after I’ve slept.’

‘Appreciate you coming out, Patrick.’ Bill helped himself to one of the cigars that protruded from Peter’s pocket.

‘I’ll tell you what I can be sure of; but keep the questions until after the PMs.’

‘You’ve got it.’ Dan yawned as the hospital clock struck four.

‘They’re both female and young; one in an advanced stage of decomposition, the other skeletal, with a few rags of organs attached. Both have soil in the mouths, nose and as far as I can make out, air passages.’

‘Buried alive?’ Bill asked.

‘I should be able to answer that tomorrow. Both were brunette, one had long hair, the other short.’

‘We found a suitcase and two handbags buried beneath the dog,’ Peter said. ‘They’re bagged, and in the ambulance.’

‘Will you take a look at the dog, as well?’ Bill asked. ‘As a favour.’

‘As a favour, I’ll take a quick look before I send it on with the suitcase to the police lab. But don’t make a habit

of it,' Patrick moved towards his car. 'See you in a couple of hours.'

'Let's clear this place,' Bill ordered.

Peter looked over to the blocks housing the patients. Apart from the ward office and the bathroom windows, the building was in darkness. He imagined Trevor curled up warm and comfortable in his bed. 'Lucky sod!' he swore as he stared at the battlefield of trenches and mounds that had been lawns and flowerbeds.

Peter didn't reach the flat he called home until dawn had lightened the sky from deep rich navy to cold steel grey. He locked his car and walked up a short, red-tiled path to the front door of a five-storey Edwardian building. Originally a middle-class home for family and servants, it now housed six flats and four bed-sits. The flat he'd chosen for its view and its proximity to the town centre, was on the third-floor.

He turned the key and stepped into the original hall. Its spaciousness was the only thing that hadn't changed. Unconcerned with period authenticity the landlord had replaced the mahogany panelled staircase and ornate, mouldering plasterwork with functional modern substitutes.

Peter took the stairs two at a time and opened the door to his flat. He walked straight into a well-proportioned, high-ceilinged living room. The bedroom and bathroom were minute. The kitchen was built into what had once been a fairly large airing cupboard, and it had an air-vent instead of a window. But he forgave the flat its failings for the one handsome room.

He walked across the brown Berber carpet to the window, opened it and stepped on to a fire-escape that overlooked the beach. He left the window open went into

the kitchen, ground a handful of coffee beans, and made himself a pot of coffee. His stomach told him he was hungry. There was half a loaf of mouldy wholemeal bread in his breadbin. He opened his fridge. A six-pack of beer, a tub of low-fat spread, a carton of long-life milk, two eggs and a stale corner of cheese. The freezer compartment held a lasagne ready meal for one, a pizza, half a pack of sausages, but no bread. He had more luck in the cupboard where he discovered a packet of Melba toasts of uncertain age.

He scrambled the eggs and layered low-fat spread on the toasts. When the meal was ready, he filled a tray and carried it, and a cushion from an easy chair on to the fire-escape. He leaned on the safety railings, dangling his legs in space while he ate, staring at the sun rising over the sea and listening to the waves and the cries of the gulls scavenging along the shoreline.

The chill in the air carried an antiseptic property that cleansed away the cloying stench of death that had fouled the night. He tried not to think of what had to be done; the identification of the victims, the tracking down of a murderer – and Trevor Joseph to wrench back into the world of the living. A perfect spring day was about to begin, and all he wanted was his bed.

He finished his meal without tasting it, threw the cushion back on to the chair, carried the tray into the kitchen, dumped the dirty dishes in the sink for his daily, and went into his bedroom. His clothes were caked with mud. He stripped them off, flung them into the linen basket and crawled beneath the duvet in his underpants. He looked at his alarm, debated whether to set it or not, and decided against making the effort. Bill or Dan would want him soon enough. Two minutes later all that could

be heard was his rhythmic breathing as he slept the heavy dreamless sleep of the truly exhausted.

‘Trevor.’ Lyn Sullivan knocked on his door before opening it. ‘It’s your turn to lay the table.’ She took a cup of tea from the auxiliary and set it on his bedside table, before moving on down the corridor.

Trevor leaned on his elbow and sipped the tea. His head ached from the sleeping pills he had taken. When the cup was empty he stumbled out of bed and into the bathroom, took off his pyjamas and climbed into the shower. The morning-after of drugs was deadlier than alcohol, he decided, as he held his head under the cool jet for two full minutes. On impulse he washed his hair. He discovered that it was longer than he’d ever worn it. Could he do what Spencer had suggested; take another step outside today? How long before he’d make it as far as the front gate? And how long before he went into town to have his hair cut?

He rinsed the lather from his body and hair, wrapped a towel around his waist, and stepped back into his bedroom. He looked at the threadbare tracksuit top that lay on the chair where he had dumped his clothes the night before. He thrust it and his faded trousers into his dirty linen bag. He opened the wardrobe door and flicked through the clothes Peter had brought from his flat. Two pairs of jeans, as faded as the trousers, but even more threadbare. A hand-knitted woollen jumper his mother had sent him last Christmas which had gone drastically out of shape after he’d taken it to the launderette. An anorak that stubbornly remained grubby no matter how often he flung it into a washing-machine, and a couple of white shirts. He settled on a white shirt and a pair of jeans. The jeans sagged three inches too large for his waist. He

looked for a belt, and found one in a bag of underclothes and socks Peter had brought that he'd never bothered to open.

He pushed the belt through the loops at the waist of his jeans, but even when the prong was hooked into the last hole, the belt hung slack. He pulled it tighter, marked the spot where another hole was needed, and looked around for something to make one with.

Lyn Sullivan knocked the door again. He opened it.

'Good, you're up. Breakfast will be ready in ten minutes, and you haven't laid the table, but I can see why. You look smart.'

'Smart?' he repeated, suspecting she was teasing him. 'These are just a pair of old jeans.'

'Old jeans and white shirts are the latest fashion. What's the problem? Belt needs another hole?'

'I was looking for something to make one with.'

'Give it to me. I'll use scissors.' She grabbed the buckle and pulled the belt loose. 'I'll bring it back in a moment.'

Trevor brushed his damp hair away from his face with his fingers and stared at himself in the full-length mirror fixed to the wall beside the wardrobe. His clothes might be clean but they were worn, and he looked thin, tired and old. Just as his father had done just before he'd died. Was that where he was headed? An early grave? But his father had died of cancer, and he'd only been mangled in the line of duty.

It was probably as Peter constantly told him; lack of effort on his part. Sitting around all day doing nothing. He'd put action off long enough. It was time to take a step forward. He opened a drawer in the bedside table and took out his wallet. It held fifty pounds cash, and his credit cards. He was receiving sick pay so he had no money

worries, and Peter had checked that the couple renting the flat he owned, but hadn't lived in for years, were paying their rent into his bank account.

Today he would aim for the gate. Once at the gate it would only be a small step to board a bus into town. He could have his hair cut, and buy some clothes. Possibly even take another bus out to see his flat. Check on both his flat and his car. It would be a beginning; and after he made a beginning he could decide on the rest of his life.

He felt sick to the pit of his stomach at the prospect of leaving the hospital, but he also felt a sense of exhilaration. For the first time since he'd been injured, he was going to take responsibility for himself.

The phone rang in Peter's bedroom what seemed like less than five minutes after he fell asleep. He stretched out his arm and picked up the receiver.

'Mortuary, ten minutes.' The line went dead, but not before he recognised Bill Mulcahy's voice. He lay back and closed his eyes, recognising even as he succumbed to temptation that it was a deadly thing to do. If he didn't move right away, he wouldn't wake for another eight hours, and not even eight hours of blissful sleep was worth incurring Bill's wrath for.

He jerked himself out of bed and headed for the shower. Five minutes later, damp but dressed, he walked out to his car. He glanced at his watch; it was just after ten. Patrick must have worked through for there to be sufficient information to justify calling a meeting. He was still hungry. The eggs and Melba toast hadn't filled much of a hole, but he knew better than to eat anything before he visited the mortuary.

*

*

*

‘We’re doing more tests. Early indications are it’s a cocktail of several drugs. We’ve identified an anti-depressant, a tranquilliser, and a muscle-relaxant, effective to the point of paralysis when administered in large doses. I found curare in the bloodstream, but the effects were probably wearing off at the time of death, because she managed to tear her glued mouth open. We know that from the damage done to the skin on her lips,’ Patrick dropped his scalpel on to the slab where his assistant had laid out Rosie Twyford again.

‘But she was paralysed when placed in the hole?’ Dan asked.

‘Peter, how nice of you to visit,’ Mulcahy called out sarcastically when he walked in.

Peter closed the doors behind him, fighting the smell of putrefaction that not even the stench of formaldehyde could kill.

‘The degree of paralysis would relate to the amount of drug ingested,’ Patrick said thoughtfully in response to Dan’s question. ‘There was a significant amount of curare in her bloodstream, but the torn lips, open eyes and amount of soil in her air passages suggest that she fought for her life as no unconscious person would have done. If she had been administered a high enough dose to cause paralysis, it was wearing off at the time of death. She was either conscious or regained consciousness, shortly after she was buried.’

‘We’re talking about the first victim,’ Dan explained to Peter.

‘Then this villain, whoever he is, likes to see his victims’ reaction as he shovels dirt on top of them?’ Bill suggested.

‘You could argue that, although I’ve come up with no evidence to support it other than she was alive when she

was buried, and both her eyes were open when she was uncovered,' Patrick said carefully.

'Michelle came up trumps. We think the first victim is one Rosie Twyford,' Dan said in his slow, Welsh lilt. 'She was discharged from Compton Castle six months ago, but she returned for twice-weekly outpatient sessions with Dorothy Clyne. I rang Tony Waters early this morning, got him out of bed, and had him check her file. Her last appointment was a week yesterday and she was discharged as an outpatient.'

'Grady also checked Rosie Twyford's bed-sit last night,' Mulcahy chipped in. 'The keys we found on the corpse fit the front door, and Rosie's door. Grady spoke to the boy in the next room. The last time he saw her was the morning she left for her hospital visit. When she didn't return, he assumed she'd been kept in again. He did say that she appeared unusually nervous.'

'He didn't think to ring the hospital and check?' Peter asked.

'Apparently they didn't have that kind of relationship. They never got past "good morning, nice weather, good evening".'

'If she's the same girl Tony Waters was talking about yesterday, she has a family in Devon. Weren't they in touch with her?' Peter walked over to the tiled wall and leaned against it. The combination of the smell and the sight of the corpse was proving nauseating.

'Devon police interviewed them this morning. There's a mother, stepfather and two stepbrothers. Sometimes she wouldn't get in touch with them for weeks.'

'Then if she went missing a week ago – ' Peter began.

‘Someone kept her alive until last Saturday night, when Vanessa Hedley saw her being buried.’

‘Vanessa Hedley’s story fits in with the facts.’ Patrick took one of the beakers of strong black coffee that his assistant had prepared. Peter and Dan balked at the coffee, but Bill took one.

‘If I don’t sit down soon I’m going to fall down.’ Patrick went into his office and sat behind his desk.

Bill dumped his coffee on the desk, flicked back the pages of a notebook until he found a clean sheet, pulled a pen from his pocket and started to scribble.

‘Victim one, Rosie Twyford keeps appointment in Compton Castle last Monday then disappears. Nothing is heard or seen of her until Vanessa goes into the garden on Monday morning. On Saturday night Vanessa Hedley saw a bulky shadow burying a body in the grounds, and no one,’ he glanced at Peter, ‘took any notice of her story until Monday morning, when she bullied the trainee into digging up the flowerbed. Then we find a corpse that we can now be certain is Rosie Twyford.’

‘Saturday/Sunday fits in with my calculations,’ Patrick interrupted. ‘I’d say she died twelve hours either side of midnight Saturday.’

‘No closer?’ Mulcahy pressed.

‘Can’t make it any closer, sorry.’ Patrick didn’t sound in the least apologetic.

‘Which means that Rosie Twyford was kept alive somewhere around Compton Castle from Monday afternoon to midnight on Saturday,’ Dan said.

‘Not necessarily,’ Peter played Devil’s Advocate. ‘She could have gone to stay with someone – a boyfriend perhaps.’

‘An abduction would fit in with her physical state; the dehydration, the starvation,’ Patrick closed his eyes.

‘Waters took us around the whole of the old building.’ Peter offered his pack of cigars.

‘Was there anywhere that could be used to hide a body?’ Bill asked.

Peter recalled the rambling corridors, the attics blanketed with years of dust, the cellar walls lined with pipes. ‘If you knew the building, you could come up with a thousand and one places. There are corners of that place that haven’t seen people or daylight in years.’

‘There were twenty-five needle marks in Rosie’s arm,’ Patrick reminded. ‘You need comparative privacy to inject twenty-five doses of muscle-relaxant, tranquilliser and anti-depressant over a period of days if you don’t want to be noticed.’

‘Which indicates that she’d been held captive before she was buried,’ Bill commented.

‘Unless she was a junkie,’ Peter perched on the edge of the desk.

‘Nothing on her record card, according to Tony Waters,’ Dan said.

‘Or in her bloodstream,’ Patrick added.

‘If she was held captive and tranquillised, what’s the motive? Sexual?’ Peter asked.

‘No physical signs of a struggle,’ Patrick said, ‘but there wouldn’t have been if she’d been tranquillised. And there were no signs of forced rape, no tearing of tissues, no traces of semen, but I can’t rule out sexual intercourse. Just no signs, no stray hairs, no fibres, no nothing.’

‘The other two victims?’ Bill checked.

‘No semen in either of the vaginas, but the soft tissue has decayed in both bodies. One had been buried for approximately six to eight weeks, the other for about four months. But those are rough calculations based on condition and depth of the burials. I may have something

more exact for you later.' Patrick looked grey, drained and exhausted.

'You haven't slept?' Dan asked

'I snatched an hour on a slab between PMs.'

'I managed three,' Peter said unthinkingly.

'Then you're set up for the next twenty-hour shift, Peter,' Mulcahy smiled

'You get anything from the suitcase or handbags, Patrick?' Dan asked.

'After a cursory glance I sent them and the dog to the police laboratory for further tests.'

'Right, Peter, that's your next stop, Mulcahy ordered. 'Afterwards liaise with Michelle and see what she's come up with on Rosie Twyford's last movements. I want you to be there when she interviews everyone in Rosie Twyford's house.'

Patrick rose from his chair and pulled off his lab coat. 'I'm for home and bed.'

'One more question,' Dan said hesitantly. 'Supposing we're right and the killer does pick his victims a week ahead, drugs them and keeps them somewhere in the hospital before burying them. What can you tell us about such a man?'

'That's one for the police psychiatrist. I'm a scientist who deals in facts, not a shrink.'

'But you've seen dozens if not hundreds of murder victims. Surely you're interested in the outcome. You must have an opinion?' Dan persisted.

'Off the top of my head, he could be an impotent male dominated by a female, possibly a mother, wife, sister. Someone who wants to be in control, but isn't. But that is pure speculation.'

‘But it does give us one more thing to consider and work on,’ Mulcahy said shortly. ‘And that’s where we’re all going now, gentlemen. To work.’

CHAPTER EIGHT

‘I *saw* him.’ Vanessa Hedley glanced over her shoulder and around the room before moving her head close to Alison Bevan’s and lowering her voice. Trevor, who was sitting across the breakfast table from them, found himself straining his ears to catch what Vanessa was saying.

‘It was dark,’ Ali Bevan pointed out, ‘so how could you see anything?’

‘There was a moon,’ Vanessa bit back. ‘I saw his features clearly. He was huge – massive. I knew he was evil. The eyes and the mouth are a dead giveaway and he had a cruel, vicious mouth.’

‘If you saw that much of him, and he saw you, aren’t you terrified?’ Ali asked.

‘Of what?’

‘That he’ll come after you.’

‘She’s right.’ Roland Williams, a not so recovering alcoholic, leered. ‘The murderer could be here, in this room, listening to every word you’re saying.’ He glanced around the dining room, which was crowded with patients, domestic staff and nurses. ‘You’re the only one who can identify him. He could be watching you, waiting his chance to grab you, rape you –’

‘That’s enough, Roland,’ Carol caught the tail end of his conversation as she passed their table.

‘Sorry,’ Roland apologised insincerely eying her breasts beneath her thin dress.

‘Rape?’ Ali hissed as soon as Carol disappeared through the door. ‘I didn’t know the victims had been raped.’

‘Of course, he raped his victims,’ Roland was enjoying himself. ‘Why else would he kill them, and try to

hide the bodies. He probably stripped them, played with them – then – ’

‘The murderer isn’t here.’ Vanessa cut him short. The one topic of conversation guaranteed to excite Roland, and keep him pontificating for hours, was perverted sexual activity – usually as practised by primitive tribes only he had heard of. And she wanted to keep everyone’s attention fixed on her and her story.

‘I’m only trying to warn you, ladies.’ Roland slurped his tea. His double chin wobbled as he licked drops from his fat, wet lips. ‘I’d hate to think of anyone kidnapping one of you, tying you up, stripping you – ’ He bent his head close to Ali’s. ‘Stroking your breasts, putting his fingers in – ’

Trevor dipped his spoon into his uneaten porridge and stirred it, mixing the crust of sugar into the glutinous mass of oats. Once a detective, always a detective, he reflected. He hadn’t wanted to get involved with this case, but he hadn’t been able to stop himself from listening to Vanessa, or forming the conclusion that, for all her boasting, she didn’t have a clue what the killer looked like. Shadows in moonlit gardens were easily distorted. They merged with bushes and trees, wavered with the wind, contorting figures, making them appear larger and wider, or taller and wispier than they were. Vanessa’s “massive killer” could have been a small man wearing a padded anorak. And he doubted that the killer had come close enough to the window for Vanessa to see his eyes.

He’d looked out of his ground-floor bedroom window that morning and watched an officer point out one of the burial sites to a colleague. He hadn’t been able to discern the constables’ features beneath their helmets in daylight. So what chance had Vanessa of seeing the murderer’s features as he’d shovelled earth on top of his

victim? But if the killer heard Vanessa's prattling, would he realise that?

Trevor glanced around the room. Apart from Lucy Craig, Roland Williams and Alison Bevan, who were listening, enthralled, to Vanessa, everyone appeared to be minding their own business. He recalled a few of the stories forced on him by his fellow patients, when he hadn't wanted to listen.

If a quarter of Roland's stories were true, he had done some very peculiar things with men and women, singly and in groups, and not only under the influence of drink. Last week he had caught sight of Roland retreating into a sluice room with a brown paper bag under his arm. He had assumed the bag contained alcohol, which was banned in Compton Castle. Had it contained something more sinister?

Michael Carpenter's sole topic of conversation was his ex-girlfriend, Angela, who had jilted him. It was common knowledge that he was incarcerated in Compton Castle because he'd set fire to her house, and almost succeeded in burning her entire family to death. Had Michael decided that the only way to hold on to a girl of his own was to kill and bury her in a grave known to no one except himself? That didn't seem far-fetched when he recalled Vanessa's railings against those who had prevented her from putting her husband in a grave where she would have had absolute control over him.

'Go on, Vanessa,' Lucy pestered. 'Tell us what he *really* looked like?'

'I've told you. Huge – with thick black hair, and a mouthful of white teeth. Enormous muscled arms like the wrestlers on television. He picked up the spade as though it was a toy, and brandished it above his head –'

‘Not hungry, Trevor?’ Lyn, in a polo-neck red sweater, black jeans, and smelling of magnolias, took the empty chair beside him, making him suddenly and painfully aware of the shabbiness of his own clothes.

‘Not for porridge.’

‘Do you want some toast? Fresh toast,’ she coaxed. ‘Not those cold rubbery slices made ten minutes before anyone gets to eat them.’

‘Sounds good,’ he admitted.

‘I’ll help you make some in the ward kitchen. You know where it is?’

‘Yes.’ If Lyn had brought him the toast, he would have eaten it, but he hated going into the ward kitchen. It was always full of people, staff as well as patients.

‘Come on, then.’ She left her chair and waited for him.

‘Lyn,’ he asked as he followed her into the corridor. ‘Can you get hold of Peter Collins for me?’

‘I could try. But with everything that’s going on he’ll be busy. But you could walk down the tunnel to the main hospital. The police have set up their mobile headquarters outside the back door.’ She allowed Trevor to go into the kitchen ahead of her.

If Trevor wanted to see Peter Collins, he’d have to make an effort to leave the ward, and that was the moment she’d been waiting for.

‘I didn’t expect to see you at work for a few days. Have your cuts healed?’ Carol asked when Lyn entered the kitchen.

‘They weren’t as bad as they looked.’ Lyn glanced at the scars on her palms that weren’t covered by plasters. She turned to Trevor. ‘There’s the toaster. Bread’s in the enamel bin next to it. Be an angel and pop a piece in for

me.’ She took the electric kettle from the work surface behind Carol, and filled it, effectively blocking Trevor’s exit from the galley.

‘Ladies.’ The male nurse, Karl Lane joined them. ‘Any tea going?’ he smiled at Lyn. Trevor saw the smile and was stung by a pang of jealousy. Not jealousy because Karl Lane was looking at Lyn, but because the glances they’d exchanged had reminded him that there were people who had fulfilling private relationships away from the public eye. Something he hadn’t experienced in years. He felt angry and empty because his own private life consisted only of his mother, married brother, sister-in-law, nieces and nephews – and Peter Collins. And fond as he was of all of them, not one of them could act as a substitute for a loving girlfriend – or wife. If only –

He pushed the thought from his mind. There were too many “if onlys” in his life.

‘Toast’s burning,’ Carol called out. She finished her tea. ‘It’s time I was back on my ward to check that none of my little darlings have gone a wandering.’

‘What do you make of all this, Carol?’ Karl asked.

‘All what?’

‘All these bodies.’

‘Oh, yes, they’ve found more haven’t they? What do you want me to make of them?’ She turned the question back on him.

‘What does Tony think?’

‘The last time I saw Tony,’ she recalled her husband’s pale face as he’d stumbled into their bed as she was getting out of it that morning, ‘he was too tired to think.’

‘Do you think the killer’s a patient or a member of staff?’

‘It has to be a patient,’ Lyn said. The other two turned and stared at her. ‘Well it does, doesn’t it? It’s obvious. This is a psychiatric hospital.’

‘So they tell me.’ Karl took the tea she handed him.

‘In my opinion we should stop playing guessing games and leave it to the police,’ Carol went to the door. ‘I’ve enough on my plate running my ward and my house. I can’t cope with a murder hunt as well. See you later.’

Trevor’s hand trembled as he offered Lyn a plate of toast he’d buttered and cut into triangles.

‘Thank you,’ she smiled. ‘You know Karl, don’t you, Trevor?’

‘We met last Sunday.’ Karl held out his hand to Trevor. ‘But we weren’t introduced. You’re a police officer, aren’t you?’

‘I was,’ Trevor corrected.

‘There’s nothing preventing you from being one again if you want to rejoin the force.’ Lyn bit into her piece of toast.

‘I’m not sure what I want any more.’ Trevor picked up his own toast, which was singed and black around the edges. He’d kept the burnt pieces for himself, and made fresh for Lyn.

‘I can understand that.’ Karl stole a piece of Lyn’s toast. ‘Police duty must be almost as bad as working here; no let up, all the hours God sends, and –’

‘Dealing with the dregs of society,’ Trevor supplied, intuitively.

‘Present company excepted. But forgive me; I don’t work on this ward. I’m on manias, and they’re different to assessment and depressions. More loopy. See you, Lyn.’

‘He didn’t mean that. It’s just that this job can get to you,’ Lyn apologised.

‘I can imagine.’ He dropped the barely nibbled toast back on to his plate.

‘It’s one of the terraced houses on the hill leading up to the heights,’ Michelle explained to Peter. ‘From the outside they look small, door in the middle, bay windows either side, and three windows above, but they’re surprisingly large inside. There are six bed-sits in there, and they share two bathrooms and two kitchens.’

‘I don’t think that recommendation is sufficient for me to want to uproot myself.’ He was tired of listening to Michelle’s chatter.

The police laboratory was attached to the forensic science unit of the university in the neighbouring town, forty miles away. Normally he would have enjoyed the drive as he regarded driving time as thinking time. But he found it impossible to enjoy anything in Michelle’s company.

‘I only spoke to the man who lives in the bed-sit next door to Rosie Twyford’s,’ Michelle confessed. ‘He said the walls are thin, so if she’d returned after last Monday he would have heard her.’

‘Did you ask him if she had any friends she might have been staying with?’

‘No. He said Rosie had only moved in three months ago, I checked the date, and it ties in with her discharge from Compton Castle.’

‘And in all of three months she never once stayed out all night?’

‘I didn’t think to ask him.’

‘You wouldn’t.’

She fell silent. Peter saw her bottom lip quivering as he turned a corner, but he felt no remorse for giving her a hard time. If she wanted to be a copper, she had to get

used to everything her superior officers were likely to throw at her. If she couldn't cut it, she'd have to find another career; one more suited to a girl who needed nannying.

He slowed down, signalled and took a slip-road off the motorway, turning into the network of narrow suburban streets that surrounded the town centre. Mindful that she may be asked to visit this place alone sometime, Michelle tried to follow his route, but Peter took turning after turning, delving deeper and deeper into a mixture of 1930s and 1950s housing, until she began to wonder if he was deliberately following an unnecessarily complicated route to confuse her.

Eventually he pulled up in a car park that fronted a huge red-brick, flat-fronted block set with steel casement windows. A sign outside declared it to be UNIVERSITY ANNEX B.

'We're here,' Peter announced.

Michelle jumped out so quickly she jarred her ankle, but she would have sooner died than admit to feeling pain in front of Peter. She allowed him to lead the way through the double doors into the lobby. As she'd expected he made no concessions to her presence, not even checking to see if she was behind him when he pressed the lift button.

The police laboratory was on the top floor and, as in the mortuary, the smell of rotting flesh was overwhelming. They noticed it the moment the lift doors opened. Peter made no comment as he pressed the bell for attention, but he took grim pleasure in the sight of Michelle fumbling in her handbag for a tissue. When the door to the laboratory opened, the stench intensified – choking and breath-taking.

The first thing Peter noticed when they walked in was the dog laid out in all its putrefying glory on a steel-topped table, strategically placed beneath a window. The suitcase and the handbags were laid out on two other tables. All the hard surfaces were covered with a grey film of fingerprint powder.

‘Sergeant Collins, isn’t it?’ A white-coated, grey-haired man nodded to Peter. ‘Recognise you from that last drugs haul. Thomas, Phil Thomas.’

‘I remember you.’ Peter looked at Phil’s hand before shaking it.

‘How’s life on the Drug Squad?’

‘Wish I knew,’ Peter moaned. ‘Been seconded to Serious Crimes.’

‘Dan Evans’s lot?’

‘That’s the one.’

‘And this is?’ Phil smiled at Michelle.

‘Michelle Grady,’ she held out her hand and wondered how long she could last in this atmosphere. She was certain the moment she took a deep breath, she’d throw up.

‘New?’ Phil asked her.

‘Does it show?’

‘Only the eagerness. Old hands like Sergeant Collins here are never eager about anything, even their days off.’

‘Seen it all before.’ Peter wished Phil would spare a thought for those who hadn’t grown accustomed to the foul atmosphere.

Phil walked to the tables holding the bags. ‘We’ve been through this lot with a fine toothcomb; got all the prints we could find. Only two sets, one matches one case and handbag, the other matches the second set, so the chances are they belong to the victims. Here’s a list of contents found in both sets of cases and handbags.

Nothing a girl wouldn't take with her on holiday. Selection of clothes – hairdrier, cosmetics, shoes. There's a nurse's uniform, belt with silver buckle, and a couple of nurses' textbooks in one of the cases. There's a driving licence in the better of the two handbags for an Elizabeth Moore, twenty-four years of age. A couple of certificates rolled into a tube at the bottom of the bag identify her as a state registered nurse. Prescription in the second handbag for tranquillisers made out to a C. Moon. No address, but there's a Compton Castle stamp. If she was an inmate, you should be able to track her down through hospital records.'

'I'll get to work on it.' Peter felt as though another minute in the fetid atmosphere would suffocate him.

'Feel free to take whatever you want. I'll get one of the lads to help you with the suitcases. And here – ' He handed Peter a sheet of paper.

'What's this?' Peter squinted at the illegible scribble that covered the page.

'Report on the dog. Sorry, our assistant's sick and we don't rate a replacement. I thought you could get someone to process it in the station. Nostrils, upper part of the lungs and air passages filled with dirt. Traces of curare in the bloodstream. I'd say it had been drugged and buried alive.'

Peter paused on his way to the door. 'You sure about that?'

'You questioning my professionalism?'

'No, it's just that – '

'What, Sergeant Collins?' Phil Thomas asked.

'I wonder why someone would go to the trouble of killing a dog in exactly the same way they've murdered three women.'

‘That’s for you to find out,’ Thomas said with a glimmer of a smile. ‘I’ve done my bit. Now it’s your turn.’

Trevor hesitated at the entrance to the perspex tunnel that connected his ward to the main hospital building. He paced up and down, debating whether to turn around and go into the garden. The grounds might have been a pleasant option if there weren’t so many people there he knew; rookies and older colleagues he’d worked with –

He turned on his heel and retreated to the security of his own room. He gasped for breath as he fumbled with the door-handle, seeking an excuse to explain his cowardice. His wallet – that was it. If he was going as far as the old hospital, he might as well keep going. Walk to the main gate, and wait for a bus. Go into town, get his hair cut. And if he took his wallet and his credit cards, maybe even buy some clothes.

He found his wallet, opened his wardrobe door and lifted out his grubby anorak. Slipping it on over his shirt, he stuffed the wallet into his inside pocket. He stood before the door. All he had to do was open it, walk down the tunnel and he’d be in the main building, close to the police HQ.

He jerked the door open, hitting his thumb painfully as the handle sprang back. Looking neither left nor right, he walked straight ahead, to the end of the corridor and, like a diver plunging into a deep pool, set foot in the tunnel. He took one step, then another, then another – walking on blindly and mechanically.

When the white walls and floor closed around him, he fought off a panic attack. Wiping clammy hands down the sides of his jeans, he let the air slowly out of his lungs and forced another breath. Provided he kept going, one

step at a time, it wouldn't take him long. Patients and nurses walked this way every day, without thinking anything of it. Closing his eyes against the blinding white glare, he drove himself forwards. He heard footsteps echoing behind him, and jumped to the side of the tunnel.

'Hi, Trevor.' Karl Lane passed him, a bundle of files tucked beneath his arm.

'Hi,' Trevor managed to whisper after Karl had moved on. He stood pressed against the side of the tunnel, his eyes closed, until he could no longer hear Karl's footsteps. Only then did he move hesitantly into the centre of the tunnel again. One step, then another, then another. Repeated again and again and again –

'Sergeant Joseph,' Sarah Merchant, a constable who usually worked in the computer room at the station, greeted him as he emerged into the hall of the main building.

Trevor wiped sticky hands over his jeans again and looked at her.

'It's good to see you up and about, sir.' She was clearly stunned by his sickly, emaciated appearance.

'Thank you, Constable Merchant,' Trevor concealed his panic behind a brusque, businesslike facade. 'Is Sergeant Collins around?'

'I haven't seen him this morning, sir, but Inspector Evans and Superintendent Mulcahy are in the mobile HQ. Would you like me to fetch them?'

Before she had a chance to walk over and knock at the door of the makeshift unit, Dan jumped down from the van and called out to Trevor.

'You've saved us a trip. We were on our way to see you. Come in.' He opened the door wide and ushered Trevor inside the mobile unit. Trevor recognised the surroundings. The overflowing ashtrays, the scattering of

dirty coffee mugs, the bins crammed full of take-away food wrappings; typewritten papers and reports strewn from one end of the van to the other, and piles of tabloid newspapers badly folded and stacked in the corner, all with page-three girls uppermost.

‘Coffee?’ Dan thrust a mug at him, and Trevor took it, not because he wanted a drink, but because it gave him something to do with his hands.

‘You look better today,’ Bill commented tactlessly.

It was on the tip of Trevor’s tongue to say he didn’t feel any better, but he knew his whining would irritate Bill when everyone on the force was working flat-out to solve a difficult case. Instead he said the first thing that came into his head.

‘Thought I’d go into town and get my hair cut.’ He could have kicked himself. Now he was committed to going into the town, when it had taken all the courage he possessed to get this far.

‘Good idea. You look like a stray sheepdog,’ Bill agreed.

‘I overheard Vanessa talking at breakfast this morning.’ Trevor looked at the others, but they were waiting for him to continue. ‘She’s been telling the other patients that she managed to get a good look at the killer.’

‘Has she now?’ Mulcahy stroked his stubbly chin.

‘And I thought – ’ Trevor stammered, succumbing to yet another panic attack. He was back where he had been before his accident; working on a murder investigation he wanted no part of. He could get hurt again – killed even, this time.

‘Being a detective, you thought that if the killer was within earshot, Vanessa Hedley’s not going to live much longer,’ Dan finished for him.

‘That’s about the size of it.’ Trevor was grateful that he didn’t have to say more.

‘What exactly did she say?’

‘She gave no useful description,’ Trevor said. ‘She said he was huge, enormous, with black hair – ’

‘Which could have been a hood or even a balaclava if he’d been wearing a coat,’ Dan broke in.

‘And evil eyes.’

‘Evil eyes?’ Dan exchanged glances with Bill.

‘I watched two officers from the window of my room this morning as they walked around the flowerbed where the first body was found. I couldn’t even make out their features, let alone see their eyes.’

‘Are you saying that she didn’t see anything?’

‘No.’ Trevor gripped the edge of the padded bench. He was finding it a tremendous strain to talk to Dan and Bill. He’d forgotten how cynical police officers were by nature. And he was left with the uncomfortable feeling that neither believed a single word he was saying. ‘She must have seen something; the finding of the body confirms that. All I’m saying is that I doubt she could have seen his features from that distance.’

‘Unless he walked up to her window?’ Bill suggested.

‘Or she already knew who he was,’ Dan suggested.

CHAPTER NINE

Vanessa Hedley's attentive audience did not desert her that morning. Roland, Michael, Lucy and Alison dogged her from breakfast, into therapy classes, and in the garden during the coffee break. Spencer watched from his room as they followed Vanessa around the flowerbeds that were being painstakingly reinstated to their former glory by an angry, noisy Jimmy Herne, who was commanding his trainees as though he were directing army battalions in military manoeuvres.

'I know Harry's always on to us to get our charges interested in something, dear boy,' Adam Hayter lisped when he visited Spencer, 'but I think he'd draw the line at gruesome murder, don't you?'

'Probably.' Spencer was nursing a foul hangover, and had already promised himself that he would never allow alcohol in any shape or form to pass his lips again.

'I must say though,' Adam chattered, 'it's made the little darlings easier to deal with. They're too busy gossiping to think of going bonzo bananas. I even found the time to make a nice lamb stew for Dotty and me in my first class this morning. And that, darling, simply isn't normal.'

'What isn't normal?' Lyn asked, as she joined them.

'For our sweeties to be so quiet,' Adam purred. 'Look at the little angels hanging on to Vanessa's every gory word. What is it about murder that excites everyone?'

'I'm damned if I know!' Spencer exploded savagely, turning his back to the window. 'Is there anything I can do for you, Adam?'

'I came to borrow the tinsiest, tiniest choccy biccy,' Adam smirked, his diffident smile carefully calculated to bring out his dimples.

'You know where I keep them.'

Adam went to Spencer's desk. 'Thank you, darling. You won't tell Dotty, will you?' Adam helped himself to three of the biscuits, and skipped out of the door.

'It isn't often the wind blows you down here, Lyn. Can I do something for you?' Spencer asked.

'I came to beg a favour,' she began warily. Spencer was more even-tempered than most of the staff in Compton Castle, including Harry Goldman, who saw it as his duty to remain calm through everything fate, the authorities and the patients threw at him. She'd never seen Spencer snap at anyone before, even Adam, who was unfailingly irritating. 'They've finally fitted a bolt to the inside of the drug cupboard, but in the process they stripped most of the paint from the outside of the door, and it draws attention to the one place we'd like to keep low-profile. I wondered if you had any white paint to spare. It doesn't have to be gloss. Anything will do to patch it in, until maintenance gets around to re-painting it. You know how long they take.'

'I do,' he commented. 'I'll take a look at it for you at lunch time.'

'I'm on split shift today, but if I'm not there, Jean will be around.'

'Fine.' He picked up his coffee and returned to the window.

Lyn walked back to her ward. She saw that Spencer wasn't the only one watching the patients in the hospital grounds. Dotty Clyne and Harry Goldman were also studying the group gathered around Vanessa, from Harry's office window. And she saw Tony glance their

way as he talked to a police officer in the drive. She only hoped that the attention wouldn't send Vanessa over the edge again.

Vanessa finished her tour of the garden, and returned to the therapy block. Basking in the glow of attention, she even began to flirt mildly with Roland. As she continued to wander through the corridors and rooms of Compton Castle, she was unaware of all but the most obvious glances and comments that came her way.

But among those watching, was someone who did not seek to coax more information from her. Someone who walked discreetly down the corridors, someone who stood outside the open door of the therapy rooms as Vanessa continued to excite her audience with gripping stories of the live burial in the grounds.

It didn't matter that Vanessa's story owed more to memories of horror films than reality. Submerged in her ramblings lay the kernels of truths. But nothing could be done immediately. It was daylight – people – far too many people were around. Later, when darkness fell, there would be fewer staff on duty and Vanessa would be sleepy from the increased dose of tranquillisers she'd proudly announced were to be administered to her to help her recover from her traumatic experience. Later – no one would notice anyone slipping from one quiet room to another – later – but not too late to prevent Vanessa from spending yet another day saying too much.

Trevor stood outside the mobile police HQ. He leaned on his stick and shivered, as the fresh spring breeze penetrated the thin denim of his worn jeans and shabby anorak. He wanted to rush back up the drive as fast as his

shaky legs would carry him, to the safe, familiar confines of his room. But Dan was standing next to him.

‘I’ll walk with you to the gate,’ Dan offered.

‘That’s not necessary,’ Trevor replied.

‘I want to see the officer on gate duty, to check the names of everyone who visited this morning. We’re trying to establish a pattern for the hospital. To find out exactly who – ’

‘Comes in, and who goes out, at certain times of the day. In other words, the people we can expect to find within these walls at any given time,’ Trevor finished for him.

‘That’s about the size of it,’ Dan said good-temperedly. ‘I’d forgotten you’d worked with Serious Crimes before.’

‘Not often,’ Trevor conceded.

‘You didn’t enjoy the experience?’

‘I was used to the Drug Squad.’

It was close to the staff lunchtime, and the first shift of nurses, doctors and therapists were walking through the gardens towards the staff dining room in the old hospital.

‘That’s interesting,’ Dan monitored the groups as they walked through the side door of the main building.

‘What?’

‘The staff are all walking through the grounds. Every one I’ve spoken to, doctors, nurses, Tony Waters, they all say how useful those tunnels are, yet not one of them appears to use them.’

‘Can you blame them?’ Trevor asked.

‘No. I don’t know about you, but those shiny white corridors give me the creeps. It’s like a poor man’s film version of the road to heaven.’

*

*

*

‘Inspector!’ The constable manning the gate jumped stiffly to attention.

‘You’ve met Sergeant Joseph?’ Evans introduced Trevor.

‘Haven’t had the pleasure, sir.’ The rookie nodded to Trevor.

‘I’ll be on my way, Dan,’ Trevor moved on. If Dan hadn’t been behind him, he would have turned around. But as he limped past the barrier and through the main gates, he sensed Dan’s eyes boring into the back of his head.

The bus stop was just outside the gates, and when he reached it, he rested on his stick and looked around. The eyes had existed only in his imagination. Dan was standing with his back to him, talking to the constable and neither was watching him.

He stared ahead at the grey expanse of road and pavement, the trees fringing the small park across from the hospital, their delicate new leaves wavering in the wind. An old man walked towards him, leading a tired old spaniel. The man touched his hat and nodded to Trevor; his manners a relic from another, politer age.

He’d made it! He was outside the gates. The enormity of his achievement suddenly hit him. Spencer had warned him it might take days, if not weeks, before he got this far. Yet here he was at the bus stop, only one day away from the shivering panic attack that had driven him back into his room from the door leading out of his block.

He glanced at his watch; it was nearly two o’clock. Cars were streaming past, but no buses. How long had it been since he’d last sat on a bus? Ten years? He hadn’t even thought to ask how often they stopped outside the hospital, and there wasn’t a timetable in sight. Perhaps he

should walk back? At least as far as the porter on gate duty.

A small, bright-red car drove out of the gates and pulled up in front of him. Lyn reached over and opened the passenger door.

‘Going into town?’

‘I was thinking of it,’ he admitted.

‘Hop in. I’ll give you a lift.’

‘There’s no need – ’

‘The buses only run every half hour, and you’ve just missed one. Can’t you tell? You’re the only one waiting here.’

Trevor hobbled hesitantly forward. Pushing his stick into the back seat of the car, he held on to the door and climbed clumsily into the passenger seat.

‘I’m working a split shift today,’ she explained. ‘And I hate split shifts. So I thought I’d go into town and spend some money to cheer myself up.’ She slammed the car into gear and pulled off sharply, cutting in behind a fast-moving Mercedes.

‘Won the pools?’ he asked, after racking his brains for something to say. Had he always found making conversation this difficult? He tried to remember the people he’d talked to before his accident and what he’d said to them.

‘No. Just celebrated my twenty-first birthday.’

‘Congratulations.’

‘You’re late; it was last week. And my parents, not knowing what else to give me, sent me a cheque. I intend to buy a whole new wardrobe. An utterly extravagant and up-to-the-minute wardrobe. It hasn’t been much fun trying to live on a student nurse’s money for the last three years.’

‘It couldn’t have been,’ he agreed.

‘But hopefully all that struggling will soon be over with.’

‘You’ve sat your finals?’

‘Three weeks ago.’ She held up her hand, fingers crossed.

‘You’ll pass.’

‘I wish I had your confidence. Where are you off to? To buy a new wardrobe as well?’

‘I was thinking of getting my hair cut, but you’re right, I do need a new wardrobe. From the state of what I’m wearing, desperately.’

‘I didn’t mean it that way,’ she blushed. ‘I must have sounded patronising. I’m sorry.’

‘Forget it.’ It was most peculiar, but her embarrassment only served to put him at his ease. ‘After searching through the clothes Peter brought from my flat, I’ve come to the conclusion that either he rummaged through my rag bag, or all my clothes should be relegated to one.’

‘He probably didn’t want to bring your best clothes into hospital.’

‘I’ve never had best clothes,’ he admitted. ‘Undercover work for the Drug Squad called for the charity shop rejects.’

‘I can’t imagine someone not taking any interest in their clothes.’

He stared out of the car window, and checked off the familiar landmarks. They were travelling through the east side of town, towards the suburb where he had bought his flat. Was it really only eight years ago? Somehow it seemed as though he’d done it in another lifetime. He and his one-time girlfriend, Mags, had bought it together, although he had paid for it. She had always balked at anything that wasn’t frivolous; entertainments, clothes,

relationships – especially relationships. But, he and Mags had been over and done with for a long time.

Strange, he'd been devastated when she'd left him to move in with a married man who'd deserted his wife. Now he could barely remember what she looked like. Yet they'd been together for six years; longer than some marriages, and long enough for him to come to hate the flat, the decor, the furniture, the fitted kitchen and even the fancy Persian cat, all chosen by Mags and abandoned by her when she'd moved on.

He'd been lucky to rent out the place, furniture, fittings, cat and all, to another copper. He could see it now; set high on the hill that towered above the town. That had been its major attraction; the view over the town, and the bay.

Trevor thought of the scruffy, poky collection of small rooms over Frank's mini-market in the old, neglected Victorian dock area that he'd moved to afterwards. The unfashionable end the town planners hadn't even considered when they'd designed and built the new marina.

'Where do you want to be dropped off?'

Lost in thought, he'd forgotten Lyn was driving him. 'Sorry, I was miles away. Did you say something?'

'I was asking where you wanted to be dropped off.'

'Anywhere. It doesn't matter.'

'Of course it does. If you want to get your hair cut, the only possible place is the unisex salon on the Marina.'

'Your family own it?'

'No,' she laughed. 'But I approve of the results that walk out of there. And, my brother swears by Lucien who works there. And he needs to look good, he's an accountant. Like my father.'

'You have your hair cut there?'

‘There’s no point. Mine’s so long, I trim the ends once a month with nail scissors.’

‘As I have nowhere else in mind, I’ll take you up on that suggestion.’

‘If it’s clothes you’re after, you should go to one of the menswear shops in the main arcade.’

‘I should?’

‘Shopping is something of a passion with me.’

‘I’m beginning to find that out.’

‘I must sound shallow.’

‘No.’ He smiled at her, and she smiled back. Seeing her outside the hospital for the first time, she looked younger than her twenty-one years. Perhaps it was the change of scene. Driving into town, and chatting casually, had put their relationship on a different footing to that of nurse and patient. Somehow, somewhere on the journey she had lost whatever authority she held over him.

‘My mother’s a shopaholic,’ she explained. ‘As a child she taught me that daddies make the money and the women in the family spend it. I’m afraid she ingrained some bad habits into me from an early age, but now I curb my shopping expeditions to splurges at birthdays and Christmas. And I always buy my father and brother clothes in those small shops in the arcade. The cut on their trousers and jeans is superb, and the sweaters, especially the hand-knitted ones, are very good. Here I go rabbiting on again.’

‘I don’t mind. At the moment I find it easier to listen than make the effort to talk.’

‘That will change. If you are intent on shopping, why don’t I show you where those shops are? I don’t want to be pushy, but –’

‘I look like a scarecrow.’

‘I didn’t say that.’

‘I did,’ he said easily. ‘And if you show me where the shops are, I’ll know where to look.’

She parked her car in the multi-storey car park on the fringes of the pedestrian area, and waited while he lugged his stick, then himself out of the car. She slowed her pace to his as they walked towards the town centre.

‘Here’s the arcade.’ She paused outside its entrance, sandwiched between two large department stores. ‘The shop with the purple sign is the best. But whatever you do,’ she lowered her voice to a whisper, ‘don’t go to the hairdresser here. It has to be the one on the marina.’

‘I’ll remember.’

‘See you.’

She disappeared into the nearest boutique. It had a window display of feminine lingerie that drove him away as soon as he looked at it. He could almost hear Peter’s jeering laugh, the one he reserved for pathetic old men reduced to ogling women’s underclothes in shop windows.

He glanced up and down the arcade. One of the better things about a midweek afternoon was a half empty town. Taking Lyn’s advice, he steeled himself and passed through the doorway of the shop she’d recommended.

Inside he was faced with a bewildering array of racks crammed with clothing. That closest to him held jeans, above it hung sweaters, and beyond were rows of trousers and shirts.

‘Can I be of any assistance, sir?’ The boy was young and anxious to please, an employee working on commission.

‘I’m just looking.’

‘If there’s anything I can do to help, please ask.’ The boy retreated behind a counter.

Trevor flicked through the jeans rack. They were cut differently to the ones he remembered. He held up a pair, chosen at random, realising he didn't even know what size he was.

'They won't fit you, sir. Those are a thirty-six waist. I'd say you were a thirty or thirty-two,' the boy hazarded. Trevor replaced them on the rack. He'd been a thirty-six inch waist before he'd been injured. He realised he'd lost weight; but that much?

'If you'd like to try these, sir? They're the same style, but more your size.'

Buying a new wardrobe was simpler than Trevor had expected. He was the only customer, so he had the undivided attention of the assistant, who managed to be helpful without being pushy. Trevor tried on the jeans, when he saw they fitted, he picked up a second pair. He flicked through the sweaters and found two he liked. He wandered over to the racks of trousers, and bought two pairs, a couple of casual shirts, a new jacket to replace the worn-out grubby antique he was wearing. An hour and a half later, the dust had been blown off one of his credit cards, he had a bundle of carrier bags, and the clothes he had worn into the shop were stuffed in a bin at the back of the arcade.

Outside the shop, he paused and looked down at his fabric trainers. Two doors up, he spotted a shoe shop. He picked up two pairs of designer trainers, and two pairs of leather shoes. Unable to decide between their various merits, he bought all four pairs, and discarding the shoes he was wearing, left the shop wearing new trainers.

Exhausted, he recalled that he wasn't far from the taxi rank. He took a short-cut through one of the stores and recalled chasing a drug dealer through the crowded

aisles one Saturday afternoon. He doubted he was capable of chasing a tortoise the way he felt now.

The department store, like the arcade, was half empty. But as he staggered along, he inadvertently bumped into an old woman who scuttled away. He suddenly realised that he wasn't alone in feeling afraid. There were others who felt terrified every time they set about the simple everyday tasks of life; shopping, walking down the street, even opening the door to the milkman. Perhaps he wasn't so different from the rest of humanity after all.

He stopped at the menswear counter and looked at some boxer shorts and socks. Juggling with his bags and stick, he tried to pick up a pair of shorts, but only succeeded in dropping everything. An assistant came to his rescue. She picked up his stick, returned his carrier bags to his numbed fingers, and packed the underclothes he chose. He almost fell into the cab when he reached the taxi rank.

The hairdresser Lyn had recommended proved easy to find. He left his parcels at the desk and asked for an appointment. Lucien was busy but George was free. George was tattooed, camp, and chatty. Trevor relinquished himself into George's care, closed his eyes and listened to an on-going diatribe against the town councillors, who apparently had an unjustified prejudice against bikers.

According to George, his hair was out of shape, out of condition, and would disgrace a shaggy sheepdog. If nothing else, George certainly knew how to take his time over cutting and shaping. A gopher brought Trevor coffee, strong and black, the way he used to drink it before hospitals had regulated his life.

'There you are, sir.'

Trevor opened his eyes and scarcely recognised the face that stared back at him from the mirror. He was seeing himself in an entirely new light. One that he wasn't too sure he liked.

'I've left it a bit longer here,' George pulled on a few strands above Trevor's left ear, 'to hide the scars. They look rather nasty. Accident?'

'Yes,' Trevor lied. It wasn't just the sight of the scars that wound their way up as far as his left temple that had shocked him; it was the bloodless lips, the thin face and the sunken cheeks.

'Will there be anything else, sir? We do a nice range of toiletries and aftershave.'

'I'll take a look.' Trevor was beginning to understand Lyn's passion for shopping. There was something comforting about spending money; as if the new image he was buying would change his entire life.

He added a carrier bag of cologne and toiletries to his collection, and limped outside. The clock on the bell-tower of the marina struck five. A pub loomed before him; a blackboard outside bore the slogan;

HOME COOKED PUB FOOD AVAILABLE ALL DAY.

He realised he hadn't eaten anything since the toast he'd shared with Lyn that morning. He stumbled across the cobblestones and went inside. It was empty apart from a couple of middle-aged women.

He ordered a pint of beer, and a large steak with chips and salad. It had been a long time since he'd tasted steak. And Spencer was right; the first step was the hardest to take. Now he'd actually made it, he felt capable of tackling almost anything.

His mouth watered at the prospect of the steak. He downed his pint and ordered another. Life wasn't so bad

after all. Why had he waited this long to pick up the threads?

CHAPTER TEN

‘Does the name Elizabeth Moore mean anything to you?’ Dan sat in the one comfortable chair Tony’s office offered apart from the administrator’s own.

‘She used to be a staff nurse here.’

Dan thought he saw the same flicker of interest in Waters’ eyes that he had noticed when Rosie Twyford’s name was first mentioned. ‘When and why did she leave?’

‘She left about three months ago, but I’d have to check the records for the precise date. She accepted a nursing post in America. We were sorry to see her go, but that’s life in British hospitals. Pay and conditions for psychiatric nurses are far better in the States than here.’ He blanched. ‘Don’t tell me that one of the bodies you dug up last night was Elizabeth?’

‘It appears to be likely.’

‘No!’

Dan thought the cry carried more than shock. There was something deeper in it, something personal. ‘We also have reason to believe that the other victim we found last night was Claire Moon, an ex-patient.’

‘Excuse me.’ Tony’s PA, Angela Morgan, walked into the room and laid a tray of coffee, milk and sugar on his desk.

‘We also found the corpse of a dog,’ Dan continued to watch Tony reactions. ‘Large, hairy, breed unknown. Grey dog with white at the tips of its fur.’

The secretary jerked her hand as she spooned sugar into Tony’s cup, knocking it over. ‘I’m sorry.’ She rushed into the outer office in search of paper towels. ‘But that sounds like Honey Boy, doesn’t it, Mr Waters?’

There was a pained expression on Tony's face, but it was difficult to determine whether it had been prompted by the spilled coffee, the news of two more girls found buried in the grounds, or the dog.

'Who owned Honey Boy?' Dan asked.

'He was a stray. You must remember Honey Boy, Mr Waters.'

'Of course I do,' Tony answered irritably.

'He practically lived in this office last Winter Inspector Evans,' Angela prattled. 'He turned up in the grounds starving, without a collar. We rang the pound, but they said if they took him in and he wasn't claimed within a few days, they'd put him down. Well, it isn't as if this is a proper hospital that needs to be kept sterile or anything, so we kept him. We all chipped in with food, and...' she dissolved into tears.

'Just when I decided to take him home with me he disappeared,' Tony said shortly. 'I already own two dogs, so another one wouldn't have made that much difference.'

Tears trickled down Angela's cheeks. 'We searched everywhere, then assumed that he'd gone back to wherever he came from. It was a shame, because Mr Waters would have given him such a good home. I tried to persuade my husband to take him in, but we live in a flat on the marina. It's not very big, and Honey Boy was a large dog and we have two cats...'

'Angela, go to personnel and pull Elizabeth Moore's file, and give patients' records a ring and ask them to send up the file of a Claire Moon.'

'Yes, sir.' She dabbed her eyes with a tissue, and left the room.

'Efficient secretary but over-emotional,' Waters declared.

‘You must have hundreds of patients passing through here in a year,’ Dan commented.

‘Around five thousand, which is average for a town of this size,’ Tony lifted out the coffee-stained papers from his in-tray and shook them over his bin.

‘Do you remember Claire Moon?’

‘Yes.’

‘Do you have much contact with your patients, Mr Waters?’

‘Not usually. But a Sunday paper did a feature on her while she was here, and I monitored the interviews at the request of the Trust.’

‘Worried about adverse publicity?’

‘Concerned about misrepresentation. Claire’s father is Arnold Moon.’

‘The businessman?’

‘If you can call a multi-millionaire a businessman. She came to this town to go to university and went off the rails. She was in here for drug and alcohol addiction, and made a good recovery.’

‘Where did she go when she left?’

‘Spain. Her parents divorced and her mother remarried a Spanish hotelier.’

‘No one contacted you to say that she never arrived there?’

‘I’d have to check with Angela. We frequently receive letters from the families of ex-patients who are trying to get in touch with them. It’s common for voluntary psychiatric patients to discharge themselves and go missing. You should know that, Inspector. Some of them must end up on police missing-persons files.’

‘Was Claire Moon a voluntary patient?’ Dan kept the questioning firmly on track.

‘Again, I’d have to check. The chances are, with drug addiction she would have been.’

Dan left his chair. ‘When the files arrive, would you send copies to our mobile HQ? And I’d be grateful if you’d keep the identities of the victims to yourself for the moment. Rosie Twyford’s mother is coming up this afternoon to identify the corpse. We’re trying to contact Elizabeth Moore and Claire Moon’s families now.’

Bill stood in front of a clear board fixed to the rear wall of the mobile headquarters. He glanced around at the twenty or so men and women crammed around him.

‘Everyone here? Right, we’ll start with the victims. Constable Grady?’ He relinquished his spot to Michelle, who stood stiffly to attention in her immaculate uniform. She consulted her notes.

‘First victim we found, and the last in chronological order of death, was Rosie Twyford.’ She pointed to a blown-up photograph of Rosie they’d found in the hospital files. ‘Blonde hair, blue eyes, five-foot six-inches, heavily built, twelve stone, twenty-five years old. She suffered from clinical depression. She worked in administration in the old hospital until she was admitted as an in-patient. Rosie was discharged from the ward six weeks ago, but continued to attend outpatient clinic. Her psychiatrist was Dorothy Clyne who discharged Rosie from the clinic last Monday, as yet we haven’t found anyone who saw her after she left Ms Clyne’s office on Monday afternoon until she was dug out of the flowerbed on Monday morning.’

‘You and Peter are returning to her bed-sit to interview her neighbours?’ Bill asked.

‘This evening, sir,’ Michelle replied. ‘We think that the second victim was murdered approximately two

months ago. She hasn't yet been formally identified, but we have reason to believe she was Elizabeth Moore who worked here as a staff nurse. We're waiting for hospital administration to send us her file.' She glanced at Dan who gave her an encouraging smile. 'We think the last victim found, and the killer's first, was a patient, Claire Moon, but as her body hasn't been formally identified either, we can't be certain of her identity.'

'Thank you, Constable Grady,' Bill took over again as she sat down. 'I called this meeting because I want to save time on individual briefings. A psychologist is working on the killer's profile – ' Peter groaned. 'Sergeant Collins,' Bill turned towards him. 'Would you like to share your thoughts with us?'

'Psychologists are often proved wrong – '

'And on occasions are proved right,' Bill countered. 'Have you any better suggestions on how to catch this killer?'

'Police work.'

'This is police work, Sergeant. Twenty-first Century style. At this moment the psychologist is feeding all the information we have into a computer that holds data on all known serial killers. And that's what we have here. A serial killer who could strike again at any moment. We don't know whether he picks his victims at random. All we do know is that they all had connections with this hospital and our killer appears to have a knowledge of the hospital layout. We probably wouldn't have found any of his victims if a patient hadn't spotted him burying one in the garden. Our killer also knows how to pick his time. All the victims were either on the point of leaving the hospital, or they were voluntary patients whose absence wouldn't be missed. Because as far as we have yet ascertained, none were reported missing.' Bill pointed to

notes scribbled on the far right of the board. 'The pathologist has confirmed that all the victims were drugged before death. It's also possible they were kept alive for days before burial, because Rosie Twyford and one of the other victims had needle marks in their upper arms. In Twyford's case, twenty-five separate syringe punctures. In the other victim the pathologist found twelve. The reason why he can't be more specific is because one of the victims has very little skin left. What he can confirm, however, is traces of drugs in the organs of all three victims, including tranquillisers and curare, which has a paralysing effect on all the muscles in the body. However, in Twyford's case the effect was wearing off at the time of burial.'

Bill stared at the assembled officers. 'From the time scale of Twyford's disappearance, we can assume that our killer abducts his victims and conceals them, probably within the hospital or the grounds, and keeps them drugged until such time as he can bury them in the garden – alive. All three corpses had earth in their air passages.'

'He must have a knowledge of drugs and how to administer them,' Peter diagnosed.

Bill handed a marker pen to Dan, who noted Peter's observations under the heading of **KILLER PROFILE**.

'Anyone think of anything else?' Bill asked.

'The killer has to be either a doctor or a nurse,' a young constable chipped in.

'What's your name, son?' Mulcahy demanded.

'Constable Pike, sir.'

'Why does the killer have to be a doctor or nurse, Pike?' Bill enquired.

'Because he knows how to administer injections, and, he has access to drugs.'

‘There are patients here who can gain access to drugs, as well as the pharmacists, and porters who ferry them from ward to ward. As for administering an injection, any diabetic or first-aid course will give you the rudimentary knowledge.’

‘Yes, sir.’ Pike shrank back into his chair.

‘Anyone else?’

‘What about the dog, sir?’

‘As you know more about that than me, tell them, Peter,’ Bill ordered.

‘Like the victims, the dog was drugged with curare and buried alive. From the lab report, approximately three to four months ago.’

‘Could it have been a practice run?’

‘Nice try, Michelle,’ Dan complimented. ‘But timing places it between the first victim and the last two.’

‘Until further notice we’ll have debriefing sessions every night at eleven-thirty sharp either here or at the station. I don’t care how much overtime you put in, or what it costs you, your family or your social life. I want this killer caught before he has the chance to turn another young woman into fertiliser. Right, gentlemen and ladies. We all have work to do. Go out there and do it,’ Bill dismissed.

Trevor felt at home in the pub on the marina. The chairs were thickly upholstered, and a log fire blazed in the hearth. He watched the flames, and ate his meal slowly, but he barely managed half the salad and steak, and less than a quarter of the chips.

‘There isn’t anything wrong with your meal, is there, sir?’ the waitress asked, when she cleared his plate.

‘Nothing,’ Trevor replied apologetically. ‘The food was fine. Just more than I’ve been used to eating lately.’

‘Would you like to see the dessert menu, sir?’

‘No, but thank you for asking.’ He felt as though he was learning to live again. Simple conversation wasn’t that difficult after all. He bought a third pint and continued to sit in front of the fire, watching the bar fill with office workers who’d stopped for a quick one on their way home. His three pints became four, and he was beginning to feel fuzzy when he heard a familiar voice.

‘Trevor, you’re the last person I expected to see in here.’ Jean Marshall stood in front of his table, a double gin in one hand and a bottle of tonic water in the other.

‘Sister Marshall.’

‘For pity’s sake, don’t call me that outside. It makes me sound like a militant nun. It’s Jean. May I join you?’

‘Of course,’ he moved his chair closer to the fire, to make room for her.

‘I didn’t recognise you at first.’ She sat in the chair opposite his. ‘I like the haircut, and the clothes. They’re an improvement,’ she complimented, as he moved his assortment of carrier bags from under her feet.

‘I’ve lost so much weight, nothing I own fits me.’

‘I wish I could say the same, but my clothes don’t fit me for a different reason.’ She poured half of the tonic water into her glass. ‘I haven’t been home yet. Thought I’d treat myself to a pick-me-up first.’

‘Hard day?’

‘No more than usual.’ She kicked off her shoes and toasted her toes before the fire. ‘It’s good to see you out and about. You look – different.’

‘How?’

‘Not just the clothes and the hair but something else. Something I can’t put a name to.’

‘I feel different,’ he smiled.

‘See what I mean? You’re smiling.’

'I don't know why I put off going outside for so long.' He coughed, glanced over his shoulder and saw a girl blowing cigarette smoke in his direction, 'then again, perhaps I do.'

'You don't like cigarette smoke?'

'Can't stand it.'

'Then how come you're in one of the few pubs left on the marina that allow it? And how come you worked with Peter Collins? Every time I see him he has a cigar in his mouth.'

'I used to complain non-stop. And I'd open windows wide in the office and the car, even in the middle of Winter. It's a wonder we didn't drive each other mad.' He finished his pint and looked at Jean's empty glass. 'Same again?'

'I'd love to, but if I drink on an empty stomach I'm going to get plastered. I need to eat.'

'It's probably time I was going anyway,' Trevor took her refusal as a rebuff.

'I was going to ask if you fancied a meal and a drink at my place.' She slipped her shoes back on. 'It's just around the corner.'

'I've just eaten.'

'How about cheese and biscuits and a beer? I've some first-class Dutch lager in the fridge that a friend brought back from Holland.'

'Are you sure I won't be imposing?' Trevor asked.

'Quite sure. I live alone because I like it that way, but that's not to say I don't enjoy company from time to time. Besides,' she grinned wickedly, 'there's nothing on the TV tonight. I checked the paper.' Jean led the way out of the pub and over a bridge that spanned the yacht berths. 'I live on the far side.' She pointed to one of the most

expensive blocks, fronting the open sea on one side and the marina on the other.

‘Nice view.’

‘You’ll see just how nice in a moment.’ She waved to the porter as they walked through the foyer. She went into the lift and pressed the button for the top floor.

‘The penthouse?’

‘What else?’ The lift halted. There was only one door in the lobby. Jean scrabbled in her handbag for her keys, and opened it.

Trevor stepped in behind her and found himself in a large, square, windowless hall with mahogany panelling, carpeted with a blue and red Persian rug, and hung with what turned out to be, on close inspection, very suggestive Persian prints.

‘I like the Orient.’ She opened one of the panels to reveal a cupboard. ‘Can I take your jacket?’

Trevor handed it over as he looked for somewhere to drop his bags.

‘Drop those in the corner.’

He followed her into a living room that could have swallowed his flat four times over. Two walls were glass, one overlooked the sea, the other the marina, and he felt as though he had wandered into a people-sized fish tank.

‘This view is spectacular. I love the sea and can just about see the dirty corner next to the sewage works from my kitchen window.’

The other two walls were painted in shades of blue. The ceiling was pale grey, the floor carpeted in navy-blue Wilton. Even the sofas were upholstered in deep blue leather; the only soft touch was the Persian tapestry cushions on the sofas, and the hand woven Persian silk hangings on the walls.

‘Orient again?’ He raised his eyebrows.

Jean brushed her hand across one of the hangings, which was almost but not quite as suggestive as the pictures in the hall. The colours were perfect for the room; predominantly blue and grey, with a few touches of white and burgundy.

‘You certainly know how to put a home together,’ Trevor complimented, looking at the grey-washed, lime-oak glass fronted cupboards that held a selection of blue Turkish glass and Chinese porcelain.

‘Thank you. Take a seat, and I’ll mix us a salad and fetch the drinks.’

‘I’d rather help.’ He followed her into another inner hallway.

‘Cloakroom,’ she pointed to a door ahead of them. ‘Bedrooms, bathrooms, kitchen, dining room and study,’ she indicated the doors. ‘It’s not vast, but it’s comfortable. Take a look around.’

‘I wouldn’t dream of it.’

‘Don’t be so polite. People are always curious about other people’s living space. Adam Hayter asked me if I had gold-plated baths and loos when he found out where I lived. The publicity campaign the builder ran when he marketed this place backfired. People expected rock musicians and film stars to move in, not the local scrap merchant.’

‘Scrap merchant?’ Trevor looked at her quizzically.

‘My husband,’ Jean explained. ‘The one who ran off with an eighteen-year-old tart.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘There’s no need to be. He did me an enormous favour. I was getting tired of hearing him crow about his face-lifts and lipo suction. And it was alarming to wake up next to him after the last face-lift. Something went wrong and he couldn’t close his eyes. I hope his tart doesn’t mind

sleeping next to a wide-open stare. And I most certainly am “All right Jack”, thank you very much. My share of our divorce settlement gave me this apartment, the first boat you see in the row if you look out the study window, and enough money to tempt all the toy boys I want into my bed when the mood takes me.’

She moved into the kitchen and, unable to resist his curiosity, Trevor walked into the study and looked out of its huge picture window. A large ocean-going cruiser was berthed in front of a line of yachts.

‘That’s your boat?’ he called into the kitchen.

‘The *Turkish Queen*.’ she called back. ‘It’s five-berth. My husband had it built, and christened it after we holidayed in Turkey. At the time I thought he named it after me; now I’m not so sure. I’d like to rename it, but that’s supposed to be unlucky.’

He looked at the rest of the study. Books lined the floor to ceiling oak shelves, all Everyman editions in mint condition that looked as though they’d never been opened. A bleached oak desk held a computer and nothing else. For all its expensive fitments the room looked strangely empty and characterless, like a display in a museum or a furniture shop.

He went into the cloakroom and washed his hands and face in a Victorian-style sink. The tiles on the wall were Minton, the thick fluffy towels American. Resisting the temptation to open the bedroom doors, he went into the kitchen where he found Jean mixing salad in between sips of gin.

‘This room’s too big for someone like me, who never cooks,’ she waved her hand around the expanse of ultra-modern black and grey granite units. ‘I’ve never switched on one of the fridge-freezers, or used the large oven in the cooker, but I’m too idle to move house, and it’s better to

have too much space and too many gadgets than too few.' She handed him a tray with the salad and a can of lager on it. 'I'll bring in the chicken pie and cheese. Sure you won't have some salad, too?'

'Perhaps just a little.' Trevor's appetite was sharpened by all the beer he'd drunk.

She loaded pie, cheese, biscuits and fruit on to another tray, and returned to the living room. To Trevor's amazement, she opened the window.

'We'll freeze.'

'Not in a centrally-heated conservatory. It's cleverly designed; you have to look hard to see where the glass ends and the balcony begins. The balcony was so large, and the winters so long, it seemed a waste of space until I had the idea of glassing half of it in.' She set the tray down on a cane table. Returning to the living room she picked up two glass plates, cutlery, and a silver box of paper napkins. 'Sorry about these disposable napkins, but I hate washing. In fact I hate all housework.'

'This is marvellous.' Trevor sat facing both the open sea and the marina. 'I'd forgotten life could be this good.' He resolved to do something about his shabby little flat the first chance he got.

Life was short, very short. It had taken a close brush with death for him to realise just how quickly the flame of existence could be snuffed out; and now he'd learned that no one, least of all himself, was immortal, perhaps it might be as well if he continued to remember his mortality for whatever time was left to him.

Jean was showing him a glimpse of the good and beautiful life, and it could be his if he made the effort. He'd seen too much ugliness. It was time he looked for something better that offered, if not the certainty of happiness, at least the chance.

They ate and drank, quietly, companionably. Dusk fell and one by one the harbour lights flickered on. First in the pubs and restaurants, then the lamps that sent silvery sparkles dancing on the waves along the water's edge and finally the red mast lights of the boats berthed in lines along the marina.

'You don't need gold-plated baths,' Trevor said. 'This view is worth every penny you paid for it.'

'I didn't pay for it. I earned it as a reward for twenty years of marriage to a boorish lout who couldn't spell his own name. But,' she chuckled throatily, 'I think the compensation was worth every second of the sentence. Don't you?'

CHAPTER ELEVEN

‘Vanessa Hedley’s missing.’

‘What?’ Karl Lane looked up from the pile of forms he was filling in and stared in disbelief at Lyn who was standing in the doorway of his ward office.

‘Vanessa’s missing. I can’t find her anywhere...’

‘Calm down,’ he ordered, exercising his authority as senior nursing officer on duty. ‘You’ve checked the ward thoroughly?’

‘Yes.’

‘The therapy units?’

‘All the therapists left two hours ago.’

‘Spencer sometimes runs an evening class.’

‘Not tonight. I checked his room.’

‘Have you telephoned security?’

‘Yes. I asked them to search the grounds.’

‘Have you informed Tony?’

‘It’s nine o’clock. I assumed he’d have gone home by now.’

‘He rarely leaves his office before eight on a normal evening and what’s happening around here at the moment is anything but normal. I’ll try him.’ He picked up the receiver and dialled. ‘You’d better get back to your ward. Vanessa probably just wandered off through the gates when the porter wasn’t looking. You know what she’s like. But wherever she is, she can’t have come to any harm given the number of police officers crawling around the grounds. How long has she been gone?’

‘I saw her at dinner. She left with Roland –’

‘Roland?’ he interrupted.

‘They only went to the day room,’ Lyn replied, knowing what he was thinking. ‘According to Lucy,

Vanessa went to the toilet shortly afterwards and didn't return. Everyone assumed she'd gone to bed early.'

'Did you ask Lucy if Roland followed Vanessa?'

'No, but he's in his own room now. I saw him there ten minutes ago.'

'They could have gone out together earlier, and Roland returned without her. He spends half his life skulking in the gardens. I think he has a bar hidden in the bushes. We'd better get security to trawl the shrubberies. Roland's probably got Vanessa plastered and she's still searching for her knickers in the dark.'

'Karl, this is no joke.' Lyn was irritated by his flippant attitude.

'Who says I'm joking?' He dropped the receiver. 'Tony isn't in his office.'

'I think we should tell the police.'

'Why?'

'She's missing,' she repeated in exasperation. 'And she's the only person who's seen the killer.'

'Vanessa Hedley's a psychiatric patient. Psychiatric patients go missing all the time. If we rang the police every time one decided to go walkabout, we'd be the laughing stock of the Trust.'

'I think in this case we should make an exception.'

'I'm senior nursing duty officer and any decision to contact the police has to be made by the senior admin officer. It's Tony's problem, not ours. Can you imagine what the local press will make of this, if it leaks out? Compton Castle staff, ask serious crime squad to find crazy lady they misplaced. They'll have a field-day, when they find out who she is. Someone's bound to recognise the name and they'll dig up the headlines from when she tried to kill her husband and his mistress. Then there'll be a hue and cry from the people who bought luxury

executive homes outside the hospital walls, and who don't want a potential murderer living in the same square mile as their offspring.'

'I can imagine the headlines this will make if she has been snatched by the killer,' Lyn said. 'Vanessa Hedley murdered by serial killer while hospital trust stays mum.'

'Return to your ward, Nurse Sullivan,' Karl said. 'You've reported Vanessa Hedley's absence to your senior. I'll take it from here.'

'Karl - '

He remembered the last night they'd spent together. She was beautiful, even with her long dark hair gathered into a knot at the nape of neck. Probably the most beautiful girlfriend he'd ever had, and the best bed mate he'd found in a long time. He laid his hands on her shoulders. 'It will be all right. No one's going to blame you. Everyone's aware that two trained staff and two auxiliaries can't supervise twenty-four patients every single minute of their day and night.'

A number of things about Karl had begun to annoy Lyn lately, not least his arrogant, patronising attitude.

'I'm not concerned with being hauled over the coals by the authorities; you stupid man, but with what might have happened to Vanessa. She's a witness... '

'Back to your ward, Nurse Sullivan.'

'Damn you, Karl. I just hope you're right and nothing has happened to her.'

'Been out, mate?' Peter slowed his car in the drive of Compton Castle, and wound down his window.

'To town,' Trevor stopped and leaned heavily on his stick. 'Give me a lift up to my ward. I'm whacked.'

'Bill received a directive from Tony Waters that all police vehicles were to keep to the first hundred yards of

the main drive, well away from all wards, but you know me and rules. Jump in.' Peter opened both back and front doors, and Trevor off-loaded his bags into the back and flung his stick on top of them, before clambering into the passenger seat.

'Been shopping until now?'

'I stopped for a meal.'

'You what?' Peter stared at Trevor in amazement. Even in the darkness he could sense a change, a subtle increase in confidence and a rebirth of humour.

'Steak and chips.'

'And beer, by the smell of you.' Peter waved a hand in front of his face. 'Lots of beer.'

'Four or five,' Trevor admitted with a grin.

'And you're obviously feeling proud of yourself, even if you're on the road to alcoholism. Welcome back to the land of the living.' Peter tried and failed to mask the emotion he felt. 'It's about bloody time, even if I am jealous as hell at the thought of you munching steak and chips, when I'm confined to a diet of take-away grease eaten at ungodly hours in the mobile HQ.'

'I thought I could smell something.'

'Something getting cold.' Peter halted outside the ward block. 'Here you are. Home. Does mother know you've been out?'

Trevor pulled a pass from his jacket pocket. 'Allowed out until nine-thirty.'

'You've one minute to spare. Here, I'll give you a hand with your bags. Bloody hell!' Peter exclaimed, as he picked up the one containing the shoes. 'What have you been buying?'

'A new image,' Trevor retrieved his stick, and limped towards the front door.

‘Good Lord, so you have.’ Peter noticed Trevor’s clothes as he stood beneath the light and rang the bell. ‘And you’ve had your hair cut. Well, that settles it.’

‘Settles what?’

‘You’ll be kicked out of the Drug Squad. You’re too damned clean and neat even for Serious Crimes.’

The door opened and Trevor walked inside. When Peter returned to his car, he almost tripped over a security guard who was shining a torch beneath it.

‘What are you are doing here at this time of night?’ the man demanded officiously.

Peter looked him up and down. Ex-forces by his build and carriage, young, and probably working for minimum wage, he decided cynically. He brought out his wallet and flashed his badge.

‘Hospital Trust has declared this area out of bounds to the police, sir,’ the guard pointed out in a marginally politer tone.

‘Returning an injured suspect.’ Peter stepped into the driving seat. The smell of fish and chips reminded him that his supper wouldn’t be getting any warmer. There was nothing worse than cold fish and chips. They reverted to blocks of solid, tasteless grease. But as he drove away from the wards towards the mobile HQ, he couldn’t help feeling uneasy. Something was wrong; he could feel it in his bones. He just couldn’t put his finger on whatever that something was.

‘Anything new on Rosie Twyford?’ Dan asked when Peter walked in.

‘Absolutely bloody nothing.’ Peter handed over one of the two paper-wrapped bundles. ‘Thought you might be hungry,’ he replied to Dan’s enquiring look.

‘That’s kind of you.’ The more Dan saw and worked with Peter, the more he was amazed by his generosity, which often came directly after a bout of particularly belligerent behaviour.

‘I came back because I’d rather sit out the night here, than listen to Mary Poppins regurgitate the blanks we drew in Rosie Twyford’s bed-sit.’

‘It was that bad?’ Dan picked up a handful of chips and squashed them into his mouth.

‘The only one who admitted to knowing her was the guy in the next bed-sit, and he claimed he had only met her twice in the hallway. But as four of the other residents have been hauled in for pushing, and three for soliciting, it’s not the kind of cosy household you invite your neighbour in to for a cup of tea and a chat.’

‘It’s the kind of household the social workers look for when they want to off-load their difficult charges.’

‘You got it in one,’ Peter mumbled, his mouth full.

‘I’m not going to object to extra help. After we’ve eaten, you can give me a hand with this.’

‘What is it?’ Peter stared at the enormous, grey cardboard box on Dan’s desk.’

‘The staff files of current hospital personnel.’

‘Official files never tell you anything. Friend of mine works in a press cutting agency. I gave him a staff list yesterday and he came up trumps.’ Peter cornered the last of his soggy chips in the blind end of the greaseproof paper bag, then crammed them into his mouth. Screwing the greasy paper into a ball, he flicked it into the bin. ‘Let’s see what he found, shall we?’ He walked out of the door and went to his car.

‘The personnel files are a collection of CVs, medical histories, and job descriptions. If I hadn’t been assured

otherwise by Tony Waters, I'd say they'd been sanitised for our benefit,' Dan complained an hour later, as he pushed the fourth file aside and reached for the coffee pot. 'Want one?' he held the pot in front of Peter.

'May as well.' Peter separated the national press cuttings from the mass of local paper's wedding photographs and details of charity cheque handovers. 'My friend is nothing if not thorough.' He spread out a photocopied double sheet, taken from a Sunday arts supplement.

'Darling of the art set makes his first million,' he read. *'Spencer Jordan has added to his phenomenal success by selling his entire current Californian exhibition to the Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art...'*

'You sure that's the same Spencer Jordan?' Dan asked.

'Take a look at the picture.' Peter passed it over. 'He's younger, better dressed and hairier, but it's the same man. What have you got on his CV?'

Dan rummaged through his files. 'Successful commercial artist. Exhibitions, lots of exhibitions, art college here, then in America... given the post of art therapist at Compton Castle two years ago. A note on his medical file says he had an eye removed, and he's made a good recovery from severe clinical depression. Isn't that what Trevor Joseph has?'

'Yes,' Peter whistled. 'Look at this,' he pushed a paper across the table. Lurid headlines blazed above a gruesome photograph that covered the front page of a tabloid.

'Has to be American press,' Dan commented. 'Not even a hardened jackal of the British press corps would sink this low.'

Four bodies had been laid out on a lawn. The faces inadequately covered with tiny squares of cloth that barely obscured their features. The hair and ears were in plain view. Two were small, one a tiny baby. All the corpses were bloodied, clothes and skin slashed to shreds.

'Artist's family slain by sect in ritual killing,' Dan read. He turned the page. *'Spencer Jordan, the well-known British artist returned to his Californian home after hosting an exhibition in New York, to find his entire family slain and their murderers occupying his house.'*

There was another photograph on the second page of Spencer being led out of the house by a paramedic. His cheeks were bloody and a gauze bandage covered his eyes.

'One of the sect attacked Spencer Jordan, tearing out his eye, but despite his horrific injuries Mr Jordan managed to fight his way to the front door and raise the alarm.'

'Which explains why he suffered from depression,' Peter observed.

'The eldest child was four, the youngest two months,' Dan whispered. *'Poor bastard. No wonder he started his career here as an inmate.'*

'Is his medical history in his personal record?' Peter asked.

'Nothing other than what I read out, Waters' secretary let slip that Harry Goldman fought the Trust to give Spencer the post of therapist here.'

'It's probably worth buying her a drink or two in the Green Monkey.'

'Where do you think she told me that?' Dan replied. *'I took her there earlier this evening. Find the local gossip, ply her with drink, pump her, and you'll save yourself a lot of leg work.'*

‘Unwritten police college motto?’ Peter agreed.

‘Pays every time. What do you think? The man obviously suffered.’

‘But did he suffer enough to lose his marbles and turn into a killer? When did he first take up his post here?’

‘Two years ago. When did this happen?’ Dan rammed his finger on the newspaper.

‘Four years ago. Two years missing.’ Peter pushed a smaller article covering the trial towards Dan. ‘There’s a footnote here, Spencer Jordan could not be called to give evidence because he was incarcerated in a state mental institution. The killers were convicted on forensic evidence, and sentenced to life.’

‘What’s life in California?’ Dan asked.

‘Probably the same as here,’ Peter replied. ‘Ten years remission for every six months of good behaviour, a pat on the head and a directive never to be a naughty boy again when released.’

‘That man’s been through a lot.’ Dan folded the newspaper so he didn’t have to look at the photographs.

‘He could be our man,’ Peter suggested. ‘He obviously went bananas, to end up in a state mental institution and then this place.’

‘I’d end up here, if I saw my family butchered.’

‘The question is, did he go sufficiently bananas to feel compelled to bury innocent people alive?’ Peter sat back in his chair, ‘and then again, the killer could be Vanessa Hedley.’

Dan laughed.

‘Look at the facts. She tried to kill her old man and his mistress, and damn near succeeded. She spent six years in Broadmoor before coming here. The world and his friend has heard her fantasy of wanting to bury her old man so she could keep an eye on him. She’s been a patient

long enough to learn how to give injections. Security in this place is a joke, so if she really wanted to, she could gain access to drugs. And with only one guard on at night, it's easy enough to dodge your way around the hospital grounds.'

'Your theory's fine until you take into account Vanessa's size,' Dan said. 'She's tiny, five-foot-two, and what – seven stone?'

'About that,' Peter agreed. 'But that's not to say she isn't strong.'

'Can you see her carrying a twelve-stone woman out of this place, dumping her in a hole and burying her?'

'Vanessa was the only one who knew where the body was buried,' Peter persisted.

'Then why did she ask the gardener to dig it up?'

'Because she's nuts, and nutty people do nutty things.'

'OK, where's the dirt on her clothes?' Dan asked. 'I asked Michelle to check out her wardrobe. We found nothing. What else have you got?'

'Adam Hayter.'

'The therapist?'

'Needlework and cookery.'

'It takes all sorts. What about him?'

'Soliciting with intent in a men's toilet and indecent exposure. Nabbed last Christmas,' Peter pushed the half-inch of column across the table.

'Found guilty, and fined. So what?'

'He's a pervert.'

'Only in some people's eyes. You know who he's shacked up with?'

'Enlighten me.' Peter finished his coffee and made a face, but he reached for the jug again. He needed

something to keep him awake. The hours between two and three in the morning were always the worst.

‘Dotty Clyne.’

‘Our female impersonator. Have you seen her moustache?’

‘Yes, but she’s a female all right. Says so on her medical record.’

‘I don’t believe it.’

‘Anything on Harry Goldman?’ Dan rubbed his hands through his thinning hair until it stood on end.

Peter put aside the cutting he was looking at and shuffled through the remaining ones. ‘Possessing and distributing pornographic material.’

‘A psychiatrist? And he’s still in work?’

‘Says here it was for his PHD thesis on sexual deviants.’

‘He should know about those, with all the examples floating around this place.’ Dan stamped his feet to bring back the circulation. ‘Anything else?’

‘Only wedding photographs, charity photographs, that sort of thing.’

‘Nothing on Tony Waters?’ Dan asked.

‘A photograph of him taken on his appointment. A photograph of him and his wife outside the church when they married. Good Lord, he’s married to that nurse – what’s- her-name?’

‘Carol Ashford.’

‘You knew?’

‘His secretary told me. Why so surprised? Hospital staff marry one another all the time. Doctors, nurses. Administrators, nurses.’

‘It’s just – the name.’

‘A lot of women keep their maiden names after marriage.’

‘I know, but she’s fanciable, and he’s weird.’

‘You can’t charge a woman because you fancy her, or a man because he’s a cold fish.’

‘Pity. We’d solve this case in five minutes if we could.’

‘I suggest we open a file on every member of staff and get one of the minions to enter their details in the computer. As soon as we get the killer profile from the psychologist, we’ll do a cross check.’

Peter rested his head on his arms and stared at the papers littering the desk. ‘You know what the problem is here, don’t you?’

‘I’ve a feeling you’re going to tell me,’ Dan said unenthusiastically.

‘We’ve half a dozen suspects on the staff, and we haven’t even started on the patients.’

‘We’ll start on their files tomorrow,’ Dan said cheerfully. ‘And then the fish and chips will be on me.’

‘What’s the matter?’ Lyn Sullivan snapped, when Trevor left his room at three.

‘Sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you.’ He pushed his hands into the pockets of his shabby paisley polyester dressing gown and shivered.

‘Did you want to get yourself a drink?’

‘No, a book. I can’t sleep and I’ve finished the one I borrowed from the hospital library.’

‘There are plenty of magazines in the office.’ Her anger dissipated. Trevor looked exposed and vulnerable in his shabby nightwear. And his fashionable new haircut contrasted strongly with his pale, thin, sickly-white face. ‘I was going to make myself a cup of tea. Do you want one?’

‘Please.’ He followed her into the ward kitchen. ‘No one else around?’

‘They had trouble on geriatric, so we sent our auxiliaries to help, and the other nurse is on meal break.’

‘You mean you’re superintending this ward alone?’

‘Locked in with all you crazy people?’ Lyn smiled. ‘I’m used to it. It happens quite often at night, and once you realise that the reality of life on the wards isn’t at all like the advert in the colour supplement that enticed me into becoming a psychiatric nurse, it’s not that bad. Beats nine-till-five word-processing.’ She switched the kettle on. ‘Toast?’

‘No, thank you.’

‘Too much alcohol?’ she asked intuitively.

‘How did you guess?’

‘It happens to everyone, first time out.’ The phone rang, and she was out of the room and down the ward before Trevor realised what was happening. He took over making the tea, and had a plate of toast made and buttered before she returned.

‘Anything important?’

‘Geriatric asking if they could keep our auxiliaries for another hour.’

‘You expecting more trouble?’

‘Not really.’

‘You sure?’

She eyed him over the rim of her cup. ‘You really have come a long way. Now you’re over the worst, you want to take up amateur psychiatry?’

‘Sorry.’

‘You seem to have switched from depression to...’

‘Elation!’

‘Not elation. If that was the case, you’d be in real trouble. Try normality.’

‘Whatever that might mean.’

‘If Goldman sees you behaving like this, he’ll throw you out of the hospital.’

‘I hope so.’ Trevor smiled. ‘I really hope so. I’ve begun to make plans...’

‘Such as?’ she interrupted.

‘To change the way I live,’ he didn’t want to say too much in case he sounded ridiculous or naïve. He watched her pick half-heartedly at her toast. But instead of trying to make conversation with him, she constantly glanced over his shoulder and out of the window.

‘Something’s wrong, isn’t it?’

‘Yes. But I’ve been ordered by my superior to keep my mouth shut.’

‘Tell me?’

‘No.’

‘Tell me off the record,’ Trevor suggested. ‘If I discover anything, I promise not to implicate you.’

She stared at him.

‘I promise,’ he repeated, sensing her hesitation.

‘Vanessa Hedley’s disappeared. And we can’t find her anywhere.’

CHAPTER TWELVE

‘What are you going to do?’ Lyn Sullivan asked warily.

‘Inform the police so they can organise a search,’ Trevor set his cup down.

‘You organise a search and I’ll lose my job.’ She bit her lip. ‘When I told Karl...’

‘Karl Lane?’ Trevor recalled the good-looking male nurse who had tended Lyn’s cuts after Vanessa went berserk.

‘He’s senior duty officer tonight. When I told him Vanessa was missing, he warned me not to tell anyone until he contacted Tony Waters.’

‘Did he now?’ Trevor said thoughtfully. ‘That’s interesting.’

‘Not in the way you think. Karl’s no murderer; he’s just obsessed with saying and doing the right thing, lest it affect his promotion prospects. He doesn’t want anyone berating him for kicking up a fuss that could lead to press headlines telling the world what a load of incompetents run this hospital.’ She fell silent for a moment. ‘Damn! This is one situation where I can’t win no matter what.’

‘I wouldn’t say that,’ Trevor smiled. ‘You mentioned your junior nurse was on meal break. Have you had yours yet?’

‘No.’

‘When do you go?’

‘When she gets back, which should be,’ she glanced up at the clock on the wall. ‘In twenty minutes. Why?’

He held a finger to his lips. ‘He who asks no questions need tell no lies afterwards. Good tea, this,’ he added innocently.

*

*

*

‘What the hell was that?’ Dan jumped up from the table where he’d been dozing over the last of the files.

‘Fire alarm by the sound of it.’ Peter ran into the outer office, where two female constables were trying to peer through a tiny window. He pushed past them and opened the door. The cool night air came as an invigorating shock after the smoke-laden stuffiness inside the van.

A security guard came running out of the main building and headed towards the wards. Peter darted after him.

‘Isn’t that the ward Trevor Joseph is on?’ Dan caught up with Peter, and pointed to a group of patients standing in front of the building in their nightclothes.

Peter ran the last hundred yards. He was overtaken by Karl Lane who began shouting orders at the patients who were stumbling sleepily, in drugged and tranquillised confusion. A junior nurse close to panic was calling names off a list. A cloud of black smoke billowed from an open window at the far end of the same block.

A security guard pushed his way past the patients and into the porch of the building, ignoring several bewildered nurses who’d left their own wards to see if they could help.

‘Very clever. I’ve never seen a guard without breathing apparatus or protective clothing run into a burning building before. What training school did he go to?’ Dan said.

‘Pyromaniac’s been at it again,’ Peter looked around for Trevor.

‘First I’ve heard of a pyromaniac,’ Dan said. ‘Tell me more.’

‘Remember a Michael Carpenter being brought into the station?’

‘Set a fire, and tried to kill his girlfriend and her family.’

Peter nodded. ‘The sooner we start examining the patients’ files the better.’

Karl Lane continued to scream commands at the dazed patients who refused to stay still. A nurse ran after Alison Bevan who was charging down the drive in panic.

‘I was in the staff dining room on break.’ Lyn ran up breathlessly and grabbed Karl. ‘Are they all out?’

‘How in hell should I know?’ he snarled. ‘Your junior is bloody useless.’

Lyn took the list from the girl’s shaking fingers. ‘Everyone over here,’ she called out coolly. ‘Over here, or you won’t be allowed back into your beds.’ The threat did the trick. The dressing gowned and slippers figures shuffled slowly towards her.

‘Alison Bevan?’

‘Here.’

‘John Carter?’

‘Present, miss.’

Everyone laughed except Karl Lane, and some of the tension dissipated. Peter scanned the ranks of patients, then shrugged his arms out of his coat sleeves.

‘What do you think you’re doing?’ Dan asked, as Peter moved towards the building.

‘I can’t see Trevor. Stupid fool’s probably trying to play the hero.’

The security guard stopped Peter in the porch. ‘You can’t go in there.’

‘Says who?’ Peter squared up to him.

A fire engine raced up the drive, siren blaring, its wheels scattering gravel over the flowerbeds. Before it

drew to a halt, Trevor stumbled, hunched and coughing, out through the inner doorway of the building.

‘You bloody fool!’ Peter threw his jacket over Trevor’s dressing gown. ‘Where the hell have you been?’

‘Checking to see no one was left behind,’ he whispered hoarsely. ‘It’s not as bad as it looks,’ he informed the first fireman to leap from the engine. ‘Just some magazines, cotton wool and a blanket bundled into the sink and set alight. I turned the tap on them.’

‘Trying to roast us in our beds again, darling?’ Ali Bevan glared at Michael Carpenter, who sat shivering on a bench, a sleep-numbed expression on his face.

‘I didn’t – I didn’t – I didn’t – ’ he chattered like a monkey.

‘Is anyone missing?’ A fireman asked Lyn, seeing the list in her hand.

‘Yes,’ she answered, giving Karl Lane a defiant look. ‘Vanessa Hedley, female, 52 years of age, five-foot-two,’ she hesitated, trying to remember what colour Vanessa’s hair had been that morning.

‘She’s a blonde today, darling,’ Roland chipped in from the crowd that had gathered outside the drug and alcohol dependency unit. ‘But there’s no use looking for her,’ he said blandly to the fireman. ‘She’s been missing for hours.’

‘She’s been missing for hours and you didn’t think to inform us?’ Peter turned furiously on Lyn.

‘I reported her disappearance to the senior nursing officer on duty at eight o’clock this evening,’ she replied defensively.

‘And what pen-pushing moron...’

‘Karl Lane, meet Sergeant Collins and Inspector Evans,’ Lyn effected the introductions.

‘A material witness in a murder case disappears, and you didn’t think to inform us?’ Dan turned angrily on Karl.

‘She’s gone missing before,’ he offered lamely.

‘For God’s sake man...’ Peter began.

Dan interrupted, ‘Has she ever gone missing all night before?’

‘Not that I can remember.’ Karl squirmed and looked around for Lyn. This had to be her fault, and tomorrow morning he’d see that she and not him was hauled over the coals.

‘I want to see whoever’s in charge of this apology for a hospital – and I don’t mean you,’ Dan raged at Karl. ‘If they’re not in our HQ in ten minutes, I’m going to the press. And not *just* the press either; television, radio – the works.’

‘It’s three o’clock in the morning,’ Karl protested feebly.

‘I couldn’t give a single sweet damn what time it is,’ Dan’s voice dropped ominously low.

‘I’ll telephone Mr Waters.’

‘In our HQ in ten minutes,’ Dan repeated. ‘And in the meantime I’m instigating a full search of the whole hospital and all the grounds.’

‘You can’t do that. Not without authority...’

‘I have all the authority I need. Peter, ring the station. Get as many coppers here as you can. Now!’

Trevor turned back to the ward, intending to get dressed.

‘You can’t go in there.’ The security guard tried to stop him.

‘Those the only words you learnt in school?’ Peter asked before making his way back to HQ.

*

*

*

Leaving her patients in the care of a staff nurse, Lyn sought out Karl. 'It's freezing out here. Where do you want me to put my patients?'

'Wherever you like.'

She stared furiously after his retreating figure. 'Right, everyone into the main hall,' she shouted. Turning to the nurses standing by she called out, 'I have twenty-four patients who need temporary housing overnight. See how many spare beds you can find in each block, make a note of the bed number and the ward, and report back to me as quickly as you can in the hall.'

'That's what I call initiative,' Dan commented to Trevor as he re-emerged, dressed in the clothes he'd worn back from town.

'I need to talk to you, in private,' Trevor croaked.

'Tell your keeper,' Dan indicated Lyn, 'where you'll be and follow me back to HQ. Perhaps you'd like to help out. We're going to need every man we can lay our hands on. Even sick ones.'

Dan poured out three cups of coffee and handed them around. 'You look fitter than the last time I saw you, Trevor.'

'That doesn't mean I'm in a hurry to get back to work. In fact I'd like to take some time off...'

'What's going on?' Bill stormed into the office, knocking over the overflowing waste-paper basket, sending greasy chip papers and empty cans shooting across the floor. 'I was woken up by some idiot gabbling on about Vanessa Hedley -'

'She's missing,' Dan interrupted.

‘That’s all we need.’ Bill shook a cigarette from a packet he kept in the top pocket of his suit jacket. ‘Can’t you just hear the screams upstairs when they find out that we didn’t give her round-the-clock protection? She was our only witness.’

‘Who was incarcerated in what was supposed to be a secure ward in a mental institution.’ Peter lit one of his cigars.

‘Seems to me those wards are anything but secure.’ Bill looked at Trevor. ‘If they were, he wouldn’t be here.’

‘We wouldn’t know she was missing if it wasn’t for him,’ Peter rounded on Bill. ‘He only found out by chance, from...’

‘Someone who told me that Vanessa was missed early this evening but the hospital authorities decided to keep her disappearance quiet,’ Trevor interrupted, with a cautionary glance at Peter.

‘She went missing early this evening and they told no one?’

‘The senior duty nurse tried to hush it up.’

‘Why would he do that?’ Bill demanded.

‘Bureaucracy. He wouldn’t do anything without the admin officer’s say-so, and Tony Waters wasn’t available,’ Trevor divulged.

‘How did you find out?’

‘When fire broke out in the ward block the headcount was one short.’

‘What fire?’ Bill looked suspiciously from Dan to Peter, to Trevor, and back.

‘I wouldn’t bother to investigate that one if I were you,’ Dan warned.

‘One of you set a fire?’

‘There’s a pyromaniac on the ward,’ Peter puffed on his cigar.

‘I still haven’t worked out what you’re doing here, Trevor.’

‘Assisting us with our enquiries,’ Dan said. ‘If we’re going to search this place thoroughly, we’ll need all the help we can get.’

‘Not from the mentally ill.’

‘I was hoping to be discharged tomorrow.’

Bill looked at him through narrowed eyes. ‘You’re recovered?’

‘I believe so.’

‘If you’re as fit as you say you are, you could be more use to us inside than out.’

‘What do you mean?’ Trevor already had his suspicions.

‘If we had someone on the inside – a good detective, which you used to be, Trevor, we might make some headway with this case.’

‘You’re asking me to stay in the hospital so you can have another pair of eyes on the case?’

‘A pair of inmate’s eyes,’ Bill qualified. ‘Who will see a lot more than a copper who comes in to interview witnesses. What do you say? A few more days might make all the difference. I’ll see that you’re put back on full pay immediately.’

‘I’m happy with sick pay.’

‘If this Hedley woman has been abducted by the killer, the chances are she’s somewhere around the hospital and still alive. You could be her only chance.’

‘I thought you were planning to search the place.’

‘We will, but even if we find her, there’s no guarantee we’ll get to her in time.’

‘Mr Waters is here, Superintendent.’ A constable knocked on the door and put his head round.

‘I’m off to bed,’ Trevor rose from his seat.

‘Lucky, lucky you,’ Peter grumbled.

‘You’ll think about what I said, Trevor?’ Bill pressed.

‘I’ll think about it, but I’m promising nothing.’ Trevor stepped outside and shivered. All the lights were on in his ward block. He entered the perspex tunnel. There was nothing inside, ahead or behind him. He knew because he stopped several times and looked around. But he was still left with an uneasy feeling that he was being followed. Quickening his pace, he hurried on, hammering on the locked door of his block as soon as he reached it. Lyn opened the door. She was holding a carton of scouring powder in rubber-gloved hands.

‘You’ve been with the police all this time?’

‘Gossiping.’

‘They started searching yet?’

‘Just getting started.’ He stepped inside and bolted the door behind him. ‘Want some tea?’

‘Is that your way of asking me to make you a cup?’

‘No. I’ve just drunk more coffee in an hour than I’ve drunk in the last month. But tea would be a way of getting you to sit down for five minutes. You look all in.’

‘I am,’ she admitted.

The ward was eerily silent without its patients. The rumpled beds and hastily thrown back sheets and blankets adding to the air of ghostly desertion. Their footsteps echoed disconcertingly across the tiled floor as they entered the kitchen.

‘The patients have been split up between the five other wards. When the fire service finished here, I thought I may as well come back and clean up, so everyone could move back first thing.’ She sank down in a chair. Trevor filled the electric kettle and switched it on. There was a

strong smell of cleaning fluid and bleach, and every surface shone, free from grime and smuts.

‘I’m sorry.’

‘For what?’ she asked.

‘Causing the mess you had to clean up.’

‘I’d rather clean a mess than be haunted by something I didn’t do, and should have.’

‘And I’m also sorry for making trouble between you and Karl Lane,’ Trevor added.

‘You can hardly hold yourself responsible for that.’

‘I hope it doesn’t affect you two,’ he dropped a tea bag into a cup.

‘There was something between us. And “was” is where it will stay after tonight,’ she said emphatically.

He poured boiling water on top of the bag. ‘How do you like your tea?’

‘Milk, no sugar.’

‘If you were going to hide a body in this hospital, where would you put it?’ he asked.

‘A hundred and one places spring to mind.’

‘Try naming ten.’

‘There are all sorts of odd corners in the original old building. Last Christmas some bright spark at the staff party came up with the idea of playing hide-and-seek. We found staircases, towers, and lots of little rooms. Most were locked, but not all. It’s a regular rabbit warren.’ She smiled.

‘Something funny?’

‘Karl, me and the staff nurse from manias, caught out Mr Waters. If he’d found out who we were he’d have sacked the lot of us.’

‘What do you mean “caught out”?’

‘Karl barged into a room at the top of the building, God only knows where. I doubt any of us could find it

again. There was a mattress in the corner, and a half-naked couple going hammer-and-tongs on top of it. We stayed just long enough to register what they were doing, then beat a hasty retreat.

‘You sure it was Tony Waters?’

‘No other man around here has that colour hair. I’m sure the woman saw us. But if she recognised us, she couldn’t have said anything. If she had, he’d have followed it up. He can be a vindictive bastard.’

‘What makes you say that?’

‘Nothing he’s done to me. Just what I’ve heard from some of the other nurses; written warnings when they’ve booked in two minutes late for a shift, when the traffic in the town’s ground to a standstill. Like last month, when there was that mammoth pile-up. Remember it?’

‘I don’t remember anything that happened last month – or the three before that.’

‘Sorry, that was stupid of me.’

‘You’re not stupid. Has Waters a reputation for womanising?’ He handed her the tea he’d made.

‘According to his secretary, Angela. She says that strange women are always phoning him. I’d feel sorry for his wife but...’

‘Carol Ashford?’

‘She’s a first-class nurse, but she’s also a cold fish. Always gives the impression that she couldn’t give a damn about anything except herself. But that comes with the job; concealing your feelings, I mean. You get hard-bitten doing work like this, whether you intend to or not. And, then again, Karl told me that he’s occasionally seen her about town with some fellow – but this is nothing more than hospital gossip. You’re not interrogating me, are you?’

‘Absolutely not.’ He handed her a box of biscuits.
‘I’m sick – unfit for duty.’

‘But you spend hours talking to your colleagues.’

‘Policing is a funny job. You can go months without seeing a civilian outside of the villains that get booked – and when a big case needs cracking, like now, you eat sleep and drink nothing but the case. You live with coppers, eat with coppers, but you can’t even socialise with coppers because there’s no time for social life for the duration.’

‘So I take it you don’t sleep with coppers?’

‘I’ve had to share a room with Peter and twelve down-and-outs, when we went undercover in Jubilee Street.’

‘That must have been fun.’

‘Police work can be funny, but not for coppers’ girlfriends, family or wives. It takes a toll. None of us are married. Peter’s divorce is being finalised later this year. The super’s wife walked out on him during our last big case, the one I got mangled on. And Dan Evans is a widower.’

‘And you?’

‘I was never married,’ he said shortly.

‘But there was someone?’

‘I lived with a girl for a while. She got tired of spending nights on her own, and found someone else.’

‘And she had long dark hair.’

‘Short blonde actually. Why do you ask?’

‘The girl you keep sketching.’

Trevor took the biscuits from her.

‘I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to pry.’

‘You’re not. I’d probably find it easier to talk about her if something had happened between us. But it didn’t.’

‘You wanted it to?’

‘Yes. But whenever we met, it was always the wrong time and the wrong place.’

‘And now?’

‘She’s abroad. I couldn’t get hold of her, even if I wanted to. Which I don’t. Dreams are best left where they are.’ He wondered if he meant what he’d said. He’d carried a torch for Daisy Sherringham for so long, he couldn’t imagine what life would be like if he relinquished it. He’d have nothing left – nothing except bleak reality. All the time he’d lain in intensive care, he’d dreamt of her returning to him. Visiting his bedside with a smile on her beautiful curved mouth.

‘I’ve come back Trevor...’

He couldn’t even be sure, really sure, what he’d feel for Daisy if she did return. So much of his life – and hers – had been destroyed.

He jerked himself out of his imaginings, and returned to Lyn and their conversation.

‘So, if you wanted to hide someone’s body you’d go into the old hospital?’

‘And hope I didn’t stumble across Tony Waters indulging in extra-marital activities. Or I’d look to the grounds. There are supposed to be passages in the cellars that come up outside in the bushes. But I’ve never seen them, only heard the older staff like Jimmy Herne talk about them.’

‘Does Jimmy Herne know where they are?’ Trevor realised that if a passage did exist, it might provide an ideal route out of the building for the killer.

‘According to Tony, who knows more than anyone about this place, they were all blocked up years ago. Jimmy did show me the entrance to one once, down by the folly, but the earth had caved in.’ She paused for an

instant. 'But knowing about the way this place is run, there'd be no need to hide a body.'

'What do you mean?'

'One extra drugged zombie wouldn't be noticed, or even counted on most wards from one week to the next. Especially geriatric.'

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Vanessa was cold. Freezing but not shivering. There was no feeling in her body other than cold. Nothing – no sensation at all. Not the slightest tingle, the slightest pain – only numbness, as though her mind was floating, disembodied in an icy, black void. She strained her eyes and stared intently into the darkness. She knew her eyes were open because she could hear the whisper of her eyelashes. The single, alarming sound in a vacuum of silence. All around was frosty, enveloping darkness unpunctuated by the slightest glimmer of grey shadow. She wondered if the air itself had changed colour.

She tried to move, but there seemed to be no physical form for her brain to command. Her mind sent messages to nerves that no longer existed. She had no limbs, no body, only eyelashes. She heard her eyelashes again, and concentrated on her facial muscles. She screamed, but the screech resounded only in her imagination. Her lips refused to open, and the only sound born in the back of her throat was a grunt that conveyed terror and panic. She forced herself to think – to remember!

A scene from a horror film flooded her mind. A brain in a jar? No, she had to be more than a brain in jar. A head – but a head without a body. Or was she already dead? Was this what death was like? Cold, black, wakeful, aware, nothingness.

She concentrated on her immediate past. She had been – where? The day room. Roland, disgusting, fat, lecherous Roland, who put his damp sweaty hands on her knees and tried to move them higher every chance he got. She saw the small half-moon slivers of skin she'd gouged

out of the back of his hand with her fingernails when he'd tried to touch her thighs.

Lucy, sweet naïve Lucy, her eyes wide open, agog with a mixture of wonder, terror, and morbid curiosity as she'd related the embroidered version of the phantom burying the body. The phantom! The phantom who buried live woman, after – if Roland was to be believed – gross violation of their bodies. Was she in the earth? Was that why she couldn't feel anything?

No. She could hear her own breath. Soft, quiet, but there; in – out – in – out. If she was buried, she wouldn't be breathing. She would be suffocated. Dead! Was this hell? No, she was cold, and hell was hot; devils hammering red hot spears of metal. She listened for the blacksmith sounds, her eardrums straining to breaking point. But the only noise was a droning that came from inside her fevered brain. Then faintly in the background the tired jingle of an old pop song. 'Bop, bop, bop, de bop' – as incessant and irritating as a dripping tap. Was that also a product of her imagination? She could no longer tell what was real and what was not.

Panic again. Hysteria when she remembered the woman at the bottom of the pit. Was she planted? Dead? A people tree? she had said something about a people tree. But there was no such thing as a people tree! Dead people didn't grow into anything. They rotted. Decayed and rotted. And Ian wouldn't know where she was. But he wouldn't have wanted to visit her. He hadn't visited her once. Not in any of the other places they'd put her in. It wasn't fair. If he'd tried to kill her, she would have visited him.

She pictured her husband as he had been when they had first met. When he'd loved her. Slowly, tenderly she recreated every detail she could recall of his features. The

lock of hair that fell over his right eyebrow. His smile, lopsided, cynical. His eyes, deep dark-brown, mirroring yet concealing so many thoughts in their depths. The feel of the skin on his back, smooth, silky beneath her fingers when they'd made love in their king-sized bed in the bridal suite in their hotel. No point in stinting themselves when life was good. If the guests lived in luxury, why shouldn't they?

And afterwards, when she was alone and Ian was no longer part of her life. Horrid little cells with nasty iron bedsteads covered by ugly, grey, itchy blankets and cold cotton sheets, not the silk or satin she'd slept on with Ian. Odious little cells with chamber pots in the corners. Ugly, foul-smelling, not even clean. But then neither had she been clean when she'd been allowed only one shower a week.

A noise came from outside her head. The sharp rasp of metal scraping against metal. A light, intense, blinding, shone into her eyes, forcing her to close them. She tried to speak, but again managed only grunts. Something came towards and over her, blanketing, smothering. It touched her face, fell over her nose, but she still breathed, then it went away. The light grew dim. There was a quick, sharp pain in her arm. Despite the hurt she marvelled that she felt it. She still had a body after all.

Warmth came. A pleasant glow that enveloped her. A radiation that rapidly became an agony of scorching pain. She tried to cry out, but all she heard was a succession of the same, small, bestial whimpers as before. Metal on metal. Darkness. No light. Only agony, she could only feel pain. Total, consuming, absolute. She was pain. Absolute pain. Burning, searing, raging – nothing else existed. Nothing at all!

‘All of you to the attic. Station one man at the top of every staircase, radios at the ready. The rest of you, comb the building. I want everything up there moved and searched; boxes, files, rubbish sacks, furniture. I don’t care how thick the dust is, or how small the space. I want every door unlocked, every room scrutinised, every cupboard emptied, all the walls tapped. Anything that rings hollow, rip apart. This place is condemned. If we have to, we’ll raze it to the ground and worry about the inconvenience later. When you’ve finished the top floor, leave a man on every staircase and check all the routes down to the next floor. Then repeat the procedure, until you’ve worked your way to the cellar. I want men left on every floor. The second you see anything suspicious, you shout down your radios. Check for gaps between ceilings and floorboards and remember to use the floor plans and measuring tapes you’ve been given.’ Peter knew he was labouring the point, but weariness had set in, making him unwilling to trust anyone’s work but his own.

‘Sergeant Collins,’ Michelle was at his elbow, bright-eyed, sharp as a button. Didn’t the damned woman ever get tired like the rest of them? ‘Superintendent Mulcahy and Inspector Evans would like to see you in the mobile HQ as soon as possible, sir.’

‘Tell them I’ll join them when I can.’

‘There’s a man from the Home Office with them, sir.’

‘I’ll be there, Constable.’ He turned away from her and faced the teams lined up in the shabby hallway of the old hospital. ‘Right, go to it. I’ll be with you as soon as I can. Note everything that’s remotely out of the ordinary, and call me the minute you find anything suspicious.’

Constable Grady will go with you. She knows where we disturbed the dust the last time we took a look around.'

Reluctantly turning his back on the search parties, Peter walked through the back door to the mobile HQ. He passed through the outer office, and acknowledged Sarah Merchant, who was operating the computer, before opening the door into the inner sanctum Dan and Bill had claimed as their territory.

Harry Goldman and a burly, red-headed man he'd never seen before were sitting sweltering in the atmosphere that reeked of stale coffee, cigarettes and greasy food.

'Peter,' Bill said wearily. 'This is Professor Crabbe.'

'John Crabbe, Home Office,' the red-headed man extended a square and hairy hand to Peter. 'I've come down here with a psychological profile of your chap.'

'I thought we should run through it with Professor Crabbe, before informing the team,' Bill lit a cigarette.

Peter pulled a chair up to the table and sat alongside Dan. Bill banged on the door and shouted in a voice calculated to carry through the thin wall. 'Coffee for five.'

'Yes, sir,' came a reply from a constable. Peter sensed resentment in his voice.

Peter could detect the strain in Bill. Vanessa's disappearance had brought a new and keener edge to the investigation. Yet here they were, the three most senior and experienced officers on the case, sitting idly on their arses listening to two shrinks, instead of getting out there and on with catching the killer who had already claimed three innocent lives and was probably in the process of claiming a fourth.

'We've taken your data and fed it into a computer that holds everything we know about serial killers who've

been convicted during the past thirty years, both here and in America – ’

‘Why America?’ Peter asked John Crabbe.

‘You know the saying,’ John smiled. ‘What America does today, we’ll be doing in twenty years. When it comes to crime, that maxim appears to be true; the Americans seem to have cornered the market on serial killers.’

Peter remembered Spencer Jordan and his American connections, but remained silent. That was something to bring up later, when Harry Goldman and this Home Office chap were elsewhere.

John Crabbe lifted his steel-coated briefcase on to the desk and opened the combination lock. He extracted a thick file, bulging with loose papers. ‘We’re looking for a man, the computer says anything between twenty-five and forty, but I’d be inclined to lower the upper limit to thirty-five. He’s a loner, finds it difficult to form relationships with either men or women, but the lack of women in his life upsets him more than the lack of male friends. He’s impotent... ’

‘How do you know?’ Dan broke in.

‘No sperm,’ Crabbe declared.

‘I thought there was no evidence of rape?’ Dan said slowly.

‘Without sperm, or physical signs such as tissue tearing, it’s not always possible to determine if entry has been forced. But whether the victims were raped or not is immaterial to this profile.’ The Professor sat forward in his chair.

‘Immaterial?’ Peter asked with a feigned air of innocence.

‘Psychologists have determined that rape is not a sexual crime.’

‘Try telling that to some of the women I’ve interviewed after the event,’ Peter challenged.

‘Rape is a crime of violence. It’s all about power. Our man takes a woman, holds her prisoner, and whether he attempts rape or not – and I’m inclined to the latter opinion – he’s unable to engage in a meaningful relationship with his victim, physical or otherwise. He’s a loner who needs to assert power over his victim.’ The professor opened his file. ‘He’s from a small family, probably an only child. Unused to living with or relating to others. He lives alone or with a single domineering female relative – mother, grandmother, aunt or older sister. He has no friends. He finds it difficult to form any kind of “normal” relationships. He almost definitely comes from the lower socio-economic group. Blue collar worker or unemployed, and he’s a low achiever.’

‘Except in the case of murder,’ Peter commented. ‘Are we looking at a patient or member of staff?’

‘Difficult to say,’ the professor hedged. ‘Could be either. As a rough guideline I’d say your man will fit at least fifty per cent of this profile, possibly more. But on occasions, we have been proved wrong. This is not an exact science.’

‘We’re aware of the possibility of error.’ The irony of Bill’s reply wasn’t lost on Crabbe.

‘If the killer has a police record, it will only be for minor, unrelated offences.’ John Crabbe continued. ‘We have discounted the kidnapping-for-profit theory. I am right in saying there have been no ransom demands?’

‘You are,’ Bill agreed. ‘Apart from Claire Moon, the victims have not been wealthy.’

‘Have you considered that this man may be a collector?’ Harry Goldman made his first contribution to the proceedings.

Dan turned to the psychiatrist. 'Please explain, "collector".'

'A collector is someone who accumulates a number of related, generally useless, objects purely for his own personal gratification and the pleasure of ownership.'

'Like the people who fill books with out of date stamps?' Peter suggested.

'Precisely,' Harry concurred. 'Or butterflies, or china frogs, or photographs, and memorabilia connected with a film or sports star.'

Bill set his hands on the table. 'Are you saying our man could be a collector of marbles who's moved on to collecting women?'

'Could be,' Professor Crabbe said thoughtfully. 'Have your people noticed anything significant in where you found the bodies, or the way they were laid out?'

'What do you mean?' Dan asked.

'Were the bodies buried in a pattern? Were their feet pointing north? Is he planting them at the four corners of the hospital grounds, or in the shape of something recognisable; a star perhaps?'

Peter left his chair and walked over to the wall behind the desk. He retracted a roller blind that covered the back wall. Stuck to the glass board was an aerial photograph of the hospital grounds, marked with the burial sites of the victims and a series of photographs taken after the corpses had been uncovered, but before they had been removed.

'Take a look for yourself.' Peter pointed to the board. 'All four – that's including the dog – were buried in flowerbeds, all in holes that had been dug out by the gardeners and left unattended overnight. The last victim was laid north to south, the second north-west to south-west, and the third east to west. Personally I think the

positioning has more to do with where the flowerbeds were than Voodoo circles.'

'I just wondered if you had considered all the options,' the Professor said shortly.

'I'm inclined to think that the killer simply doesn't want to do any more digging than necessary,' Peter returned to his chair.

'Never underestimate your opponent,' John Crabbe reprimanded.

'Shall we recap?' Dan went to a flip-chart and turned the pages until he hit a clean one. He wrote PROFILE at the top. 'We know he's strong because our witness saw him carrying a twelve-stone body.' He scribbled *Strong* beneath the heading.

'Big as well, if Vanessa Hedley is to be believed,' Peter added.

Dan added *Big* to the list.

'Professor, you say he's a loner – does that mean he doesn't relate to men as well as women?' Dan questioned.

'Probably,' the professor answered carefully.

Dan wrote *Loner*.

'And he's impotent?' Peter failed to keep a cynical tone from his voice.

'Almost certainly, but I wouldn't like to hazard whether his sexual impotence is physical or psychological in origin.'

'Either way, the results would be the same.' Peter watched Dan add *Impotent* to the list.

'He probably lives alone,' the Professor continued enthusiastically, pleased that Dan was taking him seriously. 'Or with a domineering female relative.'

'One – or more than one?' Bill asked.

‘I’d be inclined to stick my neck out and say one, although I suppose there is a possibility that there could be a mother and an older sister,’ Crabbe said.

‘What about a...’ Peter hesitated.

‘What about a what?’ Bill demanded.

Peter glanced at Harry Goldman. The psychiatrist had contributed so little to the conversation he’d forgotten that Harry was in the room, and he could hardly accuse the live-in companion of his most senior assistant of being the murderer. ‘A relationship where a man and a woman live together on a platonic basis to pool expenses,’ he finished lamely.

‘That implies a socio-economic relationship, which your killer would shy away from. Our man has his own space, he either lives alone or has a room he doesn’t allow his relatives access to,’ the Professor insisted.

Dan picked up the pen again and added *Lives alone or with domineering female relative*.

‘Possibly a collector,’ Harry reminded. He was proud of his contribution, and knew exactly who Peter had in mind when he mentioned platonic relationships.

Dan scribbled *Collector*.

‘He chooses his victim. Keeps her hidden. Does whatever he wants with her, shows her kindness, cruelty, torture, whatever his whims dictate. Then, when he tires of the game and her, he buries her.’ Harry described the scenario as graphically as he could. ‘The ultimate secret trophy to be added to his collection. Uniquely his, forever.’

‘He must know this hospital inside out,’ Peter reminded everyone, ‘to spirit Vanessa away the way he did.’

‘That’s if he has her.’ Bill lifted his feet from the desk. ‘Where’s the damned coffee?’

‘He buried the others when there were security guards around.’ Peter reached for his cigars. ‘We know he starved the last one. He couldn’t have brought her into the hospital on a number 10 bus without someone noticing something out of the ordinary.’

‘As they were paralysed he could have kept them in the boot of his car,’ John Crabbe suggested.

‘Not since we’ve been searching every car that goes in and out of here.’ Dan unscrewed the cap of his pen.

‘Knowledge of, and access to drugs,’ Peter prompted.

‘He would have suffered mood swings about the time of each disappearance and murder. You’ve nothing more accurate to give us on dates of the first two murders?’ John Crabbe asked.

‘We’ve had to rely on the pathologist, and the only thing we can be certain of is that the last victim was buried on a cloudy night when there was an intermittent full moon.’

‘You’ve forgotten to list his low socio-economic grouping,’ Harry left his seat. ‘I’m sorry, gentlemen, but I have an appointment with a patient. Trevor Joseph in fact.’

‘If you sign him out fit for duty, let me be the first to know,’ Bill said. ‘I need every man I can get.’

A knock at the door interrupted them. Harry Goldman opened it.

‘Coffee, sir,’ the constable held up a tray.

‘Bit bloody late,’ Bill barked.

Peter took the tray from the constable. She was an attractive blonde. He winked at her and she kicked him sharply and painfully on the shin.

‘So sorry, Sergeant Collins,’ she apologised insincerely. ‘My foot slipped.’

Harry left. Peters shut the door with his back. He dumped the tray on top of the papers on the table, to the disgust of John Crabbe, who made a great show of extracting his file from beneath it. The four men stared at the flip-chart while they helped themselves to coffee.

Strong, Loner, Impotent, No friends or visible woman in life apart from domineering mother or older sister. Possible collector. Knowledge of hospital layout, drugs, and has access to drugs. From the lower socio-economic grouping, had noticeable mood swings at times of victims disappearance and murder.

‘Anything else, Professor?’ Bill was anxious to be rid of the man and it showed.

‘Twenty-five to thirty-five years old – possibly forty at the outside.’

Dan amended the list, and remained, pen poised next to the chart.

‘He’s also neat, tidy and careful,’ Dan said thoughtfully.

‘What makes you say that?’ the Professor asked.

‘Absence of hairs and fibres. The pathologist found nothing on the victims that didn’t belong to them.’

Peter sipped his coffee. ‘Are we any further forward?’

‘Suppose we try to match our suspects to this profile,’ Bill suggested.

‘The staff.’ Peter was still smarting from the realisation that Bill and Dan regarded Trevor as a potential suspect.

‘The gardener, Jimmy Herne is too old. The administrative officer, Tony Waters is married...’ Dan began.

‘To a woman so cold I wonder if she’s flesh or ice,’ Peter observed.

‘She could be a volcano in private,’ Bill smiled.

‘I seriously doubt it.’

‘What’s the matter? Didn’t she fancy you, Peter?’

Bill was so tired he forgot the presence of Crabbe. All he wanted was his bed.

‘If you’re going to do this properly,’ Crabbe interrupted, ‘you should consider everyone.’

‘Harry Goldman?’ Peter winked at Bill.

‘Single. Lives alone,’ Bill pointed out.

‘Wrong socio-economic group.’ Dan placed his empty cup on the tray.

‘Look at all the variables and mark the ones with the highest percentages,’ Crabbe lectured.

‘Right on knowledge of drugs, and hospital, wrong on size.’ Peter crushed the remains of his cigar in an ashtray. ‘He weighs what? Seven stone and two of those are his spectacles. Can you see him trotting across the lawn with a twelve-stone woman slung across his shoulders?’

‘Jimmy Herne the gardener? He didn’t like us digging,’ Dan reminded.

‘Too old, at sixty. And he’s married with six children,’ Bill revealed.

‘Spencer Jordan?’ Dan flicked through his notebook.

‘Now there’s a name to conjure with.’ Peter reached for another cigar. ‘Right age bracket at thirty-eight, tall, strong, loner, no visible women, or friends, knowledge of hospital both as a patient and staff member, I dare say he could organise access to drugs, and after three years spent in psychiatric hospitals he should know how to use them.’

‘Collector?’ Crabbe asked.

‘He has pictures on the walls of his room,’ Peter answered.

‘It is an art therapy room,’ Dan chipped in. ‘And he’s the wrong socio group; he’s not a low achiever.’

‘That depends where you’re starting from. A few years ago he was a mile higher than he is now,’ Peter struck a match. ‘He lives alone in a hospital flat. I’d say, after visiting his work room, he’s neat, tidy, careful, and he has a past that could have turned his psyche upside-down.’

‘Put him down as number one on an interview list.’ Bill tapped a cigarette out of a new packet. ‘Next.’

‘Adam Hayter,’ Peter lit his cigar.

‘Big, but not strong,’ Dan opened the window to let the smoke out. ‘He’s flabby.’

‘Coming from you, that’s rich.’ Peter joked. ‘And flabby or not, he could manage a twelve-stone woman. After all, he must manage Dotty Clyne.’

‘What about no visible woman in his life?’ Dan asked.

‘You call Dotty a woman?’ Peter raised his eyebrows.

‘Other criteria,’ Bill looked at the list.

‘Collector?’ Dan read.

‘I don’t know about collector, but have you been in his kitchen?’ Peter looked from Dan to Bill. ‘Talk about everything in its place, and spotless. He’s neat, tidy and careful, right age at twenty-nine, I’d go along with impotent, and as for loner, every time I see him I’m trampled by the rush of people desperate to avoid him.’

‘Lower socio-economic group?’ Crabbe reminded.

‘Cooks are notoriously ill-paid, he has knowledge of both hospital and drugs, and he lives with Dotty who’s a domineering woman.’

‘Add his name to the list to be interviewed, then we’ll move on to the patients,’ Bill left his chair and paced across the room to keep awake.

‘What about Dotty?’ Peter suggested.

‘We’re looking for a man,’ Bill said impatiently.

‘A dyke?’ Peter glanced at Crabbe. ‘What do you think?’

‘Rare, but they do exist. Female serial killers account for only 8% of all American serial killers, but 76% of all female serial killers worldwide,’ Crabbe clearly loved statistics.

‘I didn’t ask for a lecture,’ Peter admonished. ‘Only an opinion as to whether or not it’s worth considering in this case.’

‘It could be, as long as you realise that statistically it’s a long shot. But you said that Dotty was living with a therapist – this Adam Hayter.’

‘She is,’ Peter confirmed.

‘In my experience, lesbians rarely live with men.’

‘Precisely. She’s living with Hayter.’

‘Let’s move on,’ Dan said evenly. ‘She’s big, strong,’

‘Impotent,’ Peter interrupted.

‘And a psychiatrist, which puts her out of the socio-economic group,’ Bill said.

‘But that’s the only variable,’ Peter said enthusiastically. ‘She has a knowledge of the hospital, and drugs. She’s the right age at thirty-six. She’s impotent in male sexual terms. She has to be worth thinking about.’

‘Add her to your list,’ Bill ordered Dan.

‘If we’re going to look at one woman, we’d better look at them all. Jean Marshall, Lyn Sullivan, Carol Ashford...’

‘Carol Ashford’s married,’ Dan ran his finger down a list of staff in his notebook.

‘Happily?’ Bill asked.

‘She’s married to Tony Waters. They live on a farm.’

‘Then it’s a safe bet it’s neither of them,’ Crabbe pronounced decisively.

‘Jean Marshall’s divorced, but outgoing and friendly.’

‘Peter, you’ve known her longer than any of us.’ Bill leaned against the door.

‘I’d say she’s more the “serial one night stand” than serial killer.’

‘Lyn Sullivan’s twenty-one, and has a boyfriend; the nurse, Karl Lane,’ Dan commented.

‘I think it’s safe to leave the women,’ Bill ordered. ‘Let’s start on the patients.’

‘Roland Williams is too old,’ Dan said.

‘He’s lecherous,’ Peter observed. ‘And not impotent, from what I’ve heard and from what I’ve seen, he likes to touch up females every chance he gets.’

Bill looked at the professor. ‘Our man?’

‘Is neither a toucher nor a lecher. In fact he’s probably a prude. Wouldn’t stand for public mention of sex. Outwardly he probably sees sex as something dirty. Remember the domineering woman.’

‘Roland out,’ Peter moved on. ‘Michael Carpenter?’

‘Pyromaniac – not impotent from what his girlfriend said at his trial. In fact whatever the opposite is, that’s him,’ Dan had done his homework.

‘On to the women.’

‘Vanessa’s disappeared. Lucy is too scared to say boo to a goose. She’s young and believes herself married to Jason Donovan,’ Peter explained to Crabbe.

‘An unlikely candidate,’ Crabbe said decisively.

‘Ali Bevan is fixated on men.’ Peter flicked the ash from his cigar. ‘Which means we’re left with Spencer

Jordan, Adam Hayter, Dotty Clyne, or any one of the fifty-two porters split between day and night shifts. Not to mention the nurses, male and female, and the security guards... ’

‘Maintenance men, gardeners – ’ Dan added.

‘And Uncle Tom Cobley and all,’ Peter sighed. ‘God help us. For all of this,’ he waved his hand at the flip-chart, ‘it could be just one stray nut. And, as I’ve said before, what chance do we have of finding one nut in a bloody orchard ripe for harvesting. Now, if you gentlemen can possibly spare me from this interesting exercise, I’ll see if my team has turned up something we can work on. Superintending a search isn’t an intellectual exercise, but it will help me cling to the illusion that I’m doing something constructive towards finding Vanessa Hedley.’

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Harry Goldman looked up from his desk as Trevor Joseph entered his office. 'I heard you went out yesterday.'

'Can't keep anything secret in this place, can you?'

'Sit down. Tell me, how did you find the world after your absence?' Harry waited for Trevor's response.

'It hadn't suffered unduly,' Trevor replied. Harry Goldman suddenly seemed incredibly condescending.

Goldman rested his chin on the tips of his fingers. Trevor felt that he was frantically searching his mind for something to say. 'Do you consider yourself ready to leave your ward?' he asked eventually.

'Yes, you were right. I was fit to leave weeks ago.'

'And, you think you're ready to leave right away? Today?'

'Yes.' Trevor left his chair and went the window. 'It's just that...'

'Everyone has doubts before taking such a monumental step. This place has been your second womb...'

'I don't have any doubts,' Trevor cut through Harry's jargon. 'But thank you for taking care of me when I did.' He didn't want to sound ungrateful. 'I'm going to visit my flat and sort out a few things. But there's also work.'

Goldman stared at him in amazement. 'I strongly advise against a return to such a stressful job. Aside from your physical injuries, there's the pressure. After an experience like yours, it will be difficult enough for you to cope with day-to-day living. You may believe you're ready to face more, but the balance of your mind is delicate. The slightest upset could cause a relapse. You should rest, relax, see friends, take a holiday. It would be

most unwise to contemplate returning to work for at least six months.'

Trevor smiled; it was his turn to patronise. 'You don't know the police force, Mr Goldman.'

'I am beginning to find out a little about it.'

'Superintendent Mulcahy suggested that I stay here, on the inside, for a few more days, to see if I could help with their enquiries.'

'Into the murders?'

'Yes.'

'That would be most unwise. As I said, the slightest stress or strain could... '

'They're pushed. They need all the help they can get.'

'It's laudable to see such dedication in a public servant, but you have to realise that my – and your – first duty is to Trevor Joseph the patient, not Trevor Joseph the police officer.'

'They are the same man,' Trevor said shortly. 'I'm grateful to you for everything you have done to aid my recovery. Could I impose on you a little longer? Would you write me a pass that would enable me to continue living here, but to come and go as I please during the day?'

'It would be unorthodox.'

'I might be able to help clear this case up and get the police off the premises.' Trevor saw Harry wavering. 'It should only be for a week or so.'

Goldman picked up his pen. 'I'll give you a pass, on two conditions. First, you see me here every morning at eight-thirty for half an hour, so I can check your progress. And second, you limit your working time to no more than two hours a day.'

‘I agree.’ Trevor knew that most police work meant talking to people, so it would be difficult for anyone to determine whether he was, or wasn’t, working.

‘And you will have to be back in your ward every night by ten o’clock.’

‘I intend to be.’ Trevor recalled the timing of the last burial.

‘This is still most unorthodox,’ Goldman protested, finally signing the pass.

Trevor left the psychiatrist’s office and walked down the corridor of the old Victorian block. There was evidence of police activity everywhere. In the fleet of cars and vans abandoned around the building, the teams of rookies combing the lawns, flowerbeds and shrubberies inch by inch on hands and knees; the crackle of voices bouncing back and forth on the radios of the officers searching the floors above him. Shuffling along, relying on his stick, he made his way purposefully towards Spencer’s room.

It was break-time, and Spencer was sitting alone on a stool pulled up to one of the clay-covered work tables, a couple of slices of carrot cake and cup of decaffeinated coffee laid out on a sheet of newspaper in front of him.

‘Coffee?’ Spencer offered.

‘Thanks.’ Trevor poured himself one, without bothering to reheat the water.

‘You look better today,’ Spencer complimented.

‘It’s just the clothes and the haircut.’

‘And something else. You look...’ Spencer studied Trevor, ‘quietly confident.’ He pushed a piece of cake towards Trevor.

‘Thanks to you.’ Trevor took the cake and bit into it. ‘I went to town yesterday, as you can see.’ He smoothed the back of his shorn neck. ‘Today I’m going to my flat.’

‘Leaving us?’

‘For the day.’

‘Harry breaking you in gently?’

‘Something like that.’ Trevor was grateful to Spencer, liked him even, but breaking the glass on the fire alarm last night had been a watershed. It was something he wouldn’t have thought twice about doing before he’d been injured, and the action had reminded him what it felt like to be a police officer. As a rookie, he’d been warned that police officers couldn’t afford the luxury of too many friends outside the force. And how well did one person ever really get to know another?

At any moment Spencer could become a suspect. And, as Bill constantly drummed into the officers on his team, “Friendship clouds judgement.” There were plenty of coppers who’d made mistakes on that score, and some had ended up in the slammer.

Spencer stood looking out of the window at the officers combing the grounds. ‘Are you part of the team?’

‘I’m on the sick.’

‘My grandfather used to say “Once a copper, always a copper”.’

‘Yesterday I was hoping to prove that maxim wrong.’

‘And today?’

Trevor finished his coffee. ‘I need to do some more thinking on the subject. That’s why I want to go back to my flat.’

‘Scared?’

‘Frankly, yes. I haven’t seen it in four months, and after recalling a few aspects of my life that I didn’t like, I’ve begun to wonder where I go from here.’

‘You don’t want to carry on where you left off?’

‘Before I was injured, I never had time to think about my life or where I was headed. I’d roll out of bed dog-

tired in the morning, wake myself up by standing under a jet of cold water, work ten – twelve, on occasions twenty hour shifts, eating lousy lukewarm take-away in the station as and when I could. There was no time to spend on anything important, like creating a home or a relationship.'

'And now you want both?'

'You've probably heard it all before. But if there's one thing I've learned during the past four months, it's that once you're dead, that's it. You stay dead for one hell of a long time. No one's going to come round to the crematorium, pat you on the head, and say, "Well, you were a nice hard working, conscientious fellow, so we'll give you another crack of the whip". So now,' Trevor rinsed his cup under the tap in the paint-spattered sink, 'I'm determined to do as much as I can, in whatever time I have left.'

'I wish you luck.'

'In fact, I'm probably in danger of turning into a right selfish swine. I intend to make time, not only to put together a real home, but to build a relationship. Are you married?'

'I was.' Spencer crumpled the newspaper that had been under the cake and threw it into the bin.

'I'm sorry,' Trevor sympathised. 'Breaking up with someone is always hard.'

'It is,' Spencer replied.

Trevor made his way back to his ward and opened his wardrobe door, intending to dig out his new coat. He paused for a moment, staring at the clothes Peter had hung up for him when he'd been admitted. The only reasonable item was the jacket he'd bought the day before. The rest of his new clothes were still in the carrier bags he hadn't

yet unpacked. He lifted them on to the bed and tossed his new jacket on top. Taking one of the black bags Peter had brought in for his laundry, he removed everything from the hangars and threw the lot into a sack. He tied the top into a knot.

‘Spring cleaning?’ Jean stopped outside the open door.

‘Tidying up before I leave. Harry Goldman’s given me a free pass for a week. After that I’ll be out of here, and on my own.’

‘You going out now?’

‘To take a look at my flat. Thought I’d see if it’s still standing.’

‘How would you like to have dinner with me tonight?’

‘The answer is yes if I’m allowed to buy it.’ His pulse raced at the thought of taking the first step towards establishing a relationship with a woman. ‘How about that pub on the marina?’

‘Eat in the same restaurant two nights running and you’re in danger of falling into a rut. Have you tried the Greek restaurant in Argyle Street?’

‘There’s nothing down there except offices.’

‘It opened three months ago.’

‘Turn my back for a couple of months and the whole town changes. Shall I meet you there?’

‘Seven o’clock,’ she whispered as approaching footsteps echoed down the corridor. ‘That’ll give us time for a drink afterwards.’

Trevor slipped on his jacket and tested himself by walking down the tunnel to the old block. Both his legs were aching, a nagging toothache type pain that had its origins in the unaccustomed exertions of the day before.

Ordinary, everyday sounds fell strangely around him, transformed and muted by the perspex. The roar of car engines became the cries of animals in pain. The crashing of pots of pans in the kitchen were a swordfight, the rattle of a trolley travelling over hard floors, the staccato report of machine gunfire.

He pulled himself together. The other thing a policeman couldn't afford, along with close civilian friends, was an over-active imagination. He walked through the main hall to the mobile HQ and knocked once before entering.

'Sergeant Joseph.' Sarah Merchant beamed at him, as he climbed awkwardly up the short flight of steps. 'You look in good shape.'

'I feel in good shape.' He smiled at her and the other two girls manning the telephones. 'Busy?'

'Wish we were busier,' one of the girls grumbled. 'If we were, it might mean that all this sitting around, waiting for something to happen, would be over and done with.'

'Rookies always get given the worst jobs,' he commiserated. 'But it won't last forever. There'll be another batch of recruits coming in soon, and when they do, you'll be kicked upstairs to more interesting things, and then you'll wish yourselves back here. Is the super in?'

'The super and Inspector Evans.'

'They on their own?'

Sarah nodded, and he went to the door. After he'd disappeared into the inner sanctum, one of the other girls turned to Sarah. 'Who is that?'

'Sergeant Joseph. He was on the Drug Squad.'

'The one who almost got killed?'

'Almost.' Sarah stared intently at her computer screen. Trevor Joseph had almost got himself killed on his

last case, but her boyfriend hadn't been so lucky. Murdered during the investigation, they hadn't found enough of him to fill a small box, let alone a coffin.

'He treats us as though we're human beings,' the girl said. 'Like we're police officers first and women second.'

'Hasn't he heard about the men in the force's official attitude to women recruits?' the other demanded.

'Perhaps it was the bang on the head,' the first one giggled.

'Perhaps a similar thump could do the same for the super and Sergeant Collins.'

'Sergeant Joseph has always been the same,' Sarah said. 'He's a nice guy, but don't let his appearance deceive you. He used to be a good policeman who knew how to get tough when he had to.'

Bill eyed Trevor as he entered the office. 'How are you?'

'Fine.' Trevor propped his stick in a corner and sat down without waiting to be asked. 'Dr Goldman's just told me I'm fit enough to leave the hospital.'

'And you came here to tell us?' Bill said sourly.

'I've decided to take you up on your offer. Goldman knows about it and he's given me a pass for the next week. I'll be sleeping here, but I'll be able to move freely during the day so you can brief me on what exactly you want me to do.'

Bill gave Trevor a rare smile. 'Mix with the natives. Pick up the vibrations. You know how it helps to have someone on the inside.'

'This is hardly undercover,' Trevor warned. 'In this place I'm known as a copper.'

'Then you do intend to rejoin the force?' Bill asked.

'You agreed to reinstate me.'

‘From the day you return to work. Is today soon enough?’

‘One day too soon.’ Trevor rose clumsily from his chair. ‘Make it tomorrow. I’d like to look at my flat today and there’s not much I can do with the search going on. I’ll be back tonight.’

‘Want a ride into town?’ Dan asked.

Bill glared at him. ‘You’re supposed to be running a murder investigation, not playing chauffeur.’

‘Patrick rang. He has the test results on the victims’ blood samples.’

‘Keep me posted, I’ll be at the station.’ Bill picked up the telephone, dialled and began shouting at the hapless individual on the other end of the line.

‘Things aren’t going too well at the moment,’ Dan explained to Trevor as they left. ‘It’s good to have you on board.’

‘I’m not sure I’ll be able to contribute much. And I’m not relishing the idea of staying on in this place when I don’t need to.’

‘The car’s around the corner,’ Dan remarked, seeing Trevor limp. ‘Would you like me to bring it to the door?’

‘No thanks. Sorry if I’m slowing you up.’

‘You’re not. Sometimes I think that’s what’s the matter with all investigations. Everyone rushing around like a load of crazed ants gathering sugar to take back to the nest, no one taking a second to stop and think, and everyone overlooking the obvious when it’s right in front of them.’

‘What’s the obvious in this case?’

‘I wish to God I knew.’ Dan gazed at all the police activity. ‘But it’s there somewhere, waiting for us to spot it.’

*

*

*

Lyn tossed restlessly on her bed in the nurses' hostel. She had never slept well when she'd been on night shift. Her body-clock simply refused to adjust to hospital requirements. She turned over, and pulled the pillow over her head.

She listened to a minute tick by on the clock, then another. She lifted her pillow and stared at the electronic alarm clock. Ten-fifteen. She was due back on duty at seven-thirty, only eight hours away, and she'd promised to meet her friend Miriam for tea at five. Miriam had been in school with her, and had recently taken the post of junior mortgage advisor to the largest bank in town. Being Miriam, she hated it. But then Miriam hated everything – her job, the town, the people she worked with. And Lyn was beginning to wonder if Miriam's sole joy in life was moaning about her lot over tea and cream cakes in the most expensive patisserie the town had to offer.

Lyn closed her eyes again and cursed the daylight filtering into the room despite the thick curtains. All she could hope for was six hours sleep, and she hadn't slept for twenty-four hours as it was.

Thoughts raced through her mind. Vanessa Hedley? Where was she now? She was fond of Vanessa, despite all the upset she caused. She was a character and, unlike one or two of the other patients, not an unpleasant one. What was it her father said? "A product of circumstances." That was it; Vanessa was a product of circumstances. If her husband hadn't fooled around and if she hadn't decided to follow him that night, her whole life would have turned out very differently. She'd probably still be queening it in the hotel on the front.

Lyn heard the engines of the staff's cars as they queued at the gates. How much longer before Vanessa would be found? And when she was, would it be at the bottom of a pit like the others? Suffocated by a ton or more of earth shovelled on top of her.

The buzz of a police helicopter hovering overhead reminded her of the heat-seeking cameras used to find the others. Was Vanessa already out there in the earth? Decay raising the temperature of her cold flesh? Lyn turned on to her stomach and pulled the pillow over her ears. It was useless. What would help? A warm shower? She'd had one an hour ago. Hot chocolate? Cocoa? She'd drunk two cups that morning; any more and she'd spend half the day going back and forth to the bathroom at the end of the corridor.

The radio? A book? A boring – boring book. Had to be a nursing textbook. She left the bed and went to her book-shelf. She was poised, holding the book, when she heard a noise outside her door. A cleaner pushing a polishing mop over the floor? She stood stock still. The noise was overlaid by the quiet hiss of breathing. Was she listening to her own intake of air? She held her breath to be sure.

A thud sent her scurrying back to the safety of her bed.

The key, which had been nesting securely in the lock of the door, had fallen, pushed out on to the doormat. She stared at it for a split second. Then she screamed.

Nerves ragged with fear, she recalled the details of the murders rumoured around the hospital, and she continued to scream as she grabbed her green and purple silk dressing gown from the foot of her bed. She tried to pull it over her shoulders, only to get it hopelessly tangled. 'Lyn! Are you all right?' Above the hammering on her

door she heard the voice of Alan, one of the charge nurses who had a room down the hall.

‘Someone was at my door. The key... ’ she finally managed to get her gown on properly and tied the belt, Hands shaking, she picked the key up from the mat. Keeping the chain fixed across the door, she tentatively opened it. Three nurses were standing outside, all in dressing gowns.

‘What happened?’ Alan asked. ‘You’re shaking like a leaf.’

She unfastened the chain and he walked in.

‘I was lying in bed and I heard a noise. When I looked up the key was being pushed out of the lock. Someone was at the door... ’

‘Richard, go downstairs and dial 999,’ Alan ordered their colleague.

‘With all the police hanging around the building, it would be quicker to walk to the main block and find one.’ Without stopping to pick up shoes or slippers, Richard ran down the stairs. A door banged outside, somewhere above them.

‘The fire escape.’ Alan rushed out through the door.

‘For God’s sake be careful,’ Mary, a second-year student nurse, called after him.

‘Wait for Richard to fetch the police,’ Lyn shouted.

Both pleas fell on deaf ears.

Mary looked nervously at Lyn. ‘Do you really think someone was there?’ she whispered.

Lyn went to her window and opened her curtains.

Arms outstretched like a crucifixion, face squashed and distorted against the glass, the thin figure of a man stared back at her, dark eyes gleaming. He reminded Lyn of a spider, a black venomous spider. His fingers clawed at the eaves above him, his toes retained a tenuous grip on

the window ledge. His open mouth leered, its breath fogging his features as he pitched alarmingly close to Lyn.

Mary screamed. The figure hovered for what seemed like an eternity, then swayed. His face jerked backwards. He fell.

A cry echoed, lingering in the sweet spring air as he landed with a dull thud on the flowerbed three floors below.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The woman in the wheelchair was hunched forward, her face practically resting in her lap, her features half hidden by the blanket that had been draped over her head and drooped shoulders.

‘Aren’t they just the lucky ones? What I wouldn’t give for a kip right now,’ Mark Manners, a brash young porter, shouted to his fellow porter as he wheeled past a chair that contained another comatose geriatric.

He received only a curt nod from the white-coated, baseball-capped figure that wheeled the other chair. Someone new, Mark thought. Given the meagre wages porters received there was a constant and rapid turnover of staff. He no sooner got to know someone than they moved on; but hopefully one day he’d be doing the same.

‘Soon be there, love,’ he murmured reassuringly to the elderly patient in the chair when she stirred restlessly.

‘I want to go home. Want to go home – now!’

‘I am taking you home, love,’ he promised rashly. As he was dumping the old dear off on Dotty Clyne, her problems would soon no longer be his. Five minutes more and he could take a break, steal a cup of tea, and chat up Mandy in the kitchen. He wondered how much longer it would be before he could talk Mandy into letting him take her out, and, what was more to the point, into dropping her knickers. One week? Two? Or would his lucky star make tonight the night?

The figure in the baseball cap pushed the wheelchair into Observation and Depression. The ward was usually deserted during the day. The patients were bundled off to therapy or clinic after breakfast; or if they were astute

enough to know, and demand, their rights, the garden for an unsupervised walk.

Laughter rang in the ward kitchen. The clock pointed to ten forty-five. Coffee break had just begun. Head down, the figure pushed the wheelchair swiftly on down the corridor. At the end of the passage, close to the fire-escape, was a single room. Traditionally the last bed allocated for use on every ward, the staff kept it for emergencies or those privileged enough to warrant a private room.

The figure pushed the wheelchair into the room and closed the door softly. It was broad daylight, closed blinds would attract attention, but the chance of being seen through the window was minimal at this time of day. People were too busy to stand and stare, and there was no glow of artificial light to highlight untoward movement.

Easy – take it easy, slowly, calmly. No noise. No haste, lest mistakes be made. Steady, deliberate, determined action. A moment to wheel the chair next to the bed. Another to pull back the pristine sheet, single blanket and beige cotton bedcover. Ease the limbs forward. Hands locked around a slim, cold waistline, warm breathing face next to chill, leaden one. A lift, a push – tuck the small stiffening figure between the sheets. On its side lest the knees remain upright with the onset of rigor. Raise the blonde head on to the pillow. Brush the ruffled hair forward, to hide the face.

A shudder, as a lifeless arm rolled out and dangled, the fingers inches above the floor. Pick it up. Push it beneath the sheets and between the knees to hold it fast.

The chair! Fold it. Place it next to the bed. A quick glance in the mirror. Pull the baseball cap lower. Listen at the door. The voices were still chattering in the kitchen. A few seconds was all it took to slip out through the fire

door, muffling the bar with a rubber-gloved hand lest its click be heard. Head down and then into the garden, fresh air. Pass one block, then another, and another. Easy – so easy. And done!

‘Do you know him?’

Lyn nodded and sank her teeth into her lower lip in an effort to stop herself from crying. Peter saw shock registering on her face, and accorded her grudging respect. Shaken, upset by her ordeal, her slender and – he noticed lustfully – shapely body trembling beneath her thin robe, she hadn’t protested when he’d asked her to follow him outside to identify the body. But she was a nurse, and all nurses had seen corpses, even psychiatric nurses – although possibly not those of people they had known in life.

‘Lyn, I’ve just heard. Are you all right?’ Karl Lane, dark hair combed away from his face, jumped the fence and strode towards her and Peter through the flowerbeds.

‘Perfectly,’ she replied too forcefully.

‘Sergeant, do you think you should be questioning Nurse Sullivan so soon after her ordeal?’ Karl stared at the body stretched out on its back about six feet away.

‘The best time to question a witness is when events are still fresh in the mind, Mr – ’

‘Lane,’ Karl said abruptly. ‘Senior Nurse Lane.’

‘Karl, you’re not helping matters. Please go away.’ Lyn directed the anger she felt at the waste of Michael’s life at Karl, because he was there when she didn’t want him near her. She turned her back to him. ‘That is Michael Carpenter, Sergeant Collins. He is – was – a patient in the ward I work on.’

Peter spoke to a constable who was hovering at his elbow. ‘Have you sent for the pathologist?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Keep everyone at bay until he arrives. And make sure no one else puts their big flat feet on those flowerbeds. There are a couple of prints there that should be cast.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘You,’ Peter called to another constable nearby. ‘Alert Inspector Evans and the super.’

The constable pulled out his mobile phone.

Peter turned to Lyn. ‘I’m sorry, but I have to ask you a few more questions. Shall we talk inside?’

Michelle Grady arrived breathlessly at the front door as Lyn and Peter were entering the hostel.

‘I came as quickly as I could, Sergeant Collins. I thought you might need a woman.’

‘You offering?’ he enquired snidely.

‘Only in one sense,’ she responded tartly.

He looked at her with a new respect.

Lyn showed them into a communal lounge as bleak and soulless as the day rooms in the hospital. A blank television screen stared, a sightless eye, from the corner of the room. The carpet was a vivid, clashing combination of orange and purple swirls on which islands of hard, upright gold-vinyl upholstered chairs stood uninvitingly.

After draping her dressing gown around her bare legs, Lyn sat with her back to the television opposite Peter and Michelle. Karl, who had insisted on joining them, perched on the windowsill. Peter wondered if Karl had been sent as Tony Waters’ deputy until he could get away from whatever meeting was claiming his attention.

‘I’m Constable Grady.’ Michelle introduced herself to Lyn and Karl, knowing she could wait forever before it occurred to Peter to carry out the common courtesy.

‘Lyn Sullivan,’ Lyn responded.

‘Karl Lane,’ Karl added.

Peter eyed Lyn as he held his pencil poised over his notebook. ‘I’ve already heard part of the story from the first officers at the scene. He glanced out of the window to the two constables who were standing guard over Michael’s body. ‘You were trying to sleep in your room and you heard a noise. You opened your curtains and screamed, your fellow nurses came running...’

‘Mary, Richard and Alan,’ she interrupted.

Peter checked his notes again. ‘And that would have been about a quarter past ten?’

‘About that, yes.’ She plucked nervously at the hem of her dressing gown. ‘I couldn’t sleep, and I was looking at the clock every few minutes...’

‘Watching the clock is no good,’ Michelle interrupted. ‘The only thing to do when you can’t sleep is to go for a brisk jog.’

‘I thought we were interviewing witnesses, not running Auntie Michelle’s advice column,’ Peter cut in.

Lyn gave the policewoman a sympathetic glance. ‘Thank you for your advice. I’ll try that next time.’

‘Works wonders with me,’ Michelle said in defiance of Peter’s mounting exasperation.

‘You couldn’t sleep,’ Peter reminded Lyn.

‘I heard a noise at my door,’ Lyn continued.

‘What kind of a noise?’

‘A scuffling. At first I thought it was one of the cleaners with a polishing mop. Then I heard breathing...’

‘Heavy breathing?’ Peter interrupted.

‘Yes. When I turned around, I saw the key fall out of the lock on to the carpet.’

‘Do you always leave your key in the door?’

‘Yes.’

‘I take it the door was locked?’

‘I always lock my door and leave the key in it when I’m sleeping. Day or night. I know it’s not wise, when you consider what could happen if fire broke out, but I feel safer. There’ve been prowlers around.’

‘First I’ve heard of it.’ Peter stopped writing.

‘There are always prowlers around nurses’ hostels. You of all people should know that, Sergeant Collins.’ Tony Waters strode into the room. ‘Sorry I couldn’t get away earlier, but I had to attend a meeting.’

‘Have you reported these prowlers to the local police?’ Peter asked Tony.

Tony sat in a chair next to Michelle and ran his hand through his thick, white-blond hair. ‘Not recently. The last incident was about a year ago, but I’d have to check to make sure. The man was caught and charged with disturbing the peace.’

‘Convicted?’ Peter checked.

‘I assume so. I can’t remember the details.’

‘And when was the last reported sighting of a prowler around the hostel?’

‘I really couldn’t tell you off the top of my head. Karl?’ He turned to the charge nurse. ‘Do you know where the incident book is kept in this hostel?’

‘I do. I’ll get it.’

‘Nurse Sullivan identified the corpse of this particular peeping tom as Michael Carpenter, a patient in this hospital. Can you explain how he could have gained access to this building?’ Peter asked Tony.

‘Not before checking with Michael Carpenter’s ward sister, Sergeant Collins. The emphasis of modern psychiatric treatment is on rehabilitation within the community. The old notions of incarcerating the mentally ill in secure wards out of sight of the general public are no longer in vogue. If this young man was one of our

patients, it could be that he was here voluntarily, in which case he would have been at liberty to come and go as he pleased, and not only within the hospital and its grounds.'

'This particular "young man" has been convicted of arson, attempted murder and threatening behaviour towards his ex-girlfriend and her new boyfriend,' Peter tried to recall details of the two year old case. 'In short, Mr Waters, Michael Carpenter has been convicted of crimes which marked him as a danger to the public.'

'His doctors could have since considered him cured and of no further risk...'

'He died prowling round a nurses' hostel. God alone knows what damage he would have done, if he hadn't been seen.'

'Nothing is proved.'

'The bastard is lying out there with his neck broken after falling from a windowsill!' Peter exclaimed. 'If he is our killer, I'd say he was close to securing victim number five.'

'We can't be sure there's a fourth victim yet.'

'Our only witness to a murder disappears, and you're not sure she's a victim?' Peter left his chair. 'You,' he jabbed his finger at Tony, 'and all the bloody, do-gooding clowns like you disgust me. What the hell is the point of the likes of me working around the clock to catch the rapists, killers and villains of this world if all you do is give them the benefit of the doubt, until there's another dead victim dumped in front of you? And even then, all you give their killers as punishment is a couple of years' holiday in a camp like this, under the name of rehabilitation. Before patting them on the head and sending them out of the door to carry on in their own sweet way again.'

‘Sergeant, may I remind you just who you’re speaking to,’ Tony countered.

‘I know exactly who you are.’ Peter pulled a cigar from his pocket. ‘That’s why I’m so bloody angry. Fools like you shouldn’t be given the authority to clean a latrine. And if I were in your shoes, I’d be doing a headcount of your nurses right now.’

‘He didn’t get inside the hostel,’ Karl observed in Tony’s defence.

Peter glanced at Lyn. ‘Someone eased Lyn’s door key out of the lock.’

‘You can’t say for certain whether or not it was Michael Carpenter,’ Tony insisted.

‘No, I can’t, but as he wasn’t wearing any gloves, we’ll find out. And if it wasn’t Michael Carpenter then there were two prowlers creeping around this hostel this morning. Which option would you prefer, Mr Waters?’ Peter snatched the incident book from Karl and left the room.

‘Lyn?’ Karl followed her up the stairs. ‘If you’re nervous about being on your own, I can stay with you until your next shift starts.’

‘No thank you, Karl. I’m going to shower and dress.’

‘I’ve watched you dress before,’ he reminded.

‘Cling to your memories, Karl. It’s not something you’re likely to see again.’ She ran up the stairs away from him.

‘I caught a bus last night for the first time in years, but it wasn’t a wonderful experience,’ Trevor commented as Dan drove him out of the suburbs and into the town.

‘Is that why you’re going to take a look at your car?’ Dan asked.

‘Peter found a garage in the alleyway at the back of Frank’s place. When I saw the rent he’d signed up for on my account, I wondered if the car was worth it.’

‘With all the back pay you’ve accumulated over the past few months, you can afford to treat yourself to a new car.’

‘I could,’ Trevor agreed.

‘So what happens when this case is wrapped up? Back to the Drug Squad?’

‘Or wherever else Bill wants to put me.’

‘Are you returning to the force because you can’t think of anything else to do?’

‘I like the company,’ Trevor said dryly. ‘And the pension is good.’

‘You have a sense of humour. That explains a lot.’

‘What in particular?’

‘How you’ve put up with working with Peter Collins all these years. But, I admit I found the man better than his reputation,’ Dan slowed at traffic lights.

‘Peter’s all right.’ When Trevor thought of everything that Peter had done for him since he’d been injured, he felt that “all right” was miserly. ‘He’s a good friend, and a good copper. He just needs someone to keep his temper in check now and again.’

‘I’ll try to remember that.’ Dan stopped his car outside a mini-market with boarded-up windows in the run-down dock area of the town. ‘This where you live?’

‘It is.’ Trevor reached for his stick.

‘Place looks derelict.’

‘Only way to stop the locals vandalising it even more.’

‘I hope today goes well for you.’

‘Thank you.’ Trevor left the car. Supporting himself on his stick, he pulled his keys from his jacket pocket and

went to the side door, but Frank spotted him from inside the shop, and came rushing out.

‘You’re back. You look great.’ He shook Trevor’s hand vigorously. ‘Peter said you might be in hospital for months.’

‘I’m only back for the day, Frank. I have to return to the hospital tonight.’

‘But you’ll soon be out for good.’

‘I hope so.’ Trevor limped towards the door set in the side wall beyond the shop.

‘I can’t leave the shop,’ Frank said tactfully, sensing Trevor’s need to be alone. ‘You’ll call down and see me before you go?’

‘Yes.’ Trevor waited until Frank disappeared before inserting his key in the lock. He pushed open the door and, after placing a steadying hand on the wall, negotiated the narrow flight of stairs that led to the first floor. He unlocked the single door facing him at the top, and walked into the living room of his flat. The room was lighter and larger than he remembered, and not so cluttered. The three-piece gold dralon suite, stained and shiny with wear, had been moved closer to the small, double-bar electric fire in the fake mahogany fireplace. The bent-wire magazine rack, which usually overflowed with old newspapers that he always meant to clear out, was empty. He ran his finger over the surface of the imitation teak sideboard. It was thick with grey dust. No one had cleaned the place in weeks, if not months, and yet it was tidy.

Propping his stick against the sofa, he sat down and stared at the scarred surface of the coffee table, bare except for the telephone and directories. Then he recalled that his mother and brother had stayed here during the first traumatic weeks after he’d been injured when he had hovered somewhere between life and death on the

intensive care unit of the General. He pictured his mother, small, grey-haired, duster in hand, tut-tutting as she cleaned the battered second-hand sticks of furniture.

Leaving the sofa he limped into the kitchen. It was peculiar; everything was familiar, yet all the time he had been away he hadn't given the place a single thought. The Formica-topped kitchen table stood in the centre of the room. The same strip of ugly, torn wallpaper dangled over the skirting board in the corner, as it had done since the day he'd moved in. Blue tiles, chipped, cracked but clean, framed the sink top. His mother had given the place a thorough going-over in his absence. He looked out of the window at the moss-covered brick wall that hemmed in the back yard. He'd seen better views out of a prison cell.

He walked into the bathroom, which was as worn and depressing as the kitchen; saw the clean folded towels hanging over the bath in the absence of a rail. The new bar of soap laid on the cracked washbasin, the black patches gleaming dully in the cast-iron bath where the enamel had worn thin. He went into his bedroom. His bed had been made up with clean sheets, blankets and an orange candlewick bedspread.

He recalled the luxurious decor of Jean Marshall's apartment. This flat was past the kind of redecorating he was prepared to do in a place that wasn't, and would never be his own. The rooms were a stop-gap, the sort that students and young people who lived more out than in could put up with for a while. It was no home for a man of his age. He had to do something with himself – with his life. Spencer had been right; what had been enough wasn't any longer. And to think that his mother had actually expended time and effort cleaning this place. His mother! He suddenly realised he hadn't spoken to her in weeks. He

walked into the living room, picked up the telephone and dialled her number.

‘Do you think Michael Carpenter could be our man?’ Dan asked Patrick as they watched the body shell containing what was left of Michael Carpenter being loaded into the back of an ambulance.

‘Difficult to say.’ Patrick pulled off his rubber gloves and threw them into a plastic bin. ‘If you’d asked me, I’d have said that our man wasn’t the kind to go scaling three stories of a nurses’ hostel in broad daylight. But there’s no accounting for people’s actions, especially where the insane are concerned. He could have started off when it was dark and become over confident until he believed himself invisible.

‘What I can’t understand,’ Peter mused, ‘is why a killer should turn peeping tom.’

‘The two aren’t usually synonymous,’ Patrick agreed.

‘And even supposing he had wanted to kidnap Lyn, he could never have spirited her out of the hostel in daylight. There are too many people around. He couldn’t have done it unseen. Not down all those corridors and stairs, and in daylight. And even if he had by some miracle managed it – where would he have hidden her?’

Bill studied the hostel and its surroundings. ‘One of the joys of hospitals is the way they landscape their grounds. Half the poor buggers inside can’t raise themselves high enough in their beds to see out of the windows, but they still spend an enormous amount of money on trees and shrubs.’ He pointed to a screen of thick, high greenery that fringed the back of the hostel. ‘You could hide the whole nursing staff in there. Supposing he did get her out, he could...’ Bill followed the path and contemplated the side of the building facing

the shrubbery ‘... have gone out through that fire door. There’s only a narrow gap between there and the bushes.’

‘We’ve fought our way through every bloody inch of that shrubbery,’ Peter pointed out. ‘And we found absolutely bloody nothing. So now what?’

‘We go back to HQ and sift through files,’ Bill started walking.

‘Wouldn’t it be easier to arrest everyone here, put the whole bloody lot in the cells and watch to see who turns killer?’ Peter suggested.

‘We haven’t enough cells. And we have to face the possibility that our villain could be an outsider.’

‘But the knowledge of the hospital...’ Peter broke in.

‘A lot of people have inside knowledge of this hospital. Over four hundred staff have been made redundant in the last five years. Nursing – office – catering – cleaning,’ Bill’s smile tightened. ‘And you’re going to rake through every single one of their files with a fine toothcomb for me. Aren’t you, Peter?’

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

‘That was a good meal.’

‘A very good meal.’ Trevor screwed his paper napkin into a ball and threw it on to his plate. ‘Dessert?’

‘After all I’ve eaten, you must be joking,’ Jean Marshall smiled.

He picked up the bottle of wine they’d shared and poured the last of it into her glass. ‘More wine?’

‘No,’ she drained her glass. ‘But I do know what would go down a treat. Coffee and brandy.’

Trevor raised his finger to the waiter.

‘The bill, please,’ Jean said, before Trevor spoke. ‘We’ll indulge ourselves in my flat. That way I can drink as much as I like without worrying about driving home.’

‘If you’re sure.’ Trevor had been looking forward to returning to Jean’s flat, but now the prospect was about to become reality, he wondered what he, in his present battered and worthless state, had to offer a mature, attractive and confident woman like Jean.

‘I’m sure.’ She left her chair. ‘I’ll get my coat.’

Trevor handed his credit card to the waiter and flicked through his wallet looking for a tip. He fumbled and dropped it. The waiter picked it up for him. Trevor signed the chit and laid the tip on the waiter’s tray. He reached for the stick he’d propped against an empty chair, and waited for Jean. It was ridiculous; here he was, a grown man of over thirty, nervous as a schoolboy because a woman had invited him to her place for a drink. But it had been a long time since he’d been on anything resembling “a date” and the last time hadn’t been successful. He could almost hear the brush-off again,

“Thank you, Sergeant Joseph, but I’ve more man in my life than I can cope with right now... ” Always another man, never him.

Even with Mags. “Not tonight, Trevor. I’m not feeling up to the mark.” One woman in six years, and none at all for the last two, only a pathetic hopeless crush that hadn’t, and never could have, led anywhere.

‘Ready?’ Jean tapped his arm. Using his stick he followed her out through the door to her car.

Lyn Sullivan didn’t return from town until six-thirty. She’d deliberately left herself barely enough time to take a shower, change into her uniform and walk to the ward. And none to brood on the traumatic events of earlier in the day. She needed to keep busy, keep working and get on with her job. But her limbs ached and her eyes were strained from lack of sleep.

She took care to lock the shower room door securely. Even that wasn’t enough; she jammed her slippers beneath it, and hung her wash-bag on the door-handle, so she would hear the rattle of her soap dish if someone attempted to force the lock. She showered quickly, glancing from the translucent shower door to the patterned glass in the window. Nerves at breaking point, she turned off the water and dried herself in the cubicle. When she dusted herself with talcum powder, her hand trembled so much she shook most of it over the floor.

She knew she was being absurd. Michael Carpenter was dead – and the dead couldn’t walk. There was no reason for her to be nervous. But Michael had been young and, apart from his obsessive behaviour over his ex-girlfriend, naïve, childlike and trusting. Could he really have been a murderer? Had he taken those women and planted them in a hole in the ground, watched while they

slowly – ever so slowly – suffocated, fighting for each and every breath, as the blood vessels burst in their eyes?

She expelled the graphic images of lingering death from her mind, and concentrated on cleaning the powder from the floor. Tying her dressing gown cord securely around her waist, she threw back the bolt on the door and stepped into the corridor.

‘All right now, Lyn?’

She jumped as though scalded, dropping her wash-bag.

‘Sorry, didn’t mean to scare you,’ Richard apologised as he left the adjoining bathroom.

‘I’m a bit edgy,’ she confessed as she bent to retrieve her bag.

‘You on night shift?’

‘Yes.’

‘So am I. I’ll walk up the drive with you, if you like.’

‘There’s no need. I’ll be fine.’ She recalled what Sergeant Peter Collins had said that morning. If Michael Carpenter hadn’t been the murderer, then it could be anyone in the hospital. She looked at Richard’s brown hair, his pleasant nondescript features, his brown eyes – could it even be him?

‘Don’t be silly. I’d welcome the company – and protection,’ he added not entirely ironically. ‘See you downstairs in ten minutes. Mary will be walking up with us. Alan isn’t working tonight, and the poor girl is set for a nervous breakdown.’

‘See you downstairs,’ she agreed, feeling ridiculous. How could she suspect Richard, of all people?

She returned to her room, hung her dressing gown in her wardrobe, and put everything in its allotted place. If someone entered her room during the night and disturbed anything, she wanted to know about it.

Mary and Richard were waiting for her in the foyer. It was picking with rain, so she pulled the hood of her anorak over her head before following them on to the drive. They walked quickly and in silence, all three glancing uneasily into the twilight shadows that had gathered between the bushes and trees.

‘Sit down, I’ll get us a drink.’ Jean left Trevor in her living room and went to the kitchen to fetch ice. He walked over to the window and looked out over the marina, watching the pale, soft glow of early evening dim as lights flickered on across the bay.

‘Everyone who comes here makes the right noises about the view, but you really do like it, don’t you?’ Jean returned with glasses of brandy and ice and handed him one.

‘It’s magnificent. There’s something hypnotic about the sea.’ He held up his glass. ‘Is this wise after half a bottle of wine?’

‘You only drank a quarter of the bottle, and we’ve been cutting down your drugs for the last three weeks. A brandy isn’t going to do you any harm. But, as I warned you earlier, I won’t be able to drive you back after this.’

‘I wouldn’t expect you to.’ He took a tentative sip of the brandy – his first in months. ‘I’ll call a taxi. I’m not up to facing a bus. After months of hot-house hospital temperatures, night winds whistling through open bus shelters are likely to bring on pneumonia.’

‘I can give you the number of a reliable firm. My car had to be serviced last week. It was easy enough getting a taxi from here to the hospital, but hopeless trying to arrange one the other way.’

‘They probably thought you were a patient playing a practical joke.’ He sipped his brandy and contemplated

the mix of Victorian, Edwardian and modern housing that fringed the shoreline below. 'I hope I'm not offending you by asking, but what do these apartments fetch?'

'Less than they did when my husband was talked into buying one. As you've probably noticed, half this block is up for sale.'

'That's why I asked.'

'Are you thinking of moving here?'

'Not especially. Just somewhere better than where I live at the moment.'

'The apartments here are cheap for a reason. This penthouse isn't bad because there's no one living above or to the side of me, but the walls are paper thin in the apartments below. Do you see that terrace?' She pointed to a dozen Victorian bay-windowed houses that faced the sea. The entire row was painted white, with Grecian columns set either side of the front doors, supporting a strip of balconies that ran the length of the terrace.

'It looks like it's been sympathetically renovated.' He noticed their new roofs, and the long gardens that ran from the fronts of the houses down to the beach.

'It has. I wanted one, but my ex-husband insisted on buying this because it was "prestigious" whatever that means, and we would have had to wait a year for the renovations on the terrace to be completed.' She fetched the brandy bottle and topped up their glasses. 'I have a superb view, but little privacy. If I sit in my conservatory, or even in here, with my curtains open I'm on view to the entire marina.' She moved to the sofa and sat down. 'You can't see past the stained, etched and frosted glass into those houses.'

'The garden walls are low,' he commented.

'You can always grow vines on a trellis.'

'At least four are for sale,' he observed.

‘Eight actually, and you may be able to pick one up below asking price.’

‘Why?’ he enquired suspiciously.

‘The builder who renovated the terrace is on the verge of bankruptcy. He bought high, before the last slump, did a no-expense-spared conversion, waited so long for buyers to pay above the going rate, he lost innumerable sales and if he doesn’t succeed in off-loading them before the end of the month the bank has threatened to foreclose. And yes, I’ve put in an offer for two. They’ll be a good investment.’

‘How do you know all this?’

‘I have a friendly – very friendly bank manager.’ She saw Trevor pull a receipt out of his wallet and pat his pockets in search of a pen.

‘Here,’ she handed him a pen and notepad. ‘I take it you want the estate agent’s name and number.’

‘Thank you.’ He took them from her.

‘It would be nice to have a police officer close by. I’d feel safe knowing that you could look up here any time and check on me.’

‘You make me sound like a peeping tom.’

She shuddered. ‘That isn’t funny after what happened in the nurses’ hostel this morning.’

‘What happened?’

‘You don’t know?’

‘I’ve been in town all day.’

‘Michael Carpenter climbed up the outside wall of the nurses’ hostel, this morning. Lyn heard him, opened her curtains, and saw him trying to look through her window.’

‘Poor kid,’ Trevor said. ‘She must have been frightened out of her wits.’

‘Not as frightened as Michael. He lost his hold, fell and broke his neck.’

‘Dead?’

‘Very,’ Jean assured him. ‘And rumour has it that your lot have stopped hunting for the killer.’

Trevor tried to think through what Jean had just told him, but the brandy on top of the wine blurred his thoughts. ‘Michael was a nice enough kid, just mixed up. I wouldn’t finger him as a killer.’

‘You can never tell with obsessives,’ Jean the professional said. ‘They can get peculiar notions unconnected with their original fixations.’

‘You nursed him. Do you think he could be the killer?’ Trevor asked.

‘I’ve been looking at everyone sideways since they dug up the first body. Including the gardener, who’s sixty if he’s a day. I can’t tell you if Michael was a murderer, but I’ll still be carrying this.’ Jean reached for her handbag and tipped its contents on to the cushion. She picked up a can of cheap body-spray. ‘Better than mace and it’s not classed an offensive weapon. I also have this.’ She rummaged through the mess and pulled out a rape alarm.

‘Just make sure you don’t go anywhere alone,’ Trevor warned. ‘And that includes the hospital corridors.’

‘No one’s going to have a go at me. I’ve read up on the psychology of victims. Most announce their vulnerability in the way they walk, the way they...’

‘Don’t you believe it,’ Trevor broke in. ‘One of the victims was a nurse. And everyone remembers her as being a very efficient, together sort of person.’

‘Including me. That’s if the rumours flying round the wards are true. You have found Elizabeth Moore?’

‘No formal identifications had been made when I left the hospital this morning.’ Trevor drank the remaining brandy in his glass. ‘Do you mind if I call a taxi now?’

‘Yes.’ Jean looked at him and saw the edge of excitement in his eyes. ‘You’re working, aren’t you? Undercover, in the hospital.’

‘No,’ Trevor shook his head.

‘Yes, you are,’ she contradicted.

‘Do you think I got myself into this mess,’ he looked down at his battered legs, ‘just to go undercover inside the hospital? Besides, I was there before they found the first body.’

‘Harry Goldman wanted to release you a week ago.’

‘A week ago there was no murder hunt, and I wasn’t ready to be released.’

‘You’ve made a rapid recovery.’

‘That’s down to a kind nurse who befriended me in a pub, and reminded me that some people have a social life,’ he glanced around the room. ‘And live graciously in comfort, luxury and beauty.’

She moved closer to him. ‘It’s kind of you to say so.’ Wrapping her arms around his neck, she pulled his face down to hers and kissed him.

His senses reeled. He was engulfed in the warm, moist, sensual feel of her mouth caressing his. He closed his eyes, and attempted to kiss her back, fighting to make the embrace an equal effort, trying to give her something of himself, before he became totally lost, overwhelmed by her rich musky perfume, the urgency and blatant sexuality of her caresses.

She pulled back, away from him for a moment. Seconds later, her naked arm brushed against his cheek as her hands closed once more around his neck. He looked down and saw that she had shed the silk blouse she’d been

wearing. He stared at the half globes of her tanned breasts, the nipples hardening as she thrust herself against him.

‘We could go into the bedroom,’ she nuzzled his ear.

‘Jean, I...’ he faltered, embarrassed by the injuries that had drained his strength. For the first time since Mags had left him, a woman had undressed for him, yet he felt no more than a flicker of lust that could have been roused by a quick glance at one of the soft porn magazines that littered the station.

Jean leaned past him to press a button on the coffee table. The lights dimmed and the drapes swished together. Before she embraced him again, she sloughed off the remainder of her clothes. She unbuttoned his shirt and flies, and he allowed her to undress him, feeling as though he was back on the ward at the General. The nurses there had dressed and undressed him because he’d been too weak to do so himself, but when Jean’s hand slipped down between his naked thighs he realised that he was well and truly out of hospital. That she had succeeded in arousing passions within him that he had almost believed dead.

He pressed her down on to the sofa beneath him, but even as she lay on her back and opened her legs to receive him, he felt as though it was not he who was making love to Jean, but Jean who was swallowing him whole. He felt cannibalised, consumed by her greed and hunger, a hunger he realised – as he rose to meet her thrusts with his own – that could have been satisfied by almost any man – and probably better than him in his present state.

‘It’s too bloody neat for my liking.’ Peter walked over to the chart Dan had drawn up. ‘How many murderers fall three storeys and break their necks just before we close in on them? Besides, he doesn’t fit our profile.’

‘I thought you didn’t pay any credence to profiles,’ Bill said.

‘That was this morning,’ Peter replied irritably. ‘The age is wrong for a start. Michael was nineteen, not twenty-five to thirty-five. His father’s a bank manager, his mother a solicitor, so that leaves out the working-class, blue-collar hypothesis...’

‘What did he do?’ Dan interrupted.

‘Bank clerk,’ Peter answered. ‘But he wasn’t showing anywhere near the same promise Daddy did at his age. In fact he probably wouldn’t have got into the bank at all if it hadn’t been for his father’s influence. Far from living alone with a domineering female relative, he lived with both parents and three brothers before he was admitted here.’

‘But he did try to burn down his girlfriend’s house while her entire family was asleep inside,’ Bill said.

‘Only when she went off with another fellow. There’s a world of difference between desperately trying to hang on to one particular girl and picking up anyone who comes along and burying them alive.’

‘Where are we on dates?’ Bill asked.

Dan consulted his notebook. ‘He was held on remand in the hospital wing of the local prison for four months. After sentencing he was transferred here and that was a year ago.’

‘He was admitted before the murders, he had the opportunity, the personality, and he was caught red-handed. I say we’ve got our man.’ Bill was eager to wrap up the case. If the profile didn’t fit the suspect, then that was the fault of the psychiatrists who’d drawn it up. They’d got it wrong before.

‘Until two months ago, Michael Carpenter was locked in a secure ward for twenty-four hours a day,’ Dan remarked, still studying his notes.

‘Secure secure – or secure Compton Castle style?’ Bill queried.

‘Your guess is as good as mine.’

‘Stop guessing and find out the facts!’ Bill exploded.

‘As we’ve never been allowed into that hallowed unit, it’s a fair assumption the inmates would find as many difficulties getting out as we’ve had trying to get in,’ Peter propped his feet on the edge of Bill’s desk.

The telephone buzzed.

‘I said no interruptions,’ Bill barked, knowing his voice would carry through the thin partition wall.

‘It’s Mr O’Kelly, sir. You did say that you wanted us to put him through,’ the constable’s tone was so subservient it bordered on insolence.

Bill snatched up the receiver. ‘Patrick?’

‘Just finished Michael Carpenter. He died instantly. A clean break at the top of his spinal column which severed his spinal cord. I’ve opened the cranium and sliced a few frozen brain sections, but so far there’s nothing. Not a single abnormality. Some barbiturate and tranquillisers in the bloodstream, but no more than you’d expect to find in a patient in a psychiatric hospital...’

‘I need to know if Michael Carpenter is our man.’

‘He didn’t have murderer tattooed on his forehead. If you want to know any more, you can look at the results when you come down here this evening. The relatives are coming to identify three of the bodies, remember?’

‘I remember,’ Bill repeated.

‘You’re creating a corpse jam down here,’ Patrick hung up.

‘Anything?’ Dan dared.

‘Bloody nothing.’ Bill crumpling the inevitable polystyrene take-away container in his hands.

‘Looks like we’re back to square one,’ Peter rose to his feet. ‘Carpenter might or might not be our man and after utilising our entire manpower on this morning’s search, we still don’t know where Vanessa Hedley is. In fact, we know sod all.’

Trevor had always felt faintly embarrassed after sex, and more so with Jean than he had with Mags. As Jean eased herself out from under him and they both reached for their clothes, physically close, but mentally estranged, each engrossed in their own thoughts, he wondered if it was that way with everyone. It had been easier while he was living with Mags; at least their lovemaking had taken place under sheets, in the dark. And usually both of them had been so worn out at the end of it there was no time or energy to do anything other than roll over and fall asleep.

‘I’ll call that taxi for you.’ Jean finished dressing and picked up the telephone.

He buckled his belt and pulled his pullover over his head. He limped towards her and kissed her gently on the cheek. ‘Thank you.’

‘For calling a taxi?’

‘No. For being there when I needed someone, and being understanding when I needed sympathy, and...’ he glanced at the sofa they had just vacated.

‘All part of the nursing service,’ she smiled. ‘Count it as an NHS extra.’

Ten minutes after Trevor left Jean’s flat, the telephone rang. She picked up the receiver.

‘Can I come over?’

She knew the voice. She didn't have to ask the name. 'I thought you wouldn't be able to get away this evening.'

'I can get away now.' The voice was curt, impatient.

'When will you be here?' She was grateful that Trevor had gone, for her lover, who was so offhand and neglectful most of the time, could be uncontrollably jealous when the mood struck.

'Twenty minutes.'

She remembered the champagne she'd put in the fridge, the sheets she'd changed that morning in the hope of enticing Trevor to stay the night. Strange that ten minutes of intense physical grappling on the sofa had killed all urge for conversation between them, and stifled her desire to keep Trevor with her longer. 'I'll tell the porter to expect you. You can use your key.'

'Want me to check inside for you, miss?' One of the constables on duty in the grounds joined Carol Ashford as she unlocked her car. 'I have a torch.' He switched on his powerful, police-issue torch.

'Thank you,' she said gratefully. 'All the staff are on edge.'

'Not surprising, when you consider what's been happening.' The constable opened the driver's door, shone his torch inside and looked at the passenger and back seats. 'No bodies, alive or dead, lurking inside,' he joked tastelessly. 'I'll check the boot for you as well.'

'Please,' she said quickly, and the constable noticed that she was trembling. He swung the torch high as he closed the boot and noticed that she was beautiful. Cool shining bob of smooth blonde hair, mesmerising deep blue eyes, full luscious lips...

'Thank you, Officer.'

‘Glad to be of assistance, Nurse.’ He realised he was still staring at her. She sat in the car and he closed the door on her, watching as she locked herself in. He wondered if she was married, but before he could summon the courage to ask her out, four other nurses and Adam Hayter walked into the car park, and as they’d seen him do a check of Nurse Ashford’s car, they all demanded the same service.

‘Everything quiet, Tom?’

The officer looked up from the interior of Hayter’s car, and pushed aside Adam who was hovering too close for comfort. ‘Yes, Sergeant Joseph.’ He automatically addressed Trevor by his rank. Old habits died hard.

‘Anyone in HQ?’

‘Inspector Evans, Sergeant Collins and the super have gone down to the mortuary.’

‘Have a quiet shift.’ Trevor walked on down the drive.

He had walked a couple of hundred yards when he heard a muffled scream in the bushes on his right. He stopped and peered into the darkness, wondering if it was a cat or a fox. Squeezed out by the suburbs encroaching on their old habitat, packs of them had taken to living in and around the town, scrounging out of bins and raising their litters in burrows on waste ground. And the hospital gardens, though smaller than they had once been, were still vast by the tablecloth standards of the "executive homes" outside the walls. Trevor saw a bush move, heard a rustle of leaves.

He swung his stick forward on to the lawn. It sank into the soft earth. He saw a flash of white cloth, a pair of gleaming white naked legs stretching out from beneath a bush. He took another step – a burst of crimson exploded in his head, darkening the grey shadows into unrelieved

black, and bringing in its wake a sickening tide of nausea, pain and afterwards blissful, numbing unconsciousness.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Jean stretched out in the bed, searching for a cool patch of satin sheet. Her companion's slow, rhythmic breathing rose and fell in the still air of the bedroom. She envied her lover and wished that she too was sunk in blissful rest. But sexually aroused and frustrated she would have waken him – if he hadn't had an uncertain temper.

She couldn't recall feeling like this when she had been younger. Was disappointment a feature of maturity? Maturity or old age? she debated, her forty-six years weighing heavily on her mind. It was unfair. Her companion was obviously fulfilled; why not her? Had she become more demanding, or had her appetite increased with her years to the point where it could no longer be alleviated?

She slid her hand over the smooth skin of his abdomen. She moved downwards, her fingers brushed his pubic hair with feather-light strokes she hoped would provoke a response; but the caresses only intensified the fire that burned within her. She elicited no reaction, the same steady sounds of breathing continued to fill the room.

She turned over and stared at the face that lay on the pillows alongside her own. The blond hair shone like cold moonlight in the darkness, highlighting chiselled features. The firm lines of the mouth, softened by sleep, curved into a full-lipped smile.

There had been a time, and not that long ago, when she would have given almost anything for a night of passion with the love of her life; but three years of secrecy, of keeping her feelings hidden in public, of long lonely nights and holiday weekends, continually aware of

and jealous of her lover's other life, had worn the gilding from the flush of love.

Three years ago she wouldn't have gone out with Trevor, let alone taken him, if not into her bed, on to her sofa. But she'd used Trevor as she'd used so many others during the past year; as a stopgap, someone to help her while away empty hours. He wasn't the first man she'd slept with since she'd taken her lover, nor was he likely to be the last, but he had been the least successful.

Her sexual appetite made no allowances for weakness – and prolonged sickness had made Trevor weak. If anyone needed tenderness, gentleness and understanding, it was Trevor. She should have left him alone. If she had succeeded with Peter Collins – she pictured his hard, firm-muscled body, his grim set mouth, eyes that never betrayed his inner thoughts – and smiled.

The man lying next to her moved. She was in bed with the man she had professed to love while thinking of another. Perhaps she was no longer in love? What was "love" anyway? As a schoolgirl she would have answered the question with certainty. Love was the all-consuming, wonderful emotion that incited men and women to heroic, unselfish deeds, and inspired poets like Byron to pen immortal lines. After her marriage she would have defined love as a transitory madness that caused women to fling aside every ounce of pride and independence. And now – now she knew that its passion, pleasure and fleeting happiness, also gave rise to the uglier more selfish emotions of envy and rage.

Perhaps it was time to make a clean break, to lift herself above the second-class status of "mistress". To say no when the telephone rang, to re-build a life outside of a relationship that existed only in snatched, borrowed moments. But – she looked at the face next to her own,

and knew that once those eyes opened she would not be capable of thinking of anyone or anything else.

A whistle blew, blasting Trevor into agonising consciousness. The explosion in his head had left a residue of pain that intensified the moment he tried to move. He tried to speak, but his mouth was filled with something damp, and foul-tasting. He choked, coughed, and spat out a clump of soil. He was lying on something soft and yielding like –

‘Sergeant Joseph?’

He heard shock and dismay in the voice.

‘Andrew?’ He pushed himself up on his hands, and slumped, one arm sinking into cold damp earth, the other into – he suddenly realised what he was leaning on.

‘Here, sir. I’ll give you a hand.’

His first thought was that Andrew was being ludicrously formal considering they had been constables together. He couldn’t remember Andrew calling anyone, not even Bill “sir” before. The ground beneath him reverberated as he was helped up.

‘Oh, my God!’ The voice was young. A rookie’s?

‘What the hell – ‘

Trevor heard a stream of curses that sounded like Dan’s voice being played at the wrong speed. He opened his eyes.

‘Prop him against the tree.’ Dan’s voice again, shocked as Andrew’s had been, but more urgent. Trevor looked up. He was surrounded by a ring of torches and Dan was peering down at him, while shouting orders over his shoulder.

‘Call an ambulance.’

‘Sir.’

‘Fetch the super.’

Men ran off towards the brilliantly lit windows of the main building.

Trevor lifted his hand to the back of his head. When he withdrew it, his fingers were sticky with dark clotted blood. Dan was staring at the body on the ground.

‘What happened?’ he asked Trevor.

‘I was walking down the drive and I heard a noise,’ Trevor looked over to the tarmac shining in the moonlight twenty yards to his left. Had he walked that far across the lawn? He struggled to focus his mind and eyes. The shapes he saw lying beneath a bush, and on a flowerbed merged. He ran his hands down his jacket and realised that the blood wasn’t just on his head. His clothes were soaked in it.

‘What happened?’ Dan reiterated.

‘I was walking down the drive – ’ Trevor repeated.

‘Where had you been until this time of night?’

Trevor didn’t need to look into Dan’s face to know what he was thinking. ‘Town.’

‘Until now? It’s nine-thirty.’

‘I had dinner with a friend. Jean Marshal,’ Trevor revealed testily. His head hurt, he was in pain, and he was angry that his condition didn’t appear to concern anyone else. ‘We went to a restaurant.’ Trevor was seeing three of everything, including Dan. He turned his head and skinned his ear on the trunk of the tree he was leaning against. Bile rose into his mouth, and he barely had time to turn before he vomited.

‘Sergeant Joseph came in by taxi.’ Chris Brooke volunteered the information.

‘How long ago was that?’ Dan looked from Trevor, bloodstained, vomiting and dazed, to the mutilated body on the flowerbed behind him.

‘No more than ten minutes or quarter of an hour ago, sir.’

‘Which was it, constable? Ten minutes or quarter of an hour?’ Dan demanded.

‘I – I’m not sure,’ Brooke stammered.

‘Who is it?’ Trevor’s voice was quiet, detached and remote, but it cut across the night air like a whiplash. Everyone fell silent. ‘Who is it?’ Trevor reiterated.

‘I don’t know. It could be one of the patients,’ Dan replied. ‘There’s something familiar about her. I think I saw her on the geriatric ward.’

‘Is she...’

‘She’s dead,’ Dan answered.

‘How?’

‘Cut up, possibly with a broken bottle. There are shards of brown glass protruding from her windpipe and jugular.’

‘Has she been dead long?’ Even in his dazed and disorientated state, Trevor knew that he had to clear himself of suspicion.

‘Difficult to say. She feels cold, but there’s very little blood on the body.’

‘It’s all over me,’ Trevor said ruefully.

Dan shone the torch over him and took a closer look. ‘Glass is embedded in your chest. Whatever you do, don’t move.’

‘It’s my head that’s hurting,’ Trevor complained.

‘I don’t know what happened,’ Dan bent his head close to Trevor’s. ‘But,’ he glanced over his shoulder at the officers around them, ‘it’s vital you tell me everything you remember before the ambulance arrives.’

Trevor turned and vomited the last of Jean’s brandy and the Greek meal on to the grass.

Peter Collins hated accompanying relatives into the mortuary for two reasons. The first was that the moment they entered, the mortuary lost its impersonal, laboratory feel, and took on an atmosphere that was half chapel of rest, half graveyard; the second was that the murder victims were no longer evidence in an inquiry. Weeping mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, boyfriends, husbands, transformed them into people, lovable or otherwise, who had breathed, loved, laughed, fought, argued, worked and played, and not that long ago.

Like hospitals and cemeteries, relatives visiting mortuaries reminded him of his own mortality; and he hated any reminder of his own frailty. He arrived in the car park in time to see a red-eyed Michelle Grady lead a wild-eyed, fair-haired, middle-aged woman out of the mortuary. Her resemblance to the photograph of the first victim they'd discovered was striking, and he knew he was looking at Rosie Twyford's mother. A man with a beer paunch walked slowly behind them, misery etched into every line of his bloated face.

'Mr and Mrs Moore and Mr and Mrs Moon are still waiting,' Michelle Grady whispered as she walked past. Peter nodded and pushed open the door to the bleak, comfortless waiting room.

'Sergeant Collins, this is Mr and Mrs Moon.'

Peter nodded to the couple Bill had introduced. Mr Moon looked every inch the successful businessman in his hand-tailored suit. Mrs Moon was attractive, suntanned and also well-dressed, but behind their fine clothes he saw a look of nervous misery and expectancy that he recognised. They still hoped. Despite the overwhelming evidence of the suitcase, and the dental records the lab

boys had slaved over, they still hoped that their daughter was alive.

‘I’m taking Mr and Mrs Moore in,’ Bill opened the inner door. ‘Patrick will send for you when he’s ready.’

Given the choice, Peter wasn’t sure whether he’d prefer to supervise the identification of the badly decomposed body or the skeleton. Perhaps it was just as well that Patrick had made the decision for him. He sat across the room from Mr and Mrs Moon.

‘If you’d like a cup of coffee, I could rustle up something,’ he offered, uneasy with their despair. The metre that separated the Moons’ chairs stood testimony to their mental estrangement. They’d borne a child together, yet both were facing the loss alone, without even the dubious comfort of one another’s touch. Peter had never had a child, or felt the desire for one, but even he grasped that to lose a son or daughter before your own death must be one of the greatest hells on earth for a parent.

‘Thank you, Sergeant Collins, but I’d prefer not,’ Mr Moon said stiffly. Mrs Moon shook her head. A painful silence fell over the room.

‘I’d like to extend my sympathies and those of everyone on the police force.’

‘Thank you, Sergeant Collins,’ Mr Moon replied mechanically.

‘What I can’t understand – ’ Mrs Moon pulled out a handkerchief and held it to her nose, ‘is why she wrote to us and said that she was going away with a friend. That last letter was so – so – ’ Sobs choked her speech. ‘– so happy,’ she finished at last. ‘It was full of plans for the future. I thought – ’ she looked at her husband and there was such a wealth of bitterness in his return glance Peter was taken aback.

‘Where did you think she was, Mrs Moon?’ he prompted gently.

‘On a round-the-world trip. She asked her father for money for the ticket, and we – I,’ she corrected herself, ‘sent her some spending money. She knew if she ran out, she could always have more – ’ She dabbed her eyes with her handkerchief again.

‘Do you have that letter?’ Peter asked hopefully.

‘With me.’ She opened her handbag and pulled out a tattered and creased envelope. She offered it to him with a shaking hand.

‘You don’t mind me reading it?’ he took it.

‘We don’t mind, Sergeant Collins.’ Mr Moon left his seat and walked to the window. He looked out through the slats of the Venetian blinds at the car park and box-like facade of the General Hospital. ‘But I don’t think you’ll find it helpful. I must have read it a hundred times since we discovered Claire was missing.’

‘When was that?’ Peter asked.

‘About two months after she left here. Belinda, – ’ he acknowledged his ex-wife’s presence for the first time since Peter had entered the room, ‘– contacted me, and asked if I’d heard from her. It was then that I realised the last contact either of us had with her was regarding the money for her trip, so I reported Claire missing. Not that anyone in authority took me seriously,’ he added curtly. ‘I was told that youngsters go missing every day, and sooner or later the majority turn up again, none the worse for wear. Of course, we all know different now, don’t we, Sergeant Collins?’

‘I am sorry, sir.’ The words sounded inadequate, but Peter didn’t know what else to say. He looked down at the envelope and removed the letter. It was written in bright blue ink, fountain pen or felt, not biro, and the letters were

large, rounded, those of a child. Another factor that removed the living Claire from the bundle of mildewed bones and sorry remnants of tissue and hair that he had seen laid out on Patrick's slab. He unfolded the single sheet of paper, and began to read.

Dear Mummy,

I know you don't like using the computer so this is just a short note to thank you for the money, and to let you know that I am getting better all the time. The doctor was right; now that I am out of the hospital for part of every day I am getting stronger in every way.

I went into town today and bought some cool summery things. We have decided to stop off at Hong Kong and Sri Lanka on our way to Australia, from there it is anyone's guess as to where we'll go, so you mustn't worry if you don't hear from me for a while, I'm sure that the postal service in those out of the way backwaters must be dreadfull. I will e-mail Daddy though if I find an internet café.

As well as being fit I am also very happy. That's Happy with a capital H. You were right Mummy when you said that there is someone special for everyone. When I come home I will introduce you to him. But for now I want to keep him to myself. Hug him close to me and keep him secret. But it feels good, knowing there's someone special who cares for me every bit as much as I care for him.

Take care of yourself, Mummy darling. Love to everyone in Spain, especially Sebastian. I'll write again when I'm settled for a while.

*Love and Kisses
your Claire*

Peter refolded the letter and replaced it in the envelope. 'Would you mind if we took a copy of this?' he asked Mrs Moon.

'Not if it would help.'

'Sergeant Collins?' Patrick's assistant was in the doorway. 'Mr O'Kelly is ready for you now.'

As Peter rose to his feet, he saw Bill talking to Mr Moore in the car park. Mrs Moore was as hysterical as Rosie Twyford's mother had been. He glanced at Claire Moon's mother, and felt that he hadn't drawn the short straw. He might be landed with the skeleton, but he was also landed with a mother who seemed made of sterner stuff than the common breed.

Peter's mobile rang as Patrick was showing the Moons the contents of their daughter's suitcase and, more poignantly, the personal jewellery and remnants of clothing that had been retrieved from her corpse. Deciding that whoever it was could wait, Peter switched off his phone. Mrs Moon kept her mouth and nose covered with her handkerchief as she looked at the artefacts. All she could do was nod. Mr Moon was more forthcoming.

'That's the Rolex I gave Claire last Christmas.'

'I'm sorry to have to show you your daughter's remains, Mr Moon, Mrs Moon,' Patrick apologised, 'but, as Sergeant Collins will tell you, the formalities have to be observed.'

'Will it suffice for just one of us to identify the remains?' Mr Moon asked Peter.

'Yes.' Peter opened the door for Mrs Moon to leave. She hesitated at the head of the slab, fingering a ring. A cheap silver ring decorated with an enamelled masked head. Peter looked to Patrick who nodded. 'You can take that with you if you like, Mrs Moon.'

‘Thank you, Sergeant.’ She lifted her head, and Peter thought that he had never seen such anguish in another human being’s eyes.

‘The rest of Claire’s things will be given to you later.’ Peter looked around for Michelle Grady, but she was nowhere in sight. Patrick led Mr Moon down the long narrow mortuary towards three shrouded slabs at the far end. Peter had to witness the identification, but he could hardly leave Mrs Moon unattended. He signalled to Patrick’s assistant, but by the time he had seen Mrs Moon escorted back into the waiting room the remains had been uncovered.

Patrick kept most of the skeleton covered, revealing just the skull. The hair, long, luxuriant and golden brown, clung to the cranium, held in place by a cap of dried skin. The sightless eyes stared blankly at the ceiling, the nose cartilage had crumbled. Threads of gum clung to the yellowed, earth stained teeth.

‘It’s Claire’s hair.’ Mr Moon’s voice sounded strained, inhuman.

‘Thank you, sir,’ Patrick draped the sheet back over the skull.

‘I want – I demand to know how it happened,’ Mr Moon shouted angrily. ‘How – how did she die?’

Patrick looked to Peter.

‘We think she suffocated,’ Peter said, twisting the truth.

‘You don’t know?’

‘The corpse we found buried close to Claire’s bore signs of suffocation,’ Patrick intervened. ‘And from the facts that I have been able to glean from examining your daughter’s body, I assume – ’

‘Assume!’

‘Clive?’ Moon’s ex-wife was standing in the doorway, flanked by Patrick’s assistant and Michelle. ‘We have arrangements to make.’

Her calm restored his senses. ‘Thank you, gentlemen.’ He might have been thanking a shopkeeper for his assistance.

Peter watched the Moons walk out of the door, followed by Michelle. After the door swung shut on them, Patrick opened one of the refrigerated drawers and removed two frosted glasses filled with chilled amber liquid.

‘Drink?’ Patrick handed a glass to Peter.

Peter tossed the contents back. ‘Good whisky.’

‘The best. I left yours in the drawer, I didn’t know how long you’d be,’ Patrick said to his assistant when he returned. The telephone rang in the office and Patrick went in to answer it. As soon as he hung up he called for his emergency kit.

‘Not another one?’ Peter whispered hoarsely.

‘Yes, and at Compton Castle,’ Patrick answered.

‘Vanessa Hedley?’

‘Your guess is as good as mine. You coming?’

Peter remembered the phone call earlier. ‘I’ll take my own car.’ He followed Patrick out of the door.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Peter drove through the gates of Compton Castle and, following a constable's directions, over the lawns to the area where floodlights had been set up. Patrick followed, climbed into his overalls, gathered his kit from the back of his car and headed for the taped-off area. Peter looked around for Dan or Bill. He didn't have to look far; they came running towards him as soon as they spotted his car.

'Another burial?' Peter asked when they reached him.

'No,' Bill snapped. 'We got to this one before our man had a chance to start digging.'

'Vanessa Hedley?'

'No. Elderly woman, stabbed with a broken bottle, and it looks like rape.'

Patrick called them over and they donned paper overshoes and walked towards him.

'You can stop there,' Patrick ordered. 'No doubt about rape this time.' He dropped a swab into a test tube and closed it. 'Semen's fresh, not dried, but death occurred days rather than hours ago. First impressions – I'd say she's a victim of necrophilia.'

'And we've caught the bastard red-handed,' Bill growled. 'Lying on top of the corpse, blood all over him.'

Something in the tone of Bill's voice struck Peter as ominous. He looked from the super to Dan. 'Who?' he asked.

'Trevor Joseph. He had a stick –'

'A walking stick, his legs have been broken,' Peter interrupted.

'He was unconscious –'

Peter leaned over the corpse, and ignoring Bill and Patrick, who was busy taking more samples, stared at the victim's face. The features were contorted, slashed to ribbons, the nose and ears hanging by threads of skin. But the first thing that struck him was the age of the woman. The wrinkled skin was parchment yellow in the strong glare of the floodlights.

‘She was a sweet old lady from the geriatric ward?’

Peter saw Bill standing at his elbow. ‘You can’t believe Trevor did this? Not after all the years you’ve known him.’

‘The man’s nuts.’

‘You didn’t think so this morning when you asked him to start work again.’

‘No sane man would agree to go undercover in this place.’

‘No sane man would bloody well want to work with you, but we do,’ Peter retorted. ‘Look at the marks on her. Those blows were inflicted with a hell of a lot of strength. Trevor’s been sick, he’s weak –’

‘We found him lying on her covered in blood, with a lump of glass stuck in his chest. Maybe the poor old biddy fought back.’

‘A two day old corpse fought back!’ Peter sneered.

‘We can’t be sure of the time of death until we get the pathologist’s full report.’ Bill wanted to postpone thinking about this scenario until after he’d slept.

‘Where is Trevor?’ Peter asked.

‘The General,’ Dan answered. ‘He had glass embedded in his chest and a cut on his head.’

‘Is anyone with him?’

‘A couple of constables.’

‘Is he under arrest?’

‘As soon as the doctors have finished we’ll start questioning him,’ Bill snapped.

Peter turned to Dan. ‘You can’t possibly think Trevor did this?’

Dan looked at Bill. His boss was swaying on his feet, his face grey with fatigue. He knew that if he expressed an opinion either way, he’d only succeed in provoking a head-on confrontation. ‘As soon as Patrick’s given us the basics we’ll talk to Trevor,’ he hedged, ‘then – ’ He was speaking to thin air. Peter was running back to his car.

Ignoring Dan’s shouts, Peter dived into the driving seat and hit the accelerator. And he didn’t slow down until he was outside A and E at the General.

Peter strode down the restricted area that housed the cubicles. ‘Trevor Joseph – police officer?’ he demanded of a nurse.

‘The public aren’t allowed back here,’ he replied authoritatively.

‘Police – not public.’ Peter pulled out his I.D and waved it at him. ‘I need to see him immediately.’ He pushed past the nurse and saw Chris Brooke standing guard at the end of the corridor.

‘This way, sir,’ Chris called, assuming that Peter had been sent to interview Trevor.

Andrew Murphy was standing in a corner of the cubicle. Trevor was sitting on the examination couch. A doctor was washing her hands in the sink, and a nurse was swabbing Trevor’s head with cotton wool and antiseptic.

‘The stitches will need to come out in a couple of days. Don’t worry, we’ve shaved off very little of your hair, Trevor. But it’s so thick it hardly shows,’ the nurse reassured.

‘If you experience any of these symptoms,’ the doctor handed Trevor the standard “signs of concussion” card, ‘or if you’re concerned in any way, come back immediately.’

Trevor winced as the antiseptic being dabbed on his wound touched raw flesh.

‘The cut on your chest is deep, but the wound’s clean and your X-rays are clear – who are you?’ The doctor asked when Peter walked in.

Peter waved his I.D card. ‘Police. I need to talk this man. Alone.’

‘I’ll be finished in a few moments, but he should return to Compton Castle to rest.’

‘That’s all right, doctor.’ Trevor looked around for his stick. ‘I want to talk to him.’

Peter offered Trevor his arm. ‘Bill has your stick. No doubt he thinks it’s evidence,’ he added cynically.

‘Don’t forget to come back in four days, so we can take out those stitches,’ the nurse reminded. ‘You can make an appointment in reception.’

‘Fine.’ Trevor made a mental note to ask Jean to look at them. The last thing he wanted to do was return here to waste another hour sitting around waiting to be treated.

‘I’m taking Trevor back to Compton Castle,’ Peter announced to Chris and Andrew as he helped Trevor limp into the corridor.

‘But, Superintendent Mulcahy...’

Andrew Murphy elbowed the rookie out of the way and winked at Peter. ‘We’ll see you back there, sergeants.’

‘What the hell happened?’ Peter asked Trevor as soon as they were in his car.

‘I wish I knew.’ Trevor sank his head in his hands. ‘I’d been out, I returned by taxi. While I was walking up

the drive, I saw a pair of legs lying on the grass. I walked towards them and that's the last I remember.'

'You think someone hit you?' Peter could smell alcohol on Trevor's breath. And Trevor never had been able to handle spirits. 'Or did you fall and hit your head?'

Trevor put a hand to his head and winced as his fingers touched the stitches. 'I think that's unlikely given that the cut is on the crown of my head, unless I did a head dive. And I've no memory of attempting one.'

Peter inspected the wound. There was an enormous, split lump on Trevor's crown, blood clots matting the thick black hair around the area that had been stitched.

'Given that you were found on a body in a flowerbed of soft earth, I agree.' Peter started the car.

'Surely Dan and Bill don't think I attacked that woman?' Trevor had felt pleasantly merry as he'd walked up the drive, but he was now stone-cold sober. A combination of cold night air, vomiting, and pain had cleared his stomach, if not his breath, of alcohol, and the expression on Peter's face was enough to penetrate the fog of concussion. 'For God's sake...'

'Save your breath. It's not me you've got to convince, mate,' Peter interrupted as they hit the main road to Compton Castle.

'Well?' Bill asked Patrick as he rose stiffly to his feet.

'I'm not sure how she died, but she's been dead for at least two days, and that's official. All the injuries you can see, including the rape, were inflicted after death.'

'You sure?'

'No localised bleeding. Those cuts were definitely made after death.'

'But the blood...'

‘I’ve taken swabs. It looks a lot, but it’s spread thinly. Head wounds bleed. I’d say it was all Joseph’s.’

‘And you’re sure she was raped?’ Dan checked.

‘The corpse was interfered with. Yes.’

‘You’ll type the blood and the semen?’

‘Don’t I always?’ Patrick dropped the samples he’d taken into his case.

‘Trevor Joseph...’

‘If you’re going to caution me, Bill, take it as done,’ Trevor sat back in the passenger seat of Peter’s car.

‘No one’s accusing you of anything,’ Bill leaned on the open door.

‘Yet,’ Peter qualified. ‘Patrick,’ he called out to the pathologist. As you’re here, take a look at the cut on Trevor’s head.’

Patrick pushed in past Bill. ‘Nasty,’ he said, probing the stitches with his finger.

‘I hope you washed your hands after you played with corpses,’ Trevor reprimanded. He closed his eyes. Peter had asked endless questions on the journey from the General. His head was throbbing, and Bill hadn’t helped by demanding his bloodstained anorak and sweater as soon as Peter had stopped his car. He felt hot and sticky and desperately in need of a bath and sleep. His mouth was dry, foul with the aftertaste of spicy food, too much beer, brandy and vomit.

‘You should be in bed.’ Patrick folded Trevor’s sweater and anorak into a plastic bag.

‘He can rest as soon as we’ve cleared a few things up.’ Irrational with fatigue, Bill was too stubborn to walk away for the night.

‘I’ve already talked to Trevor,’ Peter removed the keys from the ignition of his car and stepped out, ‘we’ve

established the timing and it will be easy enough to check as Trevor arrived back here by taxi, and taxi drivers keep logs.'

'Not all of them,' Bill said. 'And certainly not the ones who moonlight.'

'I'll find the guy,' Peter broke in. 'And even without him, Trevor said he spoke to a constable in the car park. That at least can be verified.'

Bill and Dan watched Trevor stumble from the car and slide slowly to the ground.

'Now can he go to bed?' Peter questioned acidly.

'So, you've found Vanessa Hedley, Inspector?' Tony Waters joined Dan on the drive as the police ambulance drove away.

'No, Mr Waters.'

'Not more problems?' Tony frowned.

'You turning up like this is fortuitous. It saves me having to send for you,' Dan observed.

'It's not fortuitous,' Tony countered. 'The DMO sent for me when she saw the activity in the grounds.'

'DMO?'

'Duty medical officer. In this case Dotty Clyne. She telephoned to see if I knew what was happening. We were hoping you'd found Vanessa Hedley.'

'No such luck, but we have found another body. And we have reason to believe that it's another of your patients.'

'Who?' Tony asked quickly.

'The body hasn't been identified.' Dan waved to Bill who was driving towards the gates. 'May I ask where you've been all evening?'

'In my office until eight-thirty. Then at home. Why do you want to know?'

‘Just building a picture of everyone’s movements.’

‘Was the patient murdered?’

‘We’ll know in due course, Mr Waters, and when we do I’ll let you know.’ Dan thrust a paper bag in front of him. ‘Peppermint?’

‘Taxi driver confirms the time he dropped Trevor off as nine- thirty.’ Peter slumped in a chair next to Dan in the mobile HQ.

‘You did well to get it verified so quickly.’

‘Connections,’ Peter said.

‘Where’s Trevor?’

‘I left him with Lyn Sullivan on his ward. Chris Brooke is outside his door.’

‘Brooke called me on his radio at nine-forty-five,’ Dan poured out coffee for both of them.

Peter picked up the cup. ‘It takes, what, ten minutes to walk from the front gate to where Trevor was found?’

‘Five,’ Dan corrected.

‘Ten in his present state,’ Peter argued. ‘Which leaves Trevor with five minutes to discover, mutilate and rape a corpse – I don’t buy that it was simply lying there. And just mutilating that corpse would be a tall order for someone in Trevor’s condition. And where do you find a corpse anyway?’

‘In a mortuary,’ Dan replied automatically.

‘Of course. The mortuary here.’

‘Where are you going?’ Dan called after him. The door banged behind Peter as he left the room. Dan picked up the telephone and dialled the number for Compton Castle’s administration.

Peter saw the lights on in the mortuary in the General as he parked outside and he blessed Patrick’s

conscientiousness. He'd guessed that Patrick wouldn't leave this PM until the morning but he had to bang the door three times before Patrick's assistant, tired and bleary eyed, opened the door and let him in.

Patrick was working down at the far end of the room.

'Peter, what a pleasant, unexpected surprise. How is Trevor?' Patrick tossed a ball of cotton wool into a bin at the top of the slab.

'Sleeping I hope.'

'Tell him what he's come here to hear.' Patrick said to his assistant, who was fiddling with a row of test-tubes on a side bench.

'We found only one blood group. Sergeant Joseph's.'

'His blood was on his sweater, the anorak, and the sheet that covered the victim.'

'She wasn't dressed?'

'Just wrapped in a sheet and a shroud. As I said, she'd been dead for at least two days. And Trevor's blood group doesn't match the semen I found in the corpse's vagina,' he added. 'I've sent the sample for DNA analysis to see if there is a match on file. Whoever our necrophilia dabbler is, it isn't Joseph.'

Lyn Sullivan felt uneasy. She spent most of the night checking and double checking her patients, pausing first at Vanessa's empty bed, then Michael Carpenter's, and finally outside Trevor Joseph's door, which was still guarded by a policeman. Mercifully, her other patients slept peacefully, unperturbed by the two empty beds in their ward.

She wondered what had happened. The police had told her nothing but it was rumoured that another corpse had been found. The officer in the ward refused to confirm that it was another murder, but if it was, that

would mean Michael Carpenter wasn't the killer. And there were Trevor's injuries. Sergeant Collins had been angry when she'd asked about them, but, she reflected, Sergeant Collins was always angry.

The trainee made coffee at four-thirty, and Lyn took hers into the office. She didn't bother to switch on the light. Instead she opened the blinds and stood in darkness looking out over the hospital grounds. The police were patrolling the area, shining lights, presumably watching and waiting for – what? Michael Carpenter's ghost to appear? Or someone else? Someone who still prowled free.

If Michael wasn't the killer, was the murderer here in the hospital, now, tonight? Were the police hoping that he would run the gauntlet of guards in an attempt to bury Vanessa the same way he'd buried the others?

Lyn pictured Michael, his shy diffident grin, and instinctively knew that he hadn't killed the women buried in the grounds. He had been a sly peeping tom, not a cold blooded murderer who shovelled earth on top of living, breathing beings. But if it wasn't Michael, then who?

She gazed out again at the floodlit lawns, shrubberies and high walls that hemmed in the grounds. Above the brickwork she could see the top storey of one of the halfway houses. Its curtains were open, the lights on, and the tall, dark silhouette of Spencer Jordan paced back and forth between two rooms. She wondered what was keeping him awake. Indigestion, or something more sinister?

She looked to the left, towards the old hospital. There were lights on in the administration block, and she wondered if Tony Waters was working. Was something more than pressure of work keeping him awake? A guilty conscience perhaps? Shuddering, she finished her coffee.

She was being foolish. Seeing bogeymen under every bed, as she had never done even as a child. Was there anyone she didn't suspect in the hospital? Tony? Spencer? Karl? Adam Hayter? –

‘Why stand in the dark?’

The lights clicked on behind her, and she closed her eyes against the sudden brightness. Karl moved over to join her at the window.

‘I wanted peace and quiet.’

‘And I want to apologise for last night.’ Hauled over the coals early that morning for not reporting Vanessa’s absence as soon as Lyn had alerted him, he felt low and miserable. Particularly at Tony’s threat to demote him. But then he’d remembered Lyn, how angry she’d been, and how his life, and not only his sex life, had improved since she’d been around, so he’d decided to make an effort to reinstate their relationship. ‘I’m sorry. You were right and I was wrong.’ Confident his apology would be accepted as soon as it was made, he slid his arm around her waist.

The feel of Karl’s warm fingers clamped against her cool flesh irked Lyn. She moved away.

‘Didn’t you hear? I said I’m sorry.’

‘I heard you.’

‘Lyn, we’ve all been under a terrible strain for the past few days. All this upset with police, and bodies, and two patients on your ward involved...’

‘And now another one,’ she said coldly.

He looked at her blankly.

‘Haven’t you heard? Another corpse was found in the grounds tonight.’

‘I didn’t know. How... who...?’

‘The police won’t elaborate. They only said they’d found another corpse. Apparently Trevor Joseph arrived at the scene before anyone else. He was hurt...’

‘I haven’t heard any of this. I’ve been working on Drugs and Alcohol. Roland went wild tonight. It took four of us to get him to bed, even with a tranquilliser.’

She continued to stare out of the window, although all she could see with the lights on was their reflection in the glass.

‘I thought we had something good going between us...’

‘So did I,’ she interrupted.

‘Don’t let a stupid row end something as special as us. I was hoping that we...’

‘What, Karl?’

‘Move in together,’ he suggested. ‘I...’

‘That “I” is the reason I’ll never move in with you, Karl. There will only ever be one “I” in any relationship you’re involved in.’

‘That’s unfair.’

‘Is it?’ Her grey eyes blazed. ‘What about yesterday? You think an apology is enough for the way you put me down?’

‘Lyn, I’m the senior nursing office. I have to make decisions. I can’t let personal considerations interfere with the running of this hospital.’

‘Personal considerations? All I asked you to do was report a patient missing from my ward.’

‘And she was reported missing.’

‘Not until a fire broke out.’

‘A fire that someone deliberately set.’

‘I was on break.’

‘Very convenient...’

‘I don’t have to listen to this.’ She tried to pass him, but he grabbed her arm.

‘Lyn, please, let’s not quarrel.’

‘Let me go!’

‘You’re hysterical.’

‘I’m not.’

‘Just listen to yourself. Lyn, it’s all right. I understand. You’re safe with me. No one’s going to hurt you.’ He wrapped an arm around her shoulders, and she cried out. The door burst open and Dan barged in.

‘I’m sorry.’ Embarrassed at breaking in on what he took to be a lover’s tiff, he said, ‘I wanted to check on Trevor.’

‘I was just about to do that, Inspector Evans.’ Lyn brushed past him on her way through the door.

‘This murder business is stretching everyone’s nerves to breaking point,’ Karl complained.

‘So I see,’ Dan agreed softly.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Edith Jenkins hummed the latest coffee advert ditty to herself as she whirled the electric polisher across the vinyl floor in the corridor.

‘You’re happy today, Edith.’ Jean called out as she pushed the drugs trolley down the ward.

‘Got to make the effort, haven’t you?’ the cleaner shouted above the noise of the machine.

‘Could you give the four-bedded ward at the end of the corridor a going over and the single room as well, please,’ Jean asked. ‘Both are empty.’

‘The four-bed is empty?’ Edith checked in surprise.

‘We had a reshuffle; moved everyone out of there and into the other wards.’ Jean didn’t want to talk about what had happened to Vanessa or Michael although she didn’t doubt that the cleaner knew and had hoped to coax more information out of her.

Edith pushed her polisher to the end of the corridor and entered the four-bed ward. With no patients underfoot, she finished the floor in a quarter of an hour. She changed from the coffee jingle to a few bars of a chocolate advert’s background music. She was ahead of herself this morning. The corridor and one room done, and it wasn’t half past eight. She wouldn’t be able to press ahead with the rest of the rooms for another ten minutes until everyone was at breakfast and out of her way. But there was still that empty room at the end. She hadn’t been in there for over a week and it was bound to be dusty. Wheeling the polisher in front of her, she passed Sister Marshall who was dishing out painkillers to the nice young policeman in the first room. Putting her back

against the door, she depressed the handle and swung around to enter.

The smell sent her reeling back into the corridor, a rotting stink that reminded her of the time a mouse had died behind the skirting boards of her flat and her husband had to rip the place apart to find it. She scanned the floor. Whatever and wherever it was, maintenance could deal with it. Her job description was cleaner, and cleaners cleaned; they didn't look for dead animals or carry them out of rooms.

Coughing and spluttering she went to the window and opened it wide. Edith didn't look at the bed until she turned around. Then she screamed.

Andrew Murphy, who'd been told to stay with Trevor until Bill could interview him, reached the room the same time as Jean. Trevor hobbled behind them, leaning on a stick Jean had found for him.

Overpowered by the stench, Murphy caught the hysterical cleaner in his arms, and stepped back.

'A body?' Trevor already knew the answer. One of the first things he had come to recognise after joining the force had been the smell of death.

'A ripe one.' Murphy's reply brought on a fresh fit of hysterics from Edith.

'It looks like – ' Jean clasped her hand over her mouth.

'Vanessa?' Trevor suggested.

She nodded.

'Phone HQ and tell them to get over here.' Trevor automatically assuming command, despite his battered state. 'I'll keep everyone away until Patrick arrives.' He looked into the room from the doorway. Lead trailing, the polisher stood at the foot of the bed. The curtains and

window were wide open. Careful not to step any further than Murphy had done, he leaned forward. All he could see was a section of black, bloated face beneath a mop of blonde hair. 'Have you a tissue?' he asked Jean.

She took a pack from her pocket and handed him one. Wrapping it around his fingers, he gingerly pulled the door closed.

The cleaner began to wail again.

Jean gazed mutely at Trevor.

'We can't do anything until the pathologist arrives.' Trevor stood in front of the door. 'When was this room last used?'

'I gave that room a good going over only last week,' Edith whispered as soon as she'd recovered enough to speak. 'It's not used often.'

Jean helped the ashen-faced cleaner across the corridor and into the sluice. Edith sank on a chair. Trevor had left his bed so quickly his legs were beginning to give way beneath him. Jean looked at him and pressed a buzzer to summon help.

'Bring a chair down here,' Jean shouted to the auxiliary who'd answered her call. 'Quickly, before Trevor keels over.'

The young woman ran off into the day room and dragged out an unwieldy armchair. Jean pushed it in front of the door leading into the single room, and helped Trevor into it.

'Look at those drag marks you've made on my nice clean floor,' Edith cried. 'Just look –'

'It doesn't matter.' Jean handed the auxiliary her keys. 'Fetch a brandy for Edith. The bottle's in the medicine cupboard in my office.'

'Brandy?' Edith perked up.

‘You’ve had a nasty shock,’ Jean said wryly. She turned to Trevor. ‘Do you want a drink?’

‘It wouldn’t go well with my thumping headache.’

‘The painkillers I gave you should start working soon.’

‘That’s good to know.’ He looked impatiently down the corridor. ‘Where the hell has Murphy got to?’

‘He’s probably outside. Mobile signal is lousy in the ward.’

The auxiliary returned with the brandy. Jean left Edith in her care and went to Trevor.

Peter strode in, Andrew at his heels. ‘I presume it’s Vanessa Hedley?’

‘Looks like it,’ Trevor answered.

‘He’s made us look a right load of Charlies this time. While we were all creeping around the grounds and searching the old hospital, he calmly walks in here to dispose of his latest victim.’

The staff canteen was full to bursting. Every chair was taken except the five ranged at a table on a dais at the far end of the room. The heat was overpowering, as was the din of conversation.

Tony Waters stood in the doorway. ‘I didn’t expect to see the night-shift here. I assumed they’d come to this evening’s meeting.’

‘They’re scared and they’re hoping to find out something that will make them less scared,’ Peter pushed his way through to join Bill, Dan and the police officers at the back of the hall.

‘Safety in numbers,’ Harry Goldman joined them. ‘One of their neighbours might be a murderer, but the chances are it won’t be more than one.’

‘We should start,’ Bill went to the table and motioned Dan, Peter, Harry and Tony forward.

‘I did tell everyone ten-thirty,’ Tony reminded.

‘The room is full to bursting now.’ Bill took the centre seat, Dan and Peter sat on his right, leaving Tony and Harry Goldman the other two chairs.

‘Would you like to begin?’ Bill asked Tony.

Tony rose and tapped the microphone that had been set up. A hollow boom echoed around the packed room. ‘This meeting...’ he had to repeat himself three times before the noise subsided and he could make himself heard. ‘This meeting has been called to put an end to the wild rumours that are sweeping this hospital. I don’t need to remind you how unsettling the present atmosphere is for our patients. It negates everything we are trying to accomplish here. There is no need for panic, but we should all take some simple precautions to ensure our personal safety and the safety of our patients; and we should also assist the police in every way we can,’ he acknowledged Bill and Dan, ‘so they can resolve this unpleasant situation quickly. Inspector Evans?’ He poured a glass of water from the carafe and took a sip before sitting down.

It was Bill not Dan who took the microphone.

Peter muttered ‘If he calls murder unpleasant, what would he call a massacre?’

‘Offensive,’ Dan suggested.

‘The man’s a total prat,’ Peter continued. ‘Four dead bodies, five if you count the dog, and the man tells his staff not to panic. How many more does this idiot want?’

‘Ssh,’ Dan hissed, conscious of heads turning in their direction.

Bill pulled the microphone towards him. Unlike Tony he didn’t enjoy public speaking, and he elected to

remain seated. 'I will give you as many of the facts of this case as I can without jeopardising our investigation. Four women have been murdered, and the corpse of a patient was found in the grounds last night. However, it has been proved beyond doubt that she died of natural causes two days ago. Her body was removed from the mortuary here and if any of you can shed any light on this macabre theft, Mr Waters would be glad to hear from you.'

Dan left his seat and pulled a sheet of paper from a board that stood beside the table, uncovering a photograph of one of the victims. He pointed to it while Bill spoke.

'Rosie Twyford, the first victim to be discovered buried in the grounds, but not the first to be murdered. We believe she was abducted last week. The last sighting we have of her was when she kept her last appointment at the outpatient clinic of this hospital on Monday afternoon. We think that she was kept hidden – possibly in the hospital – until Saturday night when she was murdered.'

Silence reigned thickly in the atmosphere.

'She was buried alive,' Bill said flatly, 'after being drugged with tranquillisers and barbiturates. After we disinterred the body of Rosie Twyford, a thorough search of the hospital grounds yielded two more victims. Inspector Evans.'

Dan revealed a second photograph.

'This is the girl we believe to be the first murder victim. She was killed four or five months ago, again, she was an ex in and outpatient, Claire Moon.'

Everyone in the room focused on the smiling image of the pretty young girl with soft grey eyes and long dark hair.

'Approximately two months after Claire Moon was murdered, the killer buried an Elizabeth Moore.'

A gasp tore through the assembly when Dan unveiled another photograph. Compton Castle wasn't so large that the name or face went unrecognised, even three months after Elizabeth Moore had left.

'Claire Moon and Rosie Twyford were both patients,' Bill continued. 'Both suffered from depression, and both had attempted suicide. Elizabeth Moore was a nurse. One of the most alarming aspects about the disappearance of all three victims is that none of them were missed immediately and no connection was made between their disappearance and this hospital. Claire Moon was the only one of the three to be reported missing, and her parents believed that she'd disappeared some time after leaving Compton Castle. Rosie Twyford's parents would undoubtedly have reported her missing in due course, but probably they, like Claire Moon's parents, would have assumed that she had disappeared after leaving the hospital. Elizabeth Moore was divorced, her friends and family believed she was in America and too busy to contact them. I believe that we are dealing with a calculating, cold-blooded killer who chooses his victims with care,' Bill said flatly. 'An hour ago we found the body of the only witness to Rosie Twyford's burial, Vanessa Hedley.'

Everyone's attention again turned to the board as Dan uncovered Vanessa's photograph.

'You knew she was a witness, why didn't you protect her?' a porter demanded.

'We tried,' Bill's excuse sounded lame even to his own ears.

'You obviously didn't try hard enough,' an angry voice shouted.

Bill ignored the interruption. 'She disappeared from her ward during the late afternoon, when the day room

was full of patients, and the ward was staffed with the half-hour overlap of shift change. I'd like every one of you to think just where she could have been held captive for the past week. If it was outside the hospital, I'd like to know exactly how she was spirited in and out of the grounds through the security barriers... '

'Which weren't erected until twelve hours after she disappeared,' Peter glared at Tony Waters.

'If she was held somewhere within Compton Castle I find it difficult to believe that a fully-grown woman could be concealed here without someone in this room knowing about it. I want all of you,' Bill hit the table with his fist, 'to go over your movements during the last week. Did any of you see Vanessa, on one of the other wards? Did you pass her in a corridor? Was she being pushed on a trolley or in a wheelchair by someone you didn't recognise? Or by someone you did? Someone who knows the hospital and has free access to the wards and buildings took her, hid her, possibly killed her – we're awaiting the results of the PM – and placed her in the room where she was discovered. We are doing all we can to trace that person or persons.'

'You think more than one person could be involved?' Tony Waters asked.

'We're keeping an open mind,' Bill answered. 'Any of you who has something to report, please go to one of the tables at the side of the room, where officers are waiting to take your statements. And please remember, no matter how small and insignificant you think your contribution; it might just be the vital piece of evidence we need to bring this case to a conclusion.'

'Shouldn't we close the hospital?' one of the domestic staff asked. 'None of us are safe with this murderer on the loose.'

‘Inspector Evans will reassure you on that point.’ Taking the coward’s way out, Bill handed over to Dan.

Soon Dan’s slow Welsh drawl could be heard in every corner of the room. Unlike Bill and Tony he didn’t use the microphone.

‘It would be pointless to close the hospital, because we’d have to find alternative accommodation for everyone here, and if the killer is a patient or member of staff, we’d only be transferring our problem, not solving it.’

‘That makes sense,’ a voice drifted up from the front row.

‘You are all aware of the strong police presence in the hospital,’ Dan said. ‘We have stationed officers alongside the security guards at the gates and in the car park. Please co-operate with the routine searches of all vehicles entering and leaving these premises. I apologise for any delays, and would like to thank all of you for your co-operation and patience. A few words of advice, walk to and from your wards in threes and fours if you can, not pairs. If you must drive to the hospital, arrange a car pool so you arrive in a full car. Threes are good, fours are better. If you have to drive into the car park alone, do not walk to your ward alone, no matter what the time of day. Wait until the duty police officer assigns you to a group. While working on your ward, stay in constant touch with the other staff...’

‘What happens if there’s only one member of staff on a ward at night?’ Jean asked.

‘We have a minimum of four staff members working on a ward at any given time,’ Tony insisted.

‘Only in theory,’ Alan contradicted. ‘Even during the day we can drop to one if two staff take a meal break and another has to take a patient to therapy. And at night, if someone’s sick we’re often down to one.’

‘If there are problems get on the phone to me, and I’ll get an agency nurse over,’ Tony replied.

‘At night?’ Alan persisted.

‘I’ll look at the staffing ratios after this meeting. If there’s a shortage I’ll book extra agency nurses.’

‘Halleluiah!’ Jean said loudly.

‘There’ll be a police presence close to every nurses’ hostel, every ward, throughout the grounds, and in the old hospital building,’ Dan said. ‘And the Trust is issuing every member of staff, male and female, with personal alarms. If you should see something suspicious, use it. I’d rather see a red-faced person who’s tripped up and accidentally set it off than another corpse.’

‘What about the patients?’ Alan asked.

‘Mr Waters is arranging for headcounts to be carried out every two hours.’

A series of groans greeted his words.

‘I know it’ll be a bind.’ Dan held his hands up for silence. ‘But Mr Goldman convinced us that it isn’t practical to issue the patients with alarms.’ A burst of laughter rocked the room. ‘If you could all make your way to one of the tables, where you will be issued with your alarm, and be able to make a statement to one of the officers...’

‘And a good time was had by all.’ Peter watched the queues form.

One woman, alarm in hand, hesitated for a moment in front of the door. Trevor, who had stood at the side of the hall with the constables, noticed her hanging back.

‘Can I help you?’ he asked.

‘You’re Sergeant Joseph, aren’t you? I’m Angela Morgan, Tony Waters’ secretary.’ She glanced over her shoulder to check that her boss was still engrossed in his discussion with Bill. ‘Could you give Inspector Evans a

message for me?’ she continued nervously. ‘Tell him I’ll meet him after work today – but not in the Green Monkey, in – in the – ’

‘Where do you live?’ Trevor interrupted.

‘The marina.’

‘How about the pump house on the marina at six?’

‘It may be nothing but... ’

‘The Inspector will be there.’

‘Thank you.’ Clutching her personal alarm she hurried out of the door.

Dan took Peter to the pub with him. They walked in at a quarter to six and Peter picked up the menu.

‘We’re working,’ Dan rebuked.

‘And I’m starving. There’s no rule that says a copper can’t eat during an interview.’

‘All right,’ Dan capitulated. ‘If they do sandwiches, I’ll have one too.’

‘Leave it to me.’ Peter went to the bar and ordered two twelve-ounce steaks, with chips and peas, and two pints of beer, while Dan sat at a secluded corner table.

‘What’s the cutlery for?’ Dan asked suspiciously when Peter returned.

‘Open sandwiches.’ Peter lied.

They’d almost finished their beers when Angela Morgan turned up at ten minutes past six, with her husband.

‘Sorry I’m late, Sergeant... ’

‘Peter,’ he corrected, recognising a press reporter at the bar. He rose to his feet. ‘What are you drinking?’

‘I hope you don’t mind me bringing my husband,’ she gabbled nervously. ‘It’s just that – ’

‘Not at all,’ Collins interrupted, wishing the woman would shut up before she attracted any more attention. ‘What are you drinking?’ he repeated.

‘I’ll have a...’ she gazed blankly at the rows of bottles behind the bar.

‘A sweet white wine and a beer,’ her husband volunteered for both of them.

Peter heard her piercing voice, as he ordered the drinks.

‘I hope you don’t mind me bringing my husband, Inspector Evans. I brought him along for moral support – and I wasn’t sure what I should tell you. It’s not as if I have any actual proof. It’s just that – well I don’t know what you’d make of it.’

‘What exactly is it that you want to tell us, Mrs Morgan?’ Dan Evans pressed.

‘Well, it’s all those girls, isn’t it?’ she whispered in response to a gesture from Dan.

‘The victims?’ Dan guessed.

‘He knew them all.’ She lowered her voice again so Dan and Peter, who’d returned with the drinks, had to bend their heads to catch what she was saying. ‘They were all special to him in one way or another. Every one of them. And if you want my opinion,’ her voice was now so low that they found it a strain to listen to her, ‘he was having affairs with all three of them. At different times, that is.’

CHAPTER TWENTY

Angela fell silent as the waitress set two large oval plates overflowing with steak and chips on to the table.

‘Sauce, vinegar, salt?’ the girl enquired pleasantly.

‘Nothing, thank you.’ Dan was annoyed at the interruption and Peter’s interpretation of “sandwich”. But Peter’s attention was riveted on the first decent meal he’d seen in days.

‘I’ll have vinegar, salt and English mustard if you’ve got it, love.’ He winked at the waitress. ‘Would you like something?’ Peter asked the Morgans, the food in front of him making him uncharacteristically generous.

‘I put a casserole in the oven,’ Angela said distractedly.

‘I presume that you were telling us about Mr Waters,’ Dan prompted.

‘Mr Waters has a roving eye. And it’s a pity – for the girls who get involved with him, I mean.’ Angela wrapped her fingers around the glass of wine that Peter had bought her. ‘It’s not as if there’s only the one, or that he cared, really cared, for any of them. He couldn’t, could he?’

‘Why not?’ Peter asked, in between mouthfuls of steak.

‘Being married. But they all telephoned him...’

‘Did you ever listen in on their conversations?’ Dan interrupted.

‘No, that wouldn’t be right!’ she exclaimed, affronted by the suggestion.

‘Never inadvertently overheard anything?’ Peter offered her a legitimate excuse.

‘No.’

‘Yet you’re sure he was having affairs with all three women?’ Dan pushed three fat chips on to his fork.

‘There was the staff party last Christmas, when some of the nurses caught him and...’

‘And who?’ Peter asked when she fell silent.

‘No one would say, but everyone had their suspicions. He was caught en flagrante as it were – stark naked in one of the rooms at the top of the old building – and –’ She turned crimson.

‘And?’ Peter pumped mercilessly.

‘Who saw them?’ Dan asked when she didn’t reply.

‘I can’t remember all of them, but one was that pretty nurse who works on the ward your friend’s on.’

‘Jean?’ Dan suggested.

‘No, the young one.’

‘Lyn Sullivan?’ Peter supplied.

‘That’s her.’

Dan took out his notebook and wrote down the name.

‘Sounds like damning evidence of adultery to me,’ Peter stopped long enough to down the remainder of his beer.

‘It’s his wife I feel sorry for.’ Angela shook her head. ‘She’s so pretty. And they’ve got everything. Beautiful house – you wouldn’t believe how beautiful. Not that I’ve been inside, but I’ve seen pictures, and heard what other people say about it.’

‘You’ve told us about what might have been a one night stand. What makes you think Tony Waters had affairs with all three victims?’ Dan asked.

‘The first one, Rosie Twyford, he used to take her home. I was sick for four months. I had a hysterectomy. I was ever so poorly...’

‘And Rosie?’ Dan steered the conversation back on course.

‘Rosie Twyford was personal assistant to Mr Chalmers, and he was made redundant the same time I had my operation. So, she was sent down to cover for me. The girls who came to visit me in hospital used to joke that I wouldn’t have a job to come back to because Rosie and Mr Waters were getting very friendly. He used to take her home after they both worked late.’

‘Do you often work late?’ Peter intervened.

‘Not now,’ Angela informed him. ‘Not with all the cutbacks, but we did then. It was just after we – the department that is – moved out of County Hall. I think that’s why I had to have the hysterectomy. It was lifting all those heavy boxes...’

‘And Rosie Twyford used to work late along with Mr Waters?’ Dan cut her short again.

‘She told the girls they were straightening the office. But when I came back to work and she had to return to the general office she had a nervous breakdown. Rumour had it because he’d lost interest in her. But when she was ill, he sent her flowers...’

‘Wouldn’t any boss do that?’ Dan asked.

‘I suppose so,’ she agreed grudgingly.

‘Did he send you flowers when you were ill?’ Peter lifted the last piece of steak to his mouth.

‘Yes,’ she admitted. ‘But, it’s not just Rosie Twyford. There’s Claire Moon. Her father was important, and when that Sunday newspaper came to do a feature about her, Mr Waters took a great deal of interest in it.’

‘Wouldn’t that be because he was wary about what the papers would print about the hospital?’ Dan sprinkled salt on to his chips.

‘That’s what I said.’ Mr Morgan spoke for the first time since he and his wife had sat down.

‘But he used to walk around the grounds with her every chance he got,’ Angela protested. ‘And a lot of people said that Elizabeth Moore was the nurse he was seen with at the staff party.’

‘I thought you said no one knew who it was?’ Dan reminded her.

‘Not for certain,’ Angela conceded. ‘But whoever she was, she had auburn hair and when I saw all three photographs up there, side by side this afternoon, I knew I had to talk to you. And Carol Ashford...’

‘Is she the jealous sort?’ Peter stared at his empty plate.

‘I wouldn’t say that,’ Angela sipped her wine.

‘Does she often visit your offices to see Mr Waters?’ Dan asked.

‘Hardly ever. If she does, it’s only because of work.’

‘Do you think she knows about her husband’s philandering?’ Peter pushed his plate aside.

‘She must do, mustn’t she?’ Angela added as if she had only just considered the idea. ‘After all, it’s common gossip around the hospital.’

‘Would you tell her?’ Dan asked.

Angela looked at him vacantly.

‘Not many people would be prepared to tell a wife when her husband strays,’ Peter explained.

‘I suppose they wouldn’t,’ she conceded.

‘Is there anything else you can think of? Anything you’ve seen, or heard?’ Dan was still hoping for some hard facts.

‘You promise what I say will be treated in confidence?’

‘Yes,’ Dan assured her.

‘Well, there is one other thing,’ she glanced at her husband. He turned away. ‘When Mrs Hedley first went

missing, Mr Waters wouldn't let anyone go into the electricity sub station in the cellar. I heard him have a real set-to with the engineer from the electricity people about it. But he still wouldn't let him in.'

'What do you think?' Dan asked Peter after Angela Morgan and her husband had gone home for their casserole and a night of television. The two officers were sitting back nursing fresh pints of beer.

'I think she's genuinely concerned,' Peter handed Dan one of his cigars.

'Concerned and agitated enough to put two and two together and make eight.'

'Probably. But if I were in charge of this investigation I'd get the forensic team to check the sub station all the same.'

'I wouldn't ask if we weren't stretched, Trevor. And I'll get one of our men patrolling the grounds to call in every hour and check you're all right.'

'I'll do it.' Trevor was amused to think that Bill, who last night had been prepared to believe he was a rapist and murderer, was now asking him to sit up all night to keep an eye on the ward.

'Upstairs is demanding results.' Mulcahy justified his request, although Trevor had neither asked for, nor expected an explanation. 'It might be helpful if you came to the briefing. Nine-thirty, in the mobile HQ.'

'What about the ward when I'm at the briefing?'

'I've two extra bodies assigned to every shift. I'll see that one of them is here.' Bill left Trevor's room and headed down the tunnel towards the old part of the hospital.

'So you are working?'

Trevor turned to see Lyn in the corridor outside his room. 'What makes you say that?'

'Senior policemen in the middle of murder investigations don't have time to make social calls to the sick.'

'If it was anything other than a case on the doorstep I wouldn't have been drafted in. But after what happened to Vanessa, it's all hands to the pumps.'

'In case he strikes again?'

Trevor didn't answer.

'You think he will strike again?'

'Your guess is as good as mine.'

'It's horrible to think that someone could be out there watching us.' She looked past him and stared out of the window.

'You have every right to be terrified.'

'I'm not usually jumpy. It's just that since Michael climbed up on to my window – and that meeting when I realised –'

'When you realised that all four victims spent some on this ward?' he guessed.

'The corpse in the garden last night didn't help.'

'It didn't help anyone,' he instinctively put a hand to his head.

'Was that the murderer?'

'We don't know,' he said honestly. 'No one saw anything except me, and I only spotted the body after it had been laid on the ground. But from now on you will have me and my trusty weapon to protect you.' He lifted the walking-stick Bill had returned to him. 'And I give you my most solemn promise, Nurse Sullivan, that I won't allow anything to happen to you. Is that a good enough guarantee?'

‘As no one has offered me anything better, I’ll accept it, Sergeant Joseph.’ She walked across his room and closed the blinds against the twilight. ‘How about I make both of us a cup of coffee?’

‘It might work,’ Bill said cautiously.

‘It’s the most harebrained suggestion I’ve heard of,’ Peter snorted. He and Dan had been in the mobile HQ for ten minutes, and already two of the girls in the outer office had gone off to take an early tea break, out of earshot of Peter and Bill’s argument.

Bill folded his arms across his chest. ‘Let’s see you come up with something better, Peter.’

‘When has a killer ever been caught by a ruse as basic as that outside of a TV show?’ Peter derided. ‘The only way we’re going to nail this villain is with police work. Dull, boring, routine police work.’

‘Our psychiatrist says...’

‘I might have known that one of your bloody Home Office shrinks dreamed up this one. Has he ever left his snug office and taken a short holiday in the real world?’

‘Shut up and listen for once in your life,’ Bill roared. ‘We’ve been talking...’

‘Who’s we?’ Peter demanded. ‘Dan and I weren’t consulted in any of this.’

‘The “we” being your superiors,’ Bill informed him icily. ‘This case has developed a press profile almost as large as your bloody ego. We have to be seen to be doing something.’

‘By the press?’ Peter sneered. ‘That’s bloody marvellous. You put someone in undercover in the hope of flushing out a killer, then you call a press conference?’

‘Not the press,’ Bill bellowed. ‘By the men upstairs and the Trust...’

‘Great. They sit on their backsides in an upholstered office, while we send some poor sod out as bait to catch a killer. Just remember Harries while you update those suits on our progress or lack of it. He proved great bloody bait, didn’t he? We didn’t even find enough of him to bury.’ Peter referred to the last high profile case that had almost cost Trevor his life and had cost another officer his.

‘That was unfortunate...’

‘Unfortunate?’ Collins reiterated. ‘You’re talking to the officer who had to scrape what was left of Harries off his shoes.’ He took a cigar from his top pocket, and pushed it between his lips. ‘I know I’m talking to the mentally deficient...’

‘One day you’ll go too far, Peter, even for me.’

Peter softened his voice, but the anger remained etched in his eyes. ‘Who’s won the lucky draw this time?’

‘We decided on more than one. We thought we’d try a member of the hospital staff as well as a patient.’ Bill looked at Peter, expecting another outburst. When none came, he continued in a quieter vein. ‘We went through all the staff profiles looking for someone we could eliminate completely from our suspects.’

‘And?’

‘It wasn’t easy. But Jean Marshall was with Trevor in the Greek Restaurant at the time of Vanessa Hedley’s disappearance.’

‘Pity you didn’t remember that last night,’ Peter said frostily. ‘If you had, you might have saved Trevor some trouble.’

‘We called her in earlier,’ Bill ignored Peter’s barbs. ‘We explained what we’re trying to do, then asked if she’d hand in her resignation, to take effect from a week today.’

‘Does anyone in the hospital have a clue as to what you’re up to?’ Peter asked.

‘No one besides Jean Marshall and these four walls.’

‘Not Harry Goldman or Tony Waters?’

‘No one,’ Bill repeated. ‘The story is that she’s decided to go to Canada, to spend a year with her married sister who lives out there.’

‘Does she have a married sister in Canada?’

‘Yes.’

‘And you expect everyone to swallow that?’

‘Everyone already has.’

‘Who’s shadowing her?’

‘Michelle Grady.’

‘She’s not even out of kindergarten. The girl’s worse than useless. She thinks in terms of brownie badges.’

‘There’ll be other back-up.’

‘Of the same kind Harries had?’

It was one crack too many. ‘If I were you I’d be looking to my stripes, Sergeant.’ Bill’s voice and temper rose precariously.

‘You said there was going to be more?’

‘Yes,’ Bill replied shortly. ‘We’re putting someone else in the same ward as Joseph.’

‘Who?’

‘Sarah Merchant. She volunteered,’ Bill added, in an attempt to pre-empt Peter’s objections.

‘You do know she was Harries’ girlfriend?’

‘I didn’t,’ Bill admitted.

‘She could have volunteered because she’s feeling suicidal – have you thought of that?’

‘She passed the psychological test.’

‘A bloody child of two could run rings around our psychologists. The test questions are so damned obvious,

they're farcical. Isn't it enough that her boyfriend died last year, without you trying to kill her too?'

'No one is going to die.' Bill leaned across the table. 'We've three people inside the ward; Jean, Sarah, and Trevor who's a trained detective...'

'A sick, physically frail and unfit detective, who was your number-one suspect yesterday,' Peter reminded.

'We have men everywhere, ready to provide back-up at a split second's notice. In the grounds, in the old hospital, outside the ward.'

'For how long?'

'Two weeks,' Bill admitted reluctantly. 'If nothing happens by then, we have orders to run down the manpower working on this case.'

Peter propped his feet on a metal waste-bin. 'So if our villain gets frightened off by this activity, all he has to do is go to ground for a fortnight. Afterwards he can go back to burying the remaining complement of patients and staff whenever he feels like it. I've another theory for you. He – whoever he is – could be an undercover agent for the Trust. His mission being to save them a fortune in redundancy pay for the staff, and relocation expenses for the patients. They'll probably pay him a bonus and still be quids in when he buries the last inmate of this nut house. Then all the Trust needs do is warn the re-developer not to dig down deeper than six foot when they build the upmarket housing estate that'll replace this place. And bingo, the new residents on this site will get an added bonus of well fertilised gardens.'

'You're sick, Peter. Sick and twisted. When this case is over, I'm putting you up for transfer,' Bill threatened.

'Promises,' Peter glared at Bill. 'Bloody promises, that's all I ever get.'

*

*

*

‘One day you’re going to argue yourself out of a job,’ Dan cautioned Peter after Bill had left the HQ.

Peter struck a match to light his cigar. ‘Ten years of trying, and I still haven’t pushed Bill far enough to get near commonsense. Have you phoned forensics about that sub-station?’

Dan shook his head and reached for the telephone. Mulcahy had been right about Peter. He was good, but he was also hell to work with.

‘Your people have searched every inch of this cellar three times this week.’ Arnold Massey, head of a maintenance staff that had shrunk from fifteen to two over the past five years, complained.

‘Between you and me, we’ve had a tip-off,’ Peter said. ‘And if we don’t act on tip-offs, everyone starts breathing down our necks. Press, politicians, higher ups, Joe public, and all.’

‘I can imagine,’ the man agreed, slightly mollified by the confidence.

Dan, who was following Peter with the technician from forensics, wondered why Peter never bothered to soft-soap the brass the way he did the public. A tenth of the patience he’d expended on Arnold would have transformed his relationship with Bill. But he’d discovered that Peter was a Jekyll and Hyde personality, and, as his temporary partner, he was grateful for the times when Jekyll surfaced – like now.

‘This cellar goes on forever,’ the forensic expert shifted his heavy case from one hand to the other.

‘Over half a mile from end to end,’ Arnold informed him. ‘And two miles of passages in total.’ He ducked his

head beneath a bridge of grimy central-heating pipes. 'This is your sub-station.'

They halted in front of a securely locked iron door set in a solid brick wall. 'By rights I suppose I should have called the electricity people...'

'There's no need,' Peter tested the door. 'The fewer people involved, the less the risk of contamination. You do know enough to tell us what's safe or unsafe for us to touch?' he checked.

'Ay, I know that much. And most of the dangerous stuff is labelled.' Arnold pulled an enormous bunch of keys from his pocket and unlocked one of several locks on the door. It took him five minutes to find the keys needed to unfasten the second and third locks. He opened the door, slipped his hand inside and switched on the light. 'It's all yours.'

The lighting was brighter inside the sub-station than it was in the corridor. Peter and Dan stared at an array of dials, switches, and gleaming black paraphernalia that meant nothing to them.

'It's all right to go inside,' Arnold assured them. 'Just be careful with anything that's labelled in red. And don't pull any switches, or you'll black out the wards.'

'Floor's not dusty,' the technician observed.

'As I said, your people have been in and out of this place like yo-yos this week,' Arnold reminded.

Peter stepped gingerly inside and looked around. 'Who else has keys to this place?' he asked Arnold.

'Electricity people, but they don't have keys to the building so they can't come down here without one of us knowing about it.'

'One of "us" being maintenance?' Dan asked.

'Or administration. Mr Waters has master keys in his office.'

‘Including this sub-station?’

‘Of course. He’d need them, wouldn’t he, in case of emergency.’

‘I suppose so,’ Dan said slowly, beginning to think that all the clues on this case seemed to lead back to Tony Waters.

‘Where do you want to start?’ the technician called to Dan, from inside the sub-station.

‘You’re the one with experience, wherever you like,’ Dan replied.

‘Floor up, or ceiling down? Front to back, or back to front?’

‘How about ceiling down, back to front,’ Peter walked to the end wall and looked back.

Nothing larger than a shoe box could have been hidden above ground level, but when they examined the floor, Dan saw distinct possibilities. It was covered with heavy metal plates, each a foot wide and three feet long. It took the combined strength of Peter and the technician to move them and underneath was a gap more than a foot deep.

‘You could hide a corpse in there,’ Dan said.

‘A thin one,’ Peter agreed. He looked to the forensics expert. ‘What do you think?’

‘I’ll get out my kit.’

Dan and Peter removed the rest of the plates, carried them out into the corridor and propped them against the cellar wall, while the technician set to work. He opened bottles, arranged test tubes to hold any specimens he might find, donned rubber gloves, slipped rubber socks over his shoes, and stepped out on to the narrow cement band surrounding the newly opened floor. Crouching on hands and knees he began to check the area, centimetre by centimetre, with his magnifying glass.

‘Cigar?’ Collins pulled a packet from the top pocket of his shirt and offered them to Arnold and Dan.

‘Don’t mind if I do.’ Arnold took one, and held it in his mouth as Peter lit it. ‘Do you think you’ll strike lucky?’

‘We can hope,’ Dan leaned against the wall.

‘If I were you I’d take a closer look at the therapists,’ Arnold suggested.

‘Why?’ Peter asked.

‘I’d want to know why that big man – the one who’s lost an eye...’

‘Spencer Jordan?’ Peter asked.

‘I’d want to know why he’s taken to carrying women’s clothes around with him.’

‘Are you sure?’ Dan glanced into the sub-station to check the technician’s progress.

‘Saw him plain as I see you. Sitting in his room at lunchtime, playing with a woman’s pink scarf and a blouse. Crying like a baby, he was. Sobbing his heart out.’

Peter looked over at Dan, and Dan nodded. The same thought went through both their minds. They didn’t want any more clues. They were both beginning to feel as though they were caught on an endless treadmill leading nowhere.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

‘Trevor, can I have a word?’ Bill asked as the officers who’d attended the briefing filed out of his room in the mobile HQ.

‘I should get back to my ward.’

‘I told Andrew Murphy to look after things until you return.’ Bill waited until only he, Dan, Peter and Trevor were left in the room then kicked the door shut. ‘I won’t keep you long. We’ve a long night ahead. But I think we should pool our knowledge in the light of new evidence.’

‘Can we eat while we talk?’ Peter went to the door.

‘Make mine fish and chips,’ Dan said.

‘Twice,’ Bill added.

‘Trevor?’ Peter asked.

‘Nothing, thanks. I ate earlier.’

‘Hospital food,’ Peter scorned. He opened the door and shouted to the girl manning the reception desk. ‘Phone down to the gate, love, and order four cod and chips from up the road for us, please.’

‘Now can we start?’ Bill asked testily.

‘Anytime that suits you,’ Peter reached for the tower of plastic cups and poured out four coffees.

‘As I mentioned during the briefing, I’ve had all the interview reports in.’ Bill lifted a pile of blue-jacketed files from the shelf behind him, and dumped them on to the table. ‘What I didn’t say, Peter, was that Harry Goldman criticised your interviewing techniques.’

‘You win some, you lose some.’ Peter shrugged.

‘Tread carefully in future,’ Bill snarled. ‘I’m tired of apologising for you.’

‘So, we here to pool ideas, or what?’ Peter asked.

‘Yes,’ Bill looked around. Trevor looked exhausted, Peter was being belligerent again – ‘Dan, you start.’

‘As I said in the briefing, Angela Morgan’s convinced that Tony Waters is the killer, but forensics went over that sub-station with a toothcomb and found nothing that shouldn’t have been there. Not as much as a fibre or a stray hair.’

‘Only traces of mud,’ Peter said. ‘Probably carried in on people’s shoes. But they’re going to sift it, and test it to see if it’s surface or subsoil.’

‘If it is subsoil, it could have been carried there by the killer – or anyone who walked through the flowerbeds, so that would prove nothing.’ Bill said. ‘Dan, do you think there’s anything in Arnold Massey, the maintenance man’s story about Spencer Jordan crying over women’s pink clothing?’

‘When did he see this?’ Trevor asked.

‘He claims every lunch-hour for the past week,’ Dan revealed. ‘The storeroom where he eats his sandwiches overlooks Jordan’s room.’

Let’s look at Spencer as a potential suspect,’ Bill sat down. ‘He cracked up. He’s odd, he knits – ’

‘You’re accusing a man of multiple murders, because he knits?’ Trevor said incredulously.

Bill went to the flip-chart and flicked the sheets over until he came to a clean page. He wrote *Spencer Jordan* at the top. ‘He’s been here long enough to commit all the murders. He’s familiar with the place, both as a patient and a member of staff. He probably knows enough to administer drugs, he’s intelligent, and he had a breakdown after he saw his wife and three children carved up by a group of maniacs.’

‘He what?’ Trevor demanded.

‘Sorry. I must give you the files so you can get up to speed.’

‘I’m ahead of you.’ Peter reached for the files stored behind the table, and extracted the one containing the press cuttings he’d brought in. He handed it to Trevor.

‘What about keeping the victims hidden?’ Dan asked Bill.

‘He lives in a halfway house just outside the wall,’ Peter answered for Bill. ‘And he works in the old building, so he must have a reasonable knowledge of the layout.’

‘But where did he keep them?’ Bill demanded short-temperedly.

‘For my money, somewhere in the old hospital. The newer buildings and the wards have too many people around. He’d run a greater risk of discovery there. Besides, there are no nooks and crannies, only straight corridors, square rooms...’

‘Where the killer chose to hide Vanessa, in plain sight,’ Bill reminded.

‘Lyn Sullivan said – said – ’ Trevor lost the thread of what he was trying to convey as he stared at the photographs and headlines detailing the murder of Spencer Jordan’s family. Sickened, he slammed the file shut.

‘Said what?’ Dan prompted.

‘Said that if she wanted to hide someone in this place, she’d drug them, wrap a blanket around their shoulders and put them on one of the wards, preferably geriatric.’

‘The lady has got a point,’ Peter nodded. ‘Do they hold regular headcounts here?’

‘Not often, judging by the number of people they seem to lose,’ Bill commented.

‘We were talking about Spencer Jordan,’ Dan reminded. ‘We’re all agreed that he has the knowledge of this place, and the means –’

‘Where’s his motive?’ Trevor asked.

‘He’s nuts,’ Peter stated.

‘*Was* nuts, and in your opinion so was I,’ Trevor reminded acidly.

‘You’re one of us so we make allowances for your nuttiness.’ Peter saw a pulse throb at Trevor’s temple, an indication that Trevor was about to lose his temper. He backed down. ‘OK, so Jordan’s now sane and he didn’t have a motive, but you tell me, what motive could anyone have for kidnapping women, drugging them, and burying them alive?’

‘None that’s obvious that I can see,’ Dan said.

‘The psychiatrist suggested power.’ Bill finished his coffee and crumpled his cup.

Trevor set aside the file on Jordan. ‘Have you considered that those women might not have been chosen at random? They were all leaving or had just left the hospital. Has anyone found out why?’

‘Twyford and Moon were patients who’d just been discharged.’ Bill reined in his irritation when he recalled Trevor was a newcomer to the investigation.

‘Why weren’t they reported missing?’

Peter finished his coffee. ‘Claire Moon told her mother that she planned to travel with a friend. We found her passport, foreign money –’

‘So whoever he is, he isn’t a thief.’ Trevor pushed his cold coffee aside.

‘Rosie Twyford told her mother she was going on holiday. And Elizabeth Moore was leaving for a job in America.’

‘Why America?’ Bill asked.

‘Tony Waters said higher wages and better working conditions. She’d recently divorced.’

‘And there’s a rumour going around that she was having an affair,’ Peter interrupted.

‘Do we know who with?’ Bill asked.

‘According to Angela Morgan, Tony. But in her opinion he was having affairs with virtually every female in the hospital.’

‘Why didn’t you mention this at the briefing?’ Bill demanded.

‘Hearsay,’ Dan said baldly.

‘All sour grapes and no facts,’ Peter supported Dan. ‘Nothing you can get your teeth into; only a middle aged woman who’s probably griping because her boss has made a pass at everyone working here except her.’

‘And Vanessa Hedley?’ Bill asked.

‘She’s the wild card in the pack.’ Peter reached in his pocket for a cigar but found it empty. ‘She saw him doing away with the others, and got done because she could identify him.’

‘But she couldn’t,’ Trevor remonstrated. ‘That’s just the point.’

‘Murderer obviously thought so.’

‘Even if Tony Waters did have affairs with all three women,’ Trevor continued, ‘that wouldn’t explain why he’d want to kill them.’

‘You live like them, you grow like them. He works in a madhouse, doesn’t he?’ Peter saw pain flash across Trevor’s face and regretted his poor joke.

‘I’ve interviewed Tony Waters and his wife,’ Dan said slowly. ‘It’s easy to see who wears the trousers in that household, and Tony’s secretary agrees he’s the dominant partner.’

‘Suspect number two.’ Mulcahy turned the page, and wrote *Tony Waters* on the top of the next sheet. ‘Like Spencer, he’s been here long enough to have carried out all four murders. And he has knowledge of the hospital.’

‘He knows this place better than anyone.’ Peter paced to the window.

‘What about medical knowledge?’ Bill asked.

‘He was a medical student for two years before he switched to a business studies course.’

‘I didn’t know that.’ Peter answered a knock at the door. Chris Brooke was outside with four bundles wrapped in white paper. Peter put his hand in his pocket and handed him a twenty pound note. ‘Thanks, mate, I owe you one.’ He shut the door before the constable could hand him his change. He tossed the parcels across the table, and Trevor had a sense of being caught in a time warp. He’d been in a room with Peter, Bill and fish and chips before, and it had led to – he pulled himself up sharply, reminding himself that this time it was different. It was a new year and Dan was working with them.

‘Did Spencer Jordan know Vanessa Hedley?’ Bill asked Trevor.

‘She attended his art therapy classes.’

‘So, he could have overheard her bragging about seeing the murderer?’

‘Along with all the other staff and patients,’ Trevor lifted the corner of the paper wrapped around his fish and chips. Dan and Peter were already breaking off large lumps of battered cod.

‘What about the other victims?’ Bill ferried a clump of greasy chips to his mouth.

‘Claire Moon and Rosie Twyford also attended his classes.’ A piece of cod fell back on to the paper, leaving Peter snapping at thin air.

‘And Elizabeth Moore worked on Spencer’s ward when he was a patient,’ Dan continued.

‘So Spencer Jordan knew all of the victims.’ Having finished his chips, Mulcahy wrapped his cod in the greaseproof bag and bit into it. ‘Any other ideas?’

‘Adam Hayter,’ Peter offered.

‘Why?’ Bill demanded.

‘Because he’s an obvious pervert, because I don’t like him, because he’s been here for two years, and because he has the relevant knowledge.’

‘Not medical knowledge? He teaches needlework and cookery,’ Bill demurred.

‘All the therapists are competent first-aiders,’ Dan pushed the last piece of fish into his mouth, and crumpled his papers into a ball. ‘It was part of a cost-cutting package brought in by Tony Waters. They were all issued with tranquillisers to be used in emergencies, taught how to administer them, and in return all nursing cover was withdrawn from therapy groups.’

‘So Spencer Jordan and Adam Hayter have medical knowledge as well as knowledge of the hospital,’ Bill conceded.

‘Look at Adam Hayter’s profile,’ Collins threw his chip papers into the bin. ‘Obsessively neat, lives with a domineering woman, impotent – ’

‘I thought you didn’t like profiles,’ Bill reminded.

‘I don’t think it’s Hayter,’ Dan said.

‘Why?’ Peter pressed.

‘I can’t give you a reason. I just feel it in my bones.’

‘He’s got enough pluses to go on the list of suspects. Let’s keep going. Anyone else?’ Bill asked.

‘Harry Goldman fits all the criteria on the profile. Separated from his wife after six months of marriage. Divorced after two years. Lives alone. Collects trains – ’

‘Collects what?’ Trevor asked.

‘Trains,’ Peter rummaged through the file until he came up with one marked *Goldman*, he passed it to Trevor. ‘Toy trains.’

‘Is there anyone we shouldn’t be watching?’ Bill asked caustically.

‘No one’s mentioned the patients.’ Trevor pushed aside the chips and cod he’d barely touched.

‘Michael Carpenter is dead. Patrick’s checking Vanessa’s body for time of death. But he doesn’t fit the profile.’

‘What about Roland?’ Trevor suggested.

‘Lechers aren’t impotent. Psychiatrist threw him out,’ Bill replied.

‘For my money he’s a more likely candidate than Spencer Jordan.’

‘Trevor, just because you like the guy – ’ Peter began.

‘He’s no killer,’ Trevor said firmly.

‘On what basis?’

‘He’s too sensitive.’ Trevor handed back the file on Spencer Jordan.

‘Now you’re saying killers can’t be sensitive? What about all those concentration camp guards who used to weep when they heard Beethoven and Mozart?’

‘Sensitive to music isn’t sensitive to people. Psychopaths are often charming, cultured, but cold and dispassionate.’

‘Now you’ve decided our villain is a psychopath.’

‘Not necessarily.’ Trevor fell silent. He sensed the others looking at him and he knew he was on probation.

‘In conclusion we have good reason to watch half the men in this hospital, but not enough evidence to hand one of them a parking ticket,’ Bill concluded wearily.

*

*

*

Peter slowed his pace to match Trevor's as they crossed the lawn and headed for the ward blocks.

'You think it's Spencer Jordan, don't you?' Trevor asked.

'I don't know. What I do know is that my head hurts from thinking about it. You know what it's like on the Drug Squad. A junkie goes down, we pick up a cache, and we start looking. And we always know where to look, given that there are only four major dealers in this town. Your usual murder coughs up one or two obvious suspects, but this one – ' Peter stopped and stared into the shadows that surrounded the buildings ahead of them. 'This one has to have – how many staff did you say worked here?'

'I didn't.'

'One week on this case and I feel as though I've been thinking about nothing else for years. I'd give a week's leave for a night off. I'd have a couple of jars down the pub – '

'I still think there has to be a connection between the victims,' Trevor cut in.

'They're not all women. There's also the dog,' Peter reminded.

'I forgot about the dog.'

'How could you. The dog Angela Morgan wept over, when it disappeared.'

'I thought it was a stray.'

'It was.'

'Could it have attacked the killer as he was burying one of the victims?'

'We'll probably never know,' Peter walked on.

They paused outside the ward block. Trevor looked up into the clear, star-studded night sky.

‘You coming back to join us, then?’ Peter asked.

‘I am back,’ Trevor corrected.

‘So you are,’ Peter smiled. ‘How long before you’re back to normal?’

‘What’s normal?’

‘You snapping at me like now,’ Peter grinned. ‘I suppose if nothing more happens here in the next two weeks, you can pack and go back to your flat.’

Trevor recalled the empty, grubby, dismal rooms, the lonely workaholic life he’d led before he’d been injured. And he knew that he didn’t want his life to continue like that. Not any more. He had a mental image of Jean Marshall’s apartment, and he suddenly knew that he didn’t want that either. Then he remembered a woman with long dark hair and sad eyes –

‘Trevor!’ Peter shook his head. ‘You can’t even stay awake when someone’s talking to you.’

‘Sorry, just thinking about something.’

‘Save it until the morning, you need to be on the ball tonight.’

Tony Waters was in the ward office with Lyn and an auxiliary nurse. Trevor could see them through the glass window between the office and the corridor. Lyn’s dark head was bent close to Tony’s fair one, as they studied a sheaf of papers.

‘The hospital has come up with new security arrangements for the wards,’ Andrew Murphy waylaid Trevor and handed him a file.

‘Any good?’ Trevor asked.

‘How should a mere constable know?’

‘I suppose any measure has to be an improvement,’ Trevor said hopefully.

‘Especially on the ward that live women are spirited out of and dead ones spirited back in.’

‘Sergeant Joseph, I take it you’re back on duty?’ Tony walked out of the office.

‘No,’ Trevor opened the door to his room. ‘I’m just being used as an extra pair of eyes.’

‘I’ve arranged for one extra nurse to work on this ward. Day and night.’

‘That’s good,’ Trevor glanced at Lyn through the glass.

‘The Trust held a meeting this afternoon. They passed a resolution ordering that outside doors will be kept locked at night and all qualified nurses to hold keys, in case of emergency. Also a headcount of patients will be carried out every two hours.’

A woman’s high-pitched screaming pierced the air.

‘Lucy Craig again,’ Lyn left the office and ran down the corridor.

‘It’s a problem keeping the security low-key, so it doesn’t upset our patients,’ Tony watched Lyn enter Lucy’s room.

‘Better an upset patient than a dead one, like Vanessa Hedley.’ It was the sort of cheap remark Peter would have tossed off without a second thought, but the hostile glare Tony sent his way lingered afterwards in Trevor’s mind.

‘This is ridiculous,’ Jean Marshall poured herself a brandy after handing Michelle a cup of coffee.

‘What’s ridiculous?’ Overawed by the opulence of Jean’s apartment, Michelle was perched on the edge of her chair.

‘You being here.’ Jean had begun to realise just how much this female bodyguard was going to cramp her style. ‘There’s a porter on duty downstairs, electronically-activated doors and safety devices, so there’s no way anyone could get up here without my permission or the doorman knowing.’ She conveniently omitted to mention the fire escape. While Michelle Grady was dogging her movements, there was no way she’d find the privacy to telephone, let alone see her lover.

‘Just remember what happened to Vanessa Hedley and the others.’

‘They were taken from the hospital.’

‘Vanessa certainly, but we can’t be sure of the others.’

‘I suppose you can’t,’ Jean agreed. ‘Well, take your pick of the spare bedrooms. There’s clean towels and soap in all the bathrooms, help yourself to whatever you need. I’ll go to bed with this,’ she lifted the brandy bottle.

‘You have your personal alarm to hand?’ Michelle asked.

‘Never go anywhere without it.’ Jean lifted her arm and Michelle saw it dangling from her wrist.

‘The first all-night shift I worked, I thought it would stay dark forever,’ Lyn walked into the ward kitchen to see Trevor standing next to the kettle.

‘The first night I worked,’ Trevor smiled, ‘I learned that a new day always dawns, no matter what happens during the night.’ He held up a jar of instant coffee.

‘Please. It’s a way of killing another ten minutes. I’ve checked everyone, extra staff as well as patients, and all’s quiet. God, I hate nights. Roll on tomorrow.’

‘Back on days?’

‘Not for two whole weeks.’

‘Holiday?’

‘My parents have a house in Brittany.’

‘Lucky you.’

‘It’s not luxurious, just a cottage on the beach, but we had some super times there when I was a kid. Beachcombing, finding mussels, crabs and winkles for tea, learning to speak French – and how to drink wine.’ She took the coffee he handed her. ‘When I get back you’ll have left, won’t you?’

‘Probably. I don’t suppose I’ll be able to spin out my stay longer, although I may still be on this case. With all this activity, our people in the grounds and the corridors, extra staff drafted on to the wards, our killer is likely to lie low for a time.’

‘But you think he’ll strike again?’

‘If he conforms to serial killer pattern, but we’ll get him in the end,’ Trevor said, with more confidence than he felt. But all he could think of as he looked into her eyes was; before or after another murder?

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

‘You were right, Sergeant Joseph. The dawn did come after all.’ Lyn set a cup of coffee on the desk in front of Trevor.

He opened his eyes, blinked and tried to focus, but remained disorientated.

‘Don’t worry, I won’t tell anyone you slept,’ she whispered as he rubbed his hands through his hair.

‘Oh God, I’m – ’

‘In the ward office and everyone is safe. I’ve just counted them; staff and patients.’ She put her own coffee next to his, sat in the chair behind the desk and snapped open the blind. The cold clear light of a new day was stealing through the ragged border of trees that fringed the lawns.

‘Did anyone come round to check after half-past four?’ his voice was thick with sleep. Half-past four was the last thing he remembered, and it was now – he glanced at his watch – seven o’clock.

‘Only Constable Murphy and I told him you were interviewing the night staff.’

‘Bless you,’ he said gratefully. ‘Just as well it wasn’t Bill; if he’d seen me he would have put me back on the sick.’

‘Where you should be, considering the state of your head and legs. And who’s Bill?’ she asked.

‘The super who thought I was fit enough to sit up all night.’ Trevor wrapped his fingers around his coffee cup. ‘I don’t think I’m going to be much use to the force for a while.’ He smiled. ‘I’m too accustomed to getting my eight hours every night.’

‘And two hours in the afternoon?’ she teased.

‘And two hours in the afternoon,’ he echoed. ‘Thanks for the coffee.’ He rose from his chair, walked to the window and stretched his arms.

‘I don’t envy you trying to sleep today.’ She picked up both their cups. ‘Not with all the extra activity on the ward.’

‘If it’s noisy I’ll go – ’ he faltered. He’d almost said “home”. His flat wasn’t home. ‘To my place,’ he amended. ‘I’ll get the car out of the garage. It might come in useful now I’m working again.’

‘If you bring it up here, leave it in the staff not the visitors’ car park,’ she warned. ‘Neither is safe, but you’re more likely to find your car jacked up on bricks in the visitors’ car park.’

‘Thanks for the tip, but no car thief would want to take mine, and even the joy riders would give it a wide berth.’

‘You haven’t seen some of the cars that have disappeared from here.’

‘No, I haven’t.’ He smiled at her. ‘Right, I’m for a shower and then, if you’ve finished your shift I’ll walk you to your hostel.’

‘Is that really necessary, with half the town’s police force lining the garden?’

‘Call it a thank you for not snitching on me last night.’

‘What’s snitching?’

‘A word that was probably in vogue before you were born.’

‘You sound like my grandfather.’

‘At the moment,’ he picked up his stick and hobbled to the door, ‘I feel like him.’

*

*

*

‘Nothing, bloody nothing,’ Peter swung his feet down from the bench seat and reached for the coffee pot.

‘Did you really expect something to happen last night?’ Dan dropped two plastic cups in front of him.

‘I believed in Santa Claus until I was ten.’ Peter raised his eyebrows as a scuffling sound resounded outside the door of the inner office, but neither of them felt energetic enough to move out of their seats to investigate.

Trevor walked in.

‘You look like I feel.’ Peter moved along the bench so Trevor could sit down. Trevor parked his stick in the corner of the room and dropped down next to him.

‘Nothing?’ Trevor looked from Peter to Dan.

‘Sweet nothing,’ Dan repeated. ‘And, as the day-shift is about to take over, I’m for home and bath.’

‘Be careful,’ Trevor warned. ‘You look tired enough to fall asleep and drown.’

‘There might be baths big enough, but I don’t possess one. I can either soak my legs or my back. It’s not big enough for both.’

‘Have you ever thought it’s not the bath that’s the wrong size?’ Peter pushed a cup towards Trevor. ‘Coffee?’

‘No ,thanks. I came to see if I could beg a lift back to my place. I’ve decided to bring my car back here.’

‘Tell a man he can crawl, and he tries to run a marathon. Sure you’re up to driving with that leg of yours?’ Peter asked.

‘I can but try. How about it?’

‘You’re on,’ Peter agreed. ‘But only if you buy me breakfast in that transport cafe on the docks.’

‘All you ever think about is your stomach,’ Trevor complained. He reached for his stick and followed Peter out of HQ.

With Peter’s help, Trevor managed to push his car from the lock-up Peter had rented. He left the battery on charge in the back room of Frank’s shop and went upstairs and lay on his bed, intending to catnap for an hour or two. Nothing was going to happen in daylight, not with every inch of the hospital grounds under surveillance by the largest force Bill had assembled to work on a single case.

He took off his jacket and stretched out, but was too restless to sleep. A line of suspects kept intruding into his mind’s eye. Spencer Jordan – Tony Waters – Harry Goldman – Adam Hayter – he visualised them, and tried to match them to Vanessa’s description of a big man with evil eyes. But no matter how he tried, he couldn’t make any of them fit the profile of a serial killer who buried his victims alive.

He pictured the girls lying conscious and helpless in a pit while someone slowly, infinitely slowly, shovelled earth over them, covering every visible inch; heard the dry patter of dried earth and the dull thuds of damp, sticky clods as they fell. Saw a small rectangle of night sky as they must have seen it. The face of the moon shining behind the silhouette of their killer.

Did he take time to study his victims’ features as he covered them? Had they known who he was before they died?

Trevor closed his eyes, but the images refused to disappear. He saw Jean Marshall, her auburn hair spread out like a halo behind her head just as it had been on the cushion of the sofa the night he’d made love to her. Her

eyes round, terrified, the irises crimson with bursting blood vessels as earth fell...

He woke in a sweat, and realised he'd slept. He went into the bathroom and splashed cold water over his head. The battery should be charged by now. He'd get Frank to help him lift it back into his car, and then talk to him. He looked around his flat before he locked the door. It was a talk that was long overdue.

'I was wondering where you'd got to,' Jean greeted Trevor when he returned to the ward at midday. 'You couldn't cope with the food outside so you've come back for a delicious hospital lunch?'

'I bought sandwiches.' Trevor tossed a plastic carrier bag on to his bed.

'Everything's quiet, and I'm well protected. Constable Grady is in the kitchen making coffee.'

Trevor walked over to the door and closed it behind her.

'Why, Sergeant Joseph.' She batted her eyelashes theatrically.

'Do you have any idea of the risk you're running?' he asked, on edge after his nightmare.

'Someone had to do something. Besides, what can happen to me? I've a round-the-clock female dogging my every step, which is more of a bind than I thought it would be. And a man outside the door of every building I'm in, whether it's here, the canteen, or my flat. A mouse couldn't creep near me without being flattened, but thank you for your concern,' she said sincerely. 'It's nice to know that someone cares about me.'

'I'm worried about the whole hospital.'

'You really are concerned, aren't you?'

‘There’s a killer on the loose, and you ask if I’m concerned?’

With the memory of their evening’s lovemaking lying between them, he couldn’t meet the searching look in her eyes. He picked up the carrier bag, and took out the sandwiches he’d scrounged off Frank. He heard laughter and he looked outside. A group of policemen were standing in front of his window smoking, and drinking coffee from disposable cups.

He didn’t have to say any more. Jean was sensitive enough to read embarrassment in his sudden preoccupation with his sandwiches.

‘About the other night,’ she said briskly. ‘It was a one-off – you do know that, don’t you?’

‘I’d still like to thank you for it. You showed me that there was life outside these four walls.’

‘Call it part of the recovery process.’ She managed to keep the bitterness from her voice.

‘You leaving us, Lyn?’ Dressed in his bathrobe, and clutching his toilet bag, Alan peered through the open door of her room on his way from the bathroom.

‘Holiday. I booked these two weeks last Christmas. My brother and I are going to join our parents in the cottage in Brittany.’

‘Lucky you. Want a hand to carry your case downstairs?’

‘It’s not as heavy as it looks, but thanks anyway.’ She lifted her case into the corridor, picked up her handbag, and locked the door behind her. ‘It’s mainly washing; I still keep most of my things at home.’

‘It must be nice to have a real home in the same town you work in.’

‘As opposed to travelling all of fifty miles away,’ she joked.

‘Unlike yours, my mother doesn’t do my washing. Have a good time, and don’t go drinking too much wine.’

She gave him a sideways look.

‘Stupid thing to say. Do drink too much wine.’

‘There won’t be anything else to do. I’ll send you a postcard if I can find one rude enough.’

‘Rotten sod,’ he grinned as he went into his own room.

Lyn heard Mary’s high-pitched giggle from behind Alan’s closed door, and she smiled. It was good to know that someone was still in love and happy in Compton Castle.

After Jean left Trevor, he rummaged in the bottom of his wardrobe for the cans of beer Peter had given him. He found half a dozen, all lukewarm. He opened one and picked up a book from his locker to read as he ate his sandwiches. The hands on the bedside clock pointed to two-thirty. The usual hum of hospital noises, interspersed with voices he recalled from the force buzzed around him. Strange how little he’d thought of work all the time he’d been ill, yet how easily he’d slipped back into the routine of take-aways, long shifts, and caustic exchanges with his colleagues.

He woke at five, the sandwiches still in their packet on his lap, the book unopened. Then he heard it again, the crashing thud that had woken him. He was out of the chair in seconds. He wrenched open the door and looked into the corridor. White-faced, Michelle was outside the ward office, watching Jean grapple with dark-suited figure behind the glass window.

‘He’s locked the door.’

‘Phone for help!’ He picked up a lightweight stacking chair from the corridor and threw it at the glass window. It bounced back, the legs falling away from the moulded plastic seat. While Michelle spoke urgently into her phone, he picked up the chair legs. Hitting the window hard on its corner, he succeeded in cracking the glass, but not shattering it.

Andrew Murphy dashed through the door, followed by Chris Brooke. They sized up the situation and put the full weight of their shoulders to the office door. There was a snapping, splintering sound and the lock gave way.

Jean was pinned against the wall, her face red, her eyes bulging. Roland was in front of her, one hand around her throat, the other wielding a syringe perilously close to her eyes. Andrew nodded to Chris. They took Roland’s arms and dragged him out of the office. When he was in the corridor, Andrew kned him in the back, and pinned him to the floor.

‘Cuffs!’ he held out his hand. Chris gave him his.

The door at the end of the corridor flew open. Dan, Peter and Tony Waters burst in.

‘Who is it?’ Peter shouted, as Trevor fought his way past Roland, Chris and Andrew and went into the office.

Jean gasped as Trevor helped her on to a chair. ‘Roland, I was working in here when he came in, slammed the door and pulled out a syringe.’

‘Where did he get that from?’ Tony demanded from the corridor.

‘You tell me.’ Jean leaned against the back of the chair.

‘They’ve taken Roland to the secure ward,’ Peter announced as he walked into Trevor’s room ten minutes

later. Trevor and Dan were sitting drinking warm beer straight from the can. 'That's my beer.'

'You gave it to me.' Trevor tossed him a can.

'For you to drink, not hoard.'

'We're drinking it now.'

'Is Roland our killer?' Dan voiced the question uppermost in all of their minds.

'I checked his record with Bill,' Peter opened his can. 'He's an alcoholic; he's been here six months –'

'Long enough to have carried out all four murders.'

'And he's a private patient. His family, his doting aged parents that is, have money enough to pay his bills here. If they didn't, he would have been out of this place long ago.'

'That explains why the staff are prepared to put up with his drinking and letching.' Trevor sat on the edge of his seat. 'But I didn't realise there were private patients here.'

'Your room is paid for by medical insurance,' Peter said pointedly.

'Is it?' Trevor asked in surprise.

'Tell that man what time of day it is, Dan.' Peter wiped the beer froth from his mouth, and sat on the bed next to Dan.

'So he had the time, the knowledge –' Dan began to mull it over.

'What was in the syringe?' Trevor asked.

'Initial diagnosis is probably water, but they're checking that now, along with all the medical stores, for signs of theft or tampering. I managed to talk to Roland briefly before Tony Waters took over. Damned man sent for a lawyer, and won't let us question Roland until he comes.'

'Accused's legal right,' Dan reminded.

‘Tony Waters is covering his backside against the flak that’s beginning to fly.’ Peter finished his can and held out his hand for another.

The room in the secure unit was unpleasantly warm. There were thick iron bars on the windows, and as if they weren’t enough, they were fronted by wire mesh screens that blocked out most of the light. Roland was sitting across a narrow table from Dan, flanked by the solicitor. Both table and chairs were chained to the floor. Karl Lane, Carol Ashford and Dotty Clyne sat in a row at the far end of the room. Peter hovered in the corner.

‘Come on, Roland,’ Dan pleaded. ‘Tell us where you found the syringe.’

Roland lifted his bloated face from his arms, and stared at Dan.

‘Why did you attack Sister Marshall?’ Dan tried another tack.

‘We have yet to establish that an attack took place, Inspector Evans,’ the solicitor reprimanded.

‘There are four witnesses,’ Peter interrupted. ‘All police officers.’

‘But can they identify Mr Williams?’

‘Yes,’ Peter replied flatly.

‘Why did you attack Sister Marshall?’ Dan reiterated.

Roland remained obdurately silent.

‘All right, Roland, let’s move on. You were holding a syringe. Where did you get it?’

‘Rubbish.’

The single word was enough to galvanise Dan’s attention. ‘What rubbish, where?’

‘In the sacks.’

‘Where are the sacks kept, Roland?’ Dan persisted.

‘In the corridor.’

‘Which corridor?’ Dan was beginning to feel as though he was caught up in that irritating children’s nursery verse, “In a dark dark wood, there’s a dark dark place, and in the dark dark place there’s a dark dark house...”

‘The corridor where the rubbish sacks are kept,’ Roland closed his eyes.

‘They’re kept in a room in the cellar of the old hospital,’ Peter chipped in.

‘Did you go into the old hospital, Roland?’ Dan pressed.

Roland sank his head on his arms again, and closed his eyes.

‘You’re not going to get anything else out of him Inspector.’ Carol Ashford rose from her chair in the corner. ‘He was so agitated we had to tranquillise him.’

‘You could try again later, Inspector.’ Karl suggested, above Roland’s snores.

‘How much did you give him?’ Peter asked.

‘The standard dose,’ Carol replied. ‘It had to be done.’

‘He was violent,’ Karl brought in a wheelchair and parked it next to Roland.

‘We’ll let you know when he wakes, Inspector,’ Carol helped Karl lift Roland into the chair and walked beside it as Karl pushed it out of the room.

‘Roland’s profile and records don’t match those of a potential murderer,’ Harry Goldman assured Peter and Dan. ‘But I’ve asked Dotty Clyne to call in as soon as she’s free. Roland’s one of her patients.’

‘What is the profile of a murderer?’ Bill enquired.

‘There’d be evidence of psychopathic or sociopath tendencies,’ Goldman answered. ‘You asked for my

opinion, Superintendent Mulcahy, and I'm giving it to you. I don't believe that Roland is your man.'

'But you can't say for sure?' Bill left his chair. 'No matter, we have enough to book him.'

'Only if Sister Marshall presses charges,' Tony Waters interposed.

'It was aggravated assault, grievous bodily harm, and he tried to attack two police officers.' Bill stared Tony in the eye.

'If you move Roland, there's a risk of him regressing and losing the headway he's made under Dotty's supervision during the past six months.'

'Given the nature of Roland's crime, and this case, that's a risk I'm prepared to take. We'll charge him as soon as he wakes then transfer him to the station.'

'I protest. You'll destroy my staff's hard work...'

'Hard work?' Bill sneered. 'Have you any idea how much your recovering alcoholic drinks?'

'Have you any evidence?'

'Every time I've spoken to the man he's been stinking of booze.' Bill went to the door. 'We give him two hours to sleep it off. After that, Sergeant Collins will charge him. Then we'll hold him in our cells. They appear to be more secure than yours.'

'Anything on Spencer Jordan?' Bill stormed into the back room of the mobile HQ.

'Nothing,' Dan sensed Bill's mood and trod warily.

'The pink silk thing?'

'Sarah... Constable Merchant saw it. She joined his therapy class today. She's moving into the ward tonight.'

'What exactly did she see?'

'A woman's headscarf.'

‘Judging by his taste in knitwear, his own,’ Peter broke in.

‘Anything else to report on Jordan?’

‘He left the lights burning in the bedroom and living room of his flat for most of the night.’

‘Guilty conscience?’ Bill raised the idea.

‘Could be indigestion.’ Peter reached for the coffee pot and a box of biscuits. ‘When he woke up he cooked himself breakfast, then left for his therapy room, and that’s where he’s been all day.’

‘Playing with the silk scarf,’ Bill snapped.

‘And working with his art groups.’

‘Does he ever leave the hospital?’

‘Not that we’ve seen.’

‘Keep him under surveillance, and put someone on Harry Goldman,’ Bill barked.

‘And Adam Hayter?’ Peter suggested.

‘If we’ve a spare man.’

‘Then you don’t think it is Roland?’ Dan asked.

‘I don’t bloody well know,’ Bill cursed. ‘A full week into this case and no one has come up with any hard evidence implicating a particular suspect. What am I leading here?’ he demanded. ‘A police investigation or a game of bloody Cluedo?’

‘We’d stand a better chance with a game of Cluedo,’ Peter stepped out of the door. ‘Fewer suspects.’

‘What’s the problem?’ At the beginning of the second leg of a split shift, Andrew Murphy was tired, irritable, and ready to bite the head off the security guard on gate duty, who was arguing with a young, slim, dark-haired man.

‘He wants to see someone in the nurses’ hostel,’ the guard explained. ‘I’ve had orders to ring through the name

of every visitor, and the girl he's asked for left this morning to go on holiday.'

'Give him the date she gets back,' Andrew said impatiently.

'That's just it, Officer.' The young man pushed his way into the booth. 'It's my sister and we were supposed to travel together to my parents' house in Brittany. We arranged to meet at home, but she didn't turn up.'

'You probably missed her on the road,' Andrew looked at the queue of traffic building up on the road outside the gates. 'It is the rush hour.'

'You don't understand.' The young man's voice pitched high in temper and something else. Something Andrew recognised as fear. 'It's nearly six o'clock, and she was supposed to meet me at ten this morning.'

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

A sick, empty feeling rose from the pit of Trevor's stomach as he stepped into the mobile HQ. 'What did you say?'

'We think Lyn Sullivan is missing,' Dan repeated slowly.

'Are you sure? She was going on holiday to Brittany...' His voice faded as he recalled the stench in the ward where they had found Vanessa.

'Peter's with her brother in the hostel. They've emptied the place by ringing the fire alarm, and they're checking with everyone to pinpoint the last sighting of her.'

'How long has she been missing?'

'We'll know more when Peter's finished.'

Trevor sank down on a chair. All the time he'd been having nightmares about Jean, the killer had been stalking Lyn. He imagined her fresh young face, pale in terror, her eyes staring upwards, as she lay at the bottom of a pit. Earth shovelled spade-full by spade-full, covering her arms, her legs – and finally her face...

'This bastard is always one step ahead of us,' Andrew Murphy stepped inside the van and handed one of the girls a sheet of paper.

'Found her car?' Dan Evans asked.

'It's still in the car park. Lab boys are springing the locks on it now.'

'Ever get the impression that someone is goading you, laughing in your face?' Dan asked no one in particular.

'We sew this place up tighter than a monkey's bum and he still gets himself another girl.' Andrew helped

himself to a cigarette from a packet lying on top of the computer. For once, none of the girls manning the desk objected.

‘You all right?’ Dan turned to Trevor.

‘I will be in a moment.’ Trevor lifted his head out of his hands.

‘We will find her.’

‘Like we found Vanessa?’ Trevor asked. No one dared answer him.

‘I want the hospital sealed off now – this minute,’ Bill’s voice reverberated through the thin walls of the van. ‘From this moment on, not so much as a moth flies in or out of the gate without being searched and giving us its name and address.’

‘We sealed off the place when Vanessa Hedley was taken,’ Trevor said when Bill stepped inside the van.

‘And we’ll do it again,’ Bill reiterated. ‘We’ll go over every inch of the buildings and the grounds. Once a room or an area is evacuated, it’s toothcombed, sealed, and a man is put on surveillance until we’ve finished the whole complex.’

‘And the personnel?’ Dan asked.

‘Those working the wards can go back to them, but the administrative staff will be searched and eliminated from our enquiries before they will be allowed out. If they’re driving cars, we’ll strip them back to the chassis.’

‘You want me to tell Tony Waters that we’re closing down the admin offices?’

‘Until further notice,’ Bill concurred.

‘And the grounds?’ Dan checked.

‘Same principle; searched, tagged, wrapped in tape, and men covering the area at intervals. Every bloody inch!’ Bill had reached the end of his patience. ‘Dog

handlers are already in the girl's room, being primed with her bed linen.'

'I know we've been here before.' Peter climbed the last few steps to the top of the old building. He stopped on the small landing and looked down at the twenty men following him. 'But we start again, room by room; ransack every cupboard, every nook, every cranny, every box and every file. Tap every wall, every stair, every ceiling, seal off everything as you go. Take it slowly, floor by floor. Five of you start that end,' he pointed to his left, 'and five this end,' he indicated right. He looked at Trevor. 'We'll do this quicker if you take ten men and start in the cellar. We'll meet in the middle.'

'It will save time,' Trevor agreed.

'When we meet we'll compare notes and double-check to make sure we've covered everything.'

Trevor leaned heavily on the banister, and looked at Chris Brooke. They walked silently down the stairs until they reached the cellar. They began by checking the incinerators, the dog-handler working ahead of them. They checked every sack of rubbish, every crack in the solid cement floor, every inlet and outlet of heating pipes, and the ceiling. And even after the whole area had been thoroughly sniffed over a second time by the dogs, and Trevor had seen everything through his own eyes, he still wondered if they could have missed something.

It was a tedious job that progressed even more slowly when Tony Waters appeared and insisted on dogging their footsteps. He had grudgingly given Trevor a full set of keys, and Trevor, who'd heard about the sub-station from Peter, supervised the lifting of every iron plate from the floor again.

'Nothing, sir,' Chris Brooke said flatly.

‘Nothing, sir,’ the dog-handler repeated.

They checked, searched and double-checked. Knocked every wall, shone torches over every inch of the floor, every inch of wall, every inch of cellar.

‘If there’s a bloody mouse that we haven’t tagged down here, I’d like to know about it,’ Andrew Murphy complained bitterly at the end of two hours of futile effort.

‘Stairs and corridor to next floor,’ Trevor ordered abruptly.

‘Half floor,’ Tony Waters corrected.

Trevor considered Tony too cool and collected for an administrator who had just lost another nurse, possibly to the same killer who had already murdered a nurse and three patients. He looked back into the empty cellar as he posted a seal on the door. ‘You,’ he called out to the last man. ‘Stand here. And you,’ he shouted to another officer. ‘Guard the far entrance in front of the locked door. Use your radios. Every ten minutes to main control, and every five to each other.’

Trevor couldn’t resist the temptation to look back as he walked away. Were there secret passages beneath the floor, dating back to the days when a Norman Castle had occupied the site? Was Lyn hidden down there, half dead, if not dead already? Was she conscious and suffering? Hoping for a rescue that might never come?

‘My wife will accompany you when you search this floor.’

It was the first time Trevor had heard Tony refer to Carol as his wife. Tony folded the note Carol had brought him into his pocket.

‘I’m sorry to have to leave you, Sergeant Joseph, but I have to attend an emergency meeting.’

‘I’m sure Sister Ashford will look after us,’ Trevor said. As Tony walked away and Carol drew closer the dogs went wild, pulling at their leashes.

‘I’m sorry,’ the handler apologised.

‘It’s all right.’ Carol patted the dog. ‘I keep two Dobermans.’

‘You also use the same perfume as Nurse Sullivan and half the other females in this hospital.’ The handler addressed Trevor. ‘Dogs have gone berserk over seven nurses already, sir.’

‘I’m afraid Laura has a lot of customers.’ Carol explained.

‘The staff here shop together?’ Trevor asked.

‘No time for shopping, so we grab what we can. Laura Stafford, the staff nurse in Alcohol and Drug Abuse, is married to a pharmacist. We give her our orders, she gives us discount, and this perfume was last month’s special.’

‘All of which makes our job bloody impossible – begging your pardon, sister,’ the handler apologised.

Carol smiled absently at him. ‘You know this floor is scarcely used now, Sergeant Joseph?’

Trevor referred to the notes Peter had thrust into his hand as they’d separated. ‘According to this, except for the rooms opposite the old padded cells. The hospital stores rubbish in them that’s destined for the incinerator.’

They climbed up the stairs, one dog and its handler preceding them, another bringing up the rear. The men regularly tapped the walls, but there was no point in testing the concrete steps. The stairwell beneath them was an empty void.

‘Note that we haven’t looked at the outside steps,’ Trevor said sharply, studying a plan of the building to make sure there were no oversights. He walked down a

grey corridor, floored and walled in concrete. A row of bare light bulbs hung overhead casting pools of weak light, but the officers still swept their powerful torch-beams over dusty corners. While Trevor tagged off the areas they had searched and locked partition doors, they moved on to the room where the rubbish was stored. The handlers allowed the dogs to sniff each bag before they were slit open. Foul-smelling waste tumbled out, carpeting the concrete. The officers spread it thinly, poking, prodding, and turning it over with long canes the team that had preceded them had left. They searched through used syringes, stained balls of cotton wool, and clumps of damp, dirty paper towels.

‘Does this job come with a free Aids test?’ Andrew Murphy asked.

‘Move on to the end of the corridor.’ Trevor ignored him, as he watched the last of the rubbish being scraped off the floor into fresh bags by Murphy and Brooke who were both wearing thick rubber gloves.

‘Do you want to search the mortuaries?’ Carol asked as they approached the male mortuary.

‘Yes.’ Trevor pulled the ring of keys out of his jeans pocket. ‘Do you keep them locked?’

‘Always, when there are bodies in them. That’s why we can’t understand how the body of Mrs Hope appeared out in the grounds.’

‘Mrs Hope was the corpse I landed on?’ Trevor opened the door.

‘She was,’ Carol acknowledged. ‘We’ve had two more deaths on geriatric earlier today. One senile dementia, ninety-two, and one heart attack, eighty-four.’

Trevor opened the door and allowed the dogs in first, but they still persisted in showing more interest in Carol’s perfume.

‘There’s no need to stay. We’ll check out the body drawers,’ Trevor said to the handlers.

Trevor walked in with Andrew Murphy and looked around the large square room. Two sinks had been fixed to the back wall, large, stone and open, without cupboards beneath them. Three plain wooden tables covered by sheets of zinc stood in the centre and a large bank of a dozen body drawers, four wide and three high, ran the full width. Andrew jerked out the top left-hand drawer, and he jumped back, as a pair of greyish white feet twitched towards him, the gnarled and yellow toenails pointing upwards.

‘The 92-year-old senile dementia,’ Carol joined him and heaved the drawer out further. She folded back the sheet that was wrapped around the slight, emaciated body, and uncovered the face of an elderly man Trevor had last seen sitting and trembling on one of the benches in the garden.

‘Will you transfer him to the General?’ Trevor asked.

‘No. We only transfer the ones who need a post mortem, Sergeant Joseph.’

‘We’ve seen all we need to, Sister.’ Andrew looked away from the corpse.

Carol covered the body again and closed the drawer. Trevor pulled out one empty drawer after another.

‘Careful!’ Carol shouted, as the whole bank leaned forward. Chris Brooke ran towards them and threw his weight alongside Andrew’s, while Trevor and Carol closed one rusty drawer after another. By the time they’d succeeded in setting the unit on an even keel again, they were all exhausted.

‘At least we know there’s nothing behind those drawers,’ Andrew took out his handkerchief and covered his nose.

‘Check the floor under the sink,’ Trevor ordered Chris Brooke, as he walked to the window and examined the mesh covering it.

‘Nothing, sir.’

Trevor was beginning to hate that word more than any other in the English language;

‘Nothing,’ Andrew echoed, as he managed to force the last drawer home.

‘Tag it and we’ll move on to the female mortuary.’ Trevor waited until everyone had moved on before sealing the door. He followed and watched while Chris Brooke and Andrew Murphy fought with another set of rusted body drawers. But this time they were careful not to open more than two at a time.

Clenching and unclenching his fists, Trevor stared at the joins between walls and ceiling. There had to be a body sized gap somewhere! People simply didn’t vanish into thin air.

Dogs and men sniffed round the huge tubs, sinks and old dry linen cupboards of the laundry.

‘Nothing,’ Chris Brooke repeated dully.

The word echoed from the floor above where Peter’s team was already working. He imagined Lyn’s face, so beautiful in life, frozen in death.

‘Shall we move on to the kitchen, sir?’ Chris had to repeat himself before Trevor heard.

The staff moved into the dining area while Trevor’s team opened stoves and refrigerators, emptied freezers, pantries, even the microwaves and food processors.

‘Nothing – nothing – nothing – ’ Trevor felt as though he would go mad if he heard that word one more time.

Peter appeared at his side.

‘Where to now?’ Trevor asked him.

‘Interview Roland. I’ve just had word he’s awake and Bill wants us to give him the third degree.’

Peter dumped a stack of files on the table before he sat down and faced Roland. Trevor closed the door and took the only vacant chair, next to Dotty Clyne.

‘Did you see Nurse Sullivan this morning, Roland?’ Peter launched straight into the important questions.

Roland shook his head so vigorously his fat cheeks and chin wobbled.

‘Did you see Nurse Lyn Sullivan at any time this morning?’ Peter repeated.

‘No.’ Roland’s voice was so low Trevor had to strain his ears to catch what he was saying.

‘Where were you this morning?’

‘Therapy.’

‘Which therapy?’ Trevor asked.

‘Art,’ Roland was so terrified he was almost gibbering.

Trevor left his chair, opened the door and beckoned to Michelle Grady who was standing in the corridor. He pointed to his chair, and indicated she should take his place.

‘Why did you attack Sister Marshall?’

Trevor heard Peter’s question, but not Roland’s answer, as he made his way down the corridor to the therapy rooms. It was only when he reached the other end that he remembered the old block had been evacuated for the search. He nodded to the officer stationed at the door and went into the garden.

Bill was standing in the drive, directing the outdoor search operation and talking to Tony. Trevor approached them.

‘Do either of you know where I can find Spencer Jordan?’ he asked.

‘We moved his class into the day room of the drug and alcohol abuse ward,’ Tony replied.

Trevor moved on and saw Spencer through the ward window. He was leaning over Lucy Craig’s chair, studying her sketchbook.

‘Come to join our class, Sergeant?’ Spencer asked when he saw him in the doorway. It was the first time Spencer had addressed him by his title, and Trevor detected a condemnatory note.

‘Not at the moment,’ Trevor said quietly. ‘But could I have a private word with you?’

Spencer joined him in the corridor and closed the door on his class.

‘I’m sorry to interrupt...’

‘I bet you are,’ Spencer said bitterly.

‘We’re all having a hard time...’ Trevor was taken aback by his vehemence.

‘Some harder than most. Have you any idea what it’s like being interrogated by that man?’ Spencer demanded.

‘Who?’ Trevor asked.

‘Your bloody superintendent.’

‘Bill? Oh yes.’ Trevor lifted his eyes to meet Spencer’s. ‘I know. And I also know what happened to your family. I’m sorry.’

‘You’re sorry?’ Spencer repeated caustically.

‘If we rode roughshod over you, I apologise, but we’re trying to save Lyn Sullivan’s life. And we don’t believe we have much time. You, more than anyone here, know what it’s like to lose someone to senseless violence. Her brother is frantic. Her parents are travelling back from France...’

‘I’ll help in any way I can,’ Spencer replied. ‘Just tell me how.’

‘Was Roland in your therapy class this morning?’

‘Yes. Surely to God you don’t think it’s Roland now?’ he demanded wearily.

‘We don’t know. He attacked Jean Marshall.’

‘I heard about that. But attacking Jean Marshall isn’t the same thing as kidnapping and burying women alive.’

‘We’re fumbling in the dark, and hoping our fumbling doesn’t cost Lyn her life,’ Trevor replied honestly.

Spencer thought for a moment. ‘Roland came in this morning at half past nine, along with everyone else. I remembered him tripping over Alison Bevan’s easel.’

‘And afterwards?’

‘He stayed with me all morning, even through break. They all did. Lucy Craig and Alison were upset. They wanted to sit and talk.’

‘Did Roland join in the conversation?’

‘Oh, yes. I don’t have to tell you what he’s like.’

‘When did he leave?’

‘He went with the others at lunchtime.’

‘It was just after lunch he attacked Jean,’ Trevor reflected. ‘Did he leave the therapy room at any time?’

‘He might have gone to the toilet. I don’t clock people in and out, you know that.’

‘But he could have left the room?’

‘If he did, and I’m not saying he did, I doubt that it was for longer than five or ten minutes. He and Alison were making papier-mâché models at the sink in front of the window, and I seem to remember non-stop conversation in that area. You could check with Alison Bevan and Lucy Craig.’

‘I will. And thanks.’

*

*

*

Trevor spoke to Lucy and Alison then went to HQ to find out which constable had been posted closest to the therapy room. The officer corroborated Spencer's story. No one had walked in or out of the door he'd manned all morning.

The last sighting of Lyn had been by Alan in the hostel at ten. And, as she was already carrying her suitcase out of her room, the chances were she'd been waylaid shortly afterwards. Otherwise her car wouldn't have been left in the car park – someone had called her back into the hospital.

Trevor returned to the secure unit to find Roland slumped in a torpor, and Peter fending off a verbal attack from Dotty Clyne.

'You cannot intimidate patients in this fashion, Sergeant. You have no idea of the long-term damage you could cause... '

'I do have a fair idea of the damage he has already caused,' Peter retorted.

'Sergeant, as a patient in this institution, Mr Williams is entitled to certain rights... '

Peter turned and saw Trevor standing in front of the door.

'Roland?' Trevor spoke softly, pitching his voice below Dotty's in an effort to gain Roland's attention. 'Where were you all morning?'

'Therapy,' Roland answered.

'And afterwards?'

'Went to eat lunch.'

'And after that?'

'In the office with... '

Trevor turned to Peter and shook his head.

'Confirmed?' Peter asked.

‘By staff, patients and police.’

‘You see, Sergeant Collins,’ Dotty crowed triumphantly.

‘There’s still the matter of the assault charge.’ Peter gathered his papers together.

‘Sister Marshall won’t press charges,’ she announced.

‘Do I take that to mean that she won’t have a job here if she does?’ Peter enquired before he and Trevor left the room.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Bill was too calm, Trevor thought as he stepped into the crowded back room of HQ. Experience had taught him that whenever Bill was this composed, it was the still before gale-force ten struck.

‘We start interviewing,’ Bill began, before the last of the team entering the HQ had time to find a seat. ‘There’ll be four teams. Sarah Merchant is looking at the staff who are still on the premises. Dan, you take one team; Peter, another; Trevor a third. I’ll lead the fourth myself. The priority is to establish everyone’s movements and whereabouts between the hours of nine-thirty and twelve this morning.’

‘And if it’s an outsider, like the milkman or the laundryman?’ Peter checked.

‘We’ve searched every vehicle that has entered the gates since Vanessa Hedley’s disappearance.’ A frown creased Bill’s forehead as he glared at the hospital security chief and the officer he’d put in charge of traffic flowing in and out of the hospital. ‘There’s been no let up in security since then?’

‘None,’ the security chief assured him. ‘Nurse Sullivan couldn’t have been taken out of this place this morning, without us knowing about it. I’m willing to stake my reputation on it.’

‘You just did,’ Peter opened the door.

Trevor watched the dietician as she left the dining room where he was conducting his interviews alongside Sarah Merchant. In the opposite corner Peter was working in uneasy tandem with Michelle Grady. He waited while

Sarah keyed the essential information from their last interview on to her laptop.

‘Name – age – position held in Compton Castle?’

‘Herne, Jimmy Herne. Fifty-eight. Head gardener.’

‘Where were you this morning between ten and twelve?’ Trevor was bored with the tedium of repeating the same questions. He wanted to do something more constructive towards finding Lyn.

‘Let me see now...’ Herne scratched his bald head thoughtfully, trying Trevor’s frayed patience. ‘I cut the lawn first thing. I never trust the boys to make the early cuts, when the grass is still tender...’

‘What time did you finish cutting the grass?’ Trevor interrupted, thinking of the fifty-two other people waiting to be interviewed.

‘About ten, I think.’

‘And what did you do then?’

‘Had second breakfast with the maintenance men, like I always do.’

‘What time did you finish this second breakfast?’

‘Half past ten, same as always.’

‘And afterwards?’

‘I worked on the flowerbeds with those damned useless boys who can’t tell a...’

‘Until when?’ Trevor cut him short again.

‘Dinner time.’

‘Which is?’

‘Half past one.’

‘Those boys you were with – did they eat second breakfast with you?’ Trevor wished he could rid himself of the feeling that all of this was a waste of time. That the people – the computers – the interviews – wouldn’t bring them any closer to solving the mystery of Lyn’s

disappearance. He glanced at his watch. Nearly six o'clock. Lyn had been missing for eight hours.

'Is there any truth in the stories you told Jean Marshall and Lyn Sullivan about tunnels in the grounds leading from the cellars to the folly?'

'Yes,' Jimmy snapped, piqued at the implication that he'd lied.

'Could you lead me to them?' Trevor asked.

'Well, I could... then again I couldn't... not exactly.'

'Explain.' Trevor ordered.

'They were all blocked off years ago,' Jimmy admitted. 'When the therapy blocks were built.'

'How long ago was that?' Trevor pressed.

'Let me see... it must have been sometime in the sixties. Builders went round the grounds and the old block, plugging all the tunnel entrances.'

'With temporary shuttering?' Trevor asked hopefully.

'Nothing temporary about what they did. They had cement mixers and they concreted the holes. Tons of cement and rubble they poured in. Tons and tons,' Jimmy emphasised.

'Could you show me where they poured it?'

'Now, let me, see... I think I could find the spot, if you wanted me to.'

'Take the rest of Mr Herne's statement.' Trevor said to Sarah. 'I'll be back after I've found a plan of this place.'

'There has to be someone who can take over from me,' Trevor begged Bill.

'These interviews might be our only chance of finding Lyn Sullivan alive.' Bill looked at Trevor and saw that he remained unconvinced. 'How often have you said,

the only way to catch villains is through routine police work?’

‘Never!’

‘Then it must have been Peter.’ Bill was nonplussed.

‘While we’re standing here talking, she could be suffocating...’

‘All right,’ Bill conceded. ‘Get Andrew to take over from you and check out the bloody tunnels if you’re convinced they exist. And while you’re about it, find out if those rookies have come up from the police college and if they have, deploy them in the grounds.’

‘I’ll do that.’ Trevor walked away. Even if the tunnels had been sealed off as solidly as Jimmy Herne had said, there was always a possibility that a gap might have been left. A loose side brick – a plug that had worked loose and fallen out – possibilities wormed through his mind. A small gap, that’s all he needed. One just big enough to take a crawling man, dragging an inert, drugged, lifeless body behind him.

‘Sealed off, just like I told you.’ Jimmy Herne pulled back a hydrangea that had spread its branches within the decaying walls of the folly. He exposed a concrete plinth set below the original floor level. Balancing on his stick, Trevor leaned over and inspected the concrete. He ran his hands around the edges and picked up a fistful of wood chip.

‘We use that to keep down the weeds,’ Jimmy informed him.

Trevor signalled to the recruit behind him. The girl hadn’t even finished her six weeks training, but with experienced officers thin on the ground, he hadn’t felt justified in taking anyone else on what could turn out to be a wild-goose chase.

‘See if you can find any gaps around that concrete,’ he ordered.

The girl dived forward and ran her hands around the edge of the plug.

‘It’s set in solid Georgian brickwork, that,’ Jimmy declared. ‘I watched them fix it. Six men worked for two days just on this plug. The tunnel was open both ends before then. That was the problem; people kept trying to walk through. Student nurses out for a lark, you know the sort of thing.’

‘I can imagine,’ Trevor said.

‘One of the nurses got caught in a fall of earth. Halloween it was. Lucky they pulled her out before she snuffed it. After that the Authorities ordered the tunnel sealed.’

‘Where was the other end?’

‘The cellar.’

‘It seems solid enough, sir,’ the rookie ventured tentatively.

‘Let’s go.’ Trevor used his stick to propel himself swiftly forward.

‘Where?’ Herne protested. ‘I can’t hang about with you lot all day. I’ve a garden to run, and this is the busiest time...’

‘Your work can wait,’ Trevor countered. ‘I need you down the cellar.’

The constable who was still standing on the cellar steps, in exactly the same position Trevor had left him, nodded, ‘All quiet, sir.’

Trevor handed Herne and the rookie torches from the pile heaped at the foot of the stone steps. He took two for himself. ‘Where was this entrance?’ he asked Jimmy.

‘Bearing in mind that I only walked down the tunnel once and that was when I first started here... Did it for a bet,’ he wandered off on yet another digression. ‘The older lads were always egging us youngsters on. Well, there was a lot more of us in those days. Twenty experienced gardeners and fifteen boys...’

‘Can you find the tunnel end?’ Trevor stepped forward and flicked a switch. A single row of dim-wattage light bulbs flickered on overhead, shedding a leprous glow over the grimy concrete floors and dusty pipes that snaked around the walls.

Jimmy made his way uncertainly through the cellar until he came to the electricity sub-station. ‘I seem to remember it was here. Yes, this is it,’ he patted a large cement patch on the wall that hadn’t gone unnoticed by the search teams. But, after tapping it to ensure that it was solid, they had ignored it, not realising that there had once been anything behind it.

Trevor knocked at it. It looked solid, but what if there was something they’d missed? A side-tunnel perhaps, that opened out somewhere else.

‘Constable?’ Trevor shouted back to the man on duty.

‘Sir?’ The boy leapt forward, bright-eyed and eager.

‘Go upstairs and fetch a pickaxe. And – ’ Trevor looked at the fragile, blonde, petite rookie who stood next to him, ‘another man. A dog-handler if you can find one.’

Fortunately, both the constable and the dog-handler he’d commandeered were in better physical shape than Trevor. They took it in turns to wield the pickaxe, and within twenty minutes of hard, banging graft that shook the cellar, they broke through the thick covering skin of concrete to reveal a gap plugged with rubble.

The first hole was barely two inches wide, but it was a start. With Trevor's chivvyng, both men managed to enlarge the hole to a rough three-foot square in a matter of minutes.

'That's the beginning of the tunnel you remember?' Trevor turned to Jimmy Herne.

'Yes, but you can't be thinking of going in there. It was sealed up because of earth falls. No one's been down there in more years than I care to remember. It's dangerous. You could get killed ...'

'Did you ever hear of any side-tunnels? Anything leading off from this end or the other?' Trevor persisted.

'Plenty,' Jimmy said flatly. 'The usual sort of buried treasure nonsense. These tunnels were supposed to have been built as secret passages leading out from the dungeons of the old castle. There are stories that a Medieval king stashed his gold here. An Edward or perhaps it was a William. I can't remember the details... '

'But there were rumours of side-tunnels?' Trevor repeated.

'Legends, yes. But nothing that I ever saw.'

'Give me a hand to get in here.' Trevor beckoned to the constable and propped his stick against the wall.

'Sir?' The constable looked at Trevor's leg as he stood awkwardly in front of the hole. 'You can't be thinking of going in there?'

'Why not?' Trevor asked.

'It's not my place to be saying this, sir,' the lad ventured diffidently, 'but... '

'You're quite right,' Trevor stripped off his jacket. 'It's not your place. You're out of order.'

The tunnel was damp, icy-cold, and crumbling. After the constable had helped him in, Trevor inched forward,

propelling himself on his elbows. He pushed the two torches in front of him, one lit, the other held in reserve. Every time he slithered forward, clods of wet earth fell on his back, soaking his thin shirt. After ten feet of painstakingly slow crawling, the tunnel widened. He pushed himself forward and fell, in a clatter of torches and shower of earth and rubble on to a stone floor. The torch went out and he fumbled blindly in total, terrifying darkness for five panic-stricken minutes before his fingers closed around it again and he found the switch. He pressed it downwards, and a blessed warm glow of light dispersed the gloom.

‘You all right, sir?’ the constable’s voice echoed down the tunnel. Trevor shone his torch back into the hole.

‘Fine,’ he rubbed his legs. ‘I’ve broken through into an area high enough to stand in.’

‘Do you want me to follow you, sir?’

‘Not much point until I’ve had a look around,’ Trevor shone his torch upwards and his heart missed a beat. A bulge of earth, held precariously in place by a network of tree roots loomed barely inch above his head. He tried to ignore it and looked for a continuation of the tunnel. A few large stones were set at the foot of the walls, presumably put there at some time to contain the earth falls that had covered the outer edges of the stone floor with a layer of mud. Dark, crumbling walls of earth met his torch beam at every turn. Starting at the point at which he’d entered, he walked slowly around the open area.

He’d almost worked his way around the chamber when he thrust his hand against the wall, lost his balance and plunged headlong into a hole. He tried to cry out, but dirt clogged his eyes, his nose and his mouth as he fell

downwards, unable to save himself. Again, he tried to shout, but he couldn't breathe, let alone speak.

He'd been careful to keep a tight grip on his torch but there was too much earth between his hands and his face for him to lift it into view. Choking, coughing, spluttering, he remembered the victims who had been buried alive, and wondered if that was going to be his fate as well.

He summoned every ounce of energy he possessed and fought to propel himself upwards, out of the dirt. Pushing up with his hands, he finally managed to create a little space around his face. It gave him the impetus and air, he needed to fight his way back to the chamber. After what seemed like eternity, he collapsed on the stone floor, in inches of freezing, sticky mud. He was filthy, soaked to the skin, icy-cold. But he was alive. And as his scalded lungs heaved in more damp, stale air, he was grateful for that much.

A fat worm slithered across his legs. Then he realised, the air was chill only because of the layers of insulating soil above and around him. He could feel no fresh draughts. The earth he'd tumbled into had obviously fallen and blocked the tunnel. If there were any side shafts, or networks of secret passages, he could see no sign of them. He rose slowly and with great difficulty to his feet.

'I'm coming back.' He turned to where he thought the tunnel should be and saw only a blank dirt wall. He spun the beam of his torch around. All he could see was walls of earth. He breathed in and forced himself to remain calm. If he took it slowly, inch by inch, he was bound to find his entrance point. It had to be there. Even if it was covered, that covering wouldn't be very deep. It couldn't be...

He crawled around the walls and began to study every clump, every pile of earth...

‘Sergeant Joseph what?’ Peter bellowed down the radio.

‘He went into the tunnel fifteen minutes ago, sir, and we can’t see or reach him. We can’t even see a light. The tunnel is in darkness.’

‘Where are you?’

‘Cellar, sir. Close to the sub station.’

‘Stay there. Don’t move. Don’t do anything. I’m on my way.’ Peter left his seat and broke into a run.

‘Where’s he going?’ Bill bellowed as he watched Peter disappear out through the door.

‘Over here, sir,’ the constable called, as Peter charged down the cellar steps.

‘What happened?’ Peter demanded.

‘Sergeant Joseph ordered us to break through the cement plug into an old tunnel...’

‘He went in there and you didn’t try to stop him?’ Peter stared at the square that they had hacked in the concrete plug.

‘We did try, sir,’ the dog-handler protested.

Peter squinted at the girl wearing a rookie’s uniform. ‘But he wouldn’t listen, would he? The stupid bloody hero,’ he muttered under his breath.

‘Sir?’ she questioned.

‘Nothing.’ He took off his jacket and thrust his radio into his shirt pocket. Was he getting old, or was the force picking up recruits from junior comprehensives these days? The girl looked about fifteen years old. ‘Right, I’m going in.’

‘You’ll get caught in a fall, too,’ Jimmy said. ‘I’m warning you.’

‘Get some rope,’ Peter ordered the dog-handler. ‘I’ll tie it around my waist. If there’s a problem, I’ll shout out and you can pull me back.’

Unlike Trevor, Peter didn’t need any help to climb into the tunnel. He pushed himself forward, stretched out full-length with a torch carefully poised in front of him, dug his toes into the soft earth and propelled his body into the inky blackness ahead. It took him only ten minutes of hard, and despite the temperature, sweating work to reach the earth wall at the end of the tunnel. He prodded it gingerly and a shower of earth fell over him. He sheltered his face in his arms as it continued to fall. Even after he dared to raise his eyes, he could still hear the soft thud of damp clods falling too close for comfort.

He shone his torch around the top and sides of the tunnel looking for an exit that he might have missed. Seeing nothing, he yelled at the top of his voice.

He held his breath, and waited a few moments. Had he heard an answering cry – or was it only wishful thinking? He called out again and shielding his head with his arms, dug his toes in and charged.

Trevor sat on the stone floor, thinking what a complete and utter fool he’d been to rush in and play Sir Galahad. It went against all his training. How often had it been drummed into him that simple, boring, routine legwork caught villains – not heroics – or climbing blindly into underground passages.

A black mass hurtled out of the wall, and fell on top of him. Thick clouds of dirt filled the air.

‘Trevor, you bloody idiot, are you there?’

Too shocked to be grateful, it was as much as Trevor could do to whisper; ‘Yes.’

‘If you can see me, grab hold. I’ll rope us together, so they can heave us out of this mess.’

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

‘See anything?’ Peter demanded as he and Trevor were dragged head-first out into the cellar.

Trevor shook his head. He coughed violently to clear his lungs.

‘Nothing?’ Peter pressed.

‘No one’s been down there in years,’ Trevor croaked.

‘I told you so,’ Jimmy chanted.

‘Haven’t you gardening to do, Jimmy?’ Peter bent down to help Trevor to his feet.

Jimmy moved towards the door. Peter looked ruefully at his torn, filthy shirt and muddy trousers ‘Right bloody predicament you got us into this time, Trevor.’

‘Thought I was on to something,’ He groped for his stick.

‘You.’ Peter turned to the rookie. ‘Report to the duty officer on the gate. They need every body they can lay their hands on. Even ones as small as yours.’

Too intimidated by Peter’s air of authority to quote equal opportunities act, she disappeared up the cellar steps.

‘If you can manage without me, sir, I’ll show her the way,’ the dog-handler suggested.

‘Always got to play the cowboy in the white hat, haven’t you?’ Peter complained as soon as he and Trevor were alone. ‘And now I suppose you expect me to help you back to your room?’

‘Thanks,’ Trevor limped forward, glanced at Peter and for one blissful moment they forgot the urgency of the search and burst out laughing.

*

*

*

Despite Peter's pleadings, Trevor refused to stay in his room a minute longer than it took him to strip off his filthy clothes, shower and change. Peter followed Trevor into the shower and borrowed a clean shirt and sweater but as his waist was considerably larger than Trevor's he had to content himself with wiping off his muddy trousers.

They went to the mobile HQ and found Sarah Merchant sitting alone in the outer office loading discs into a computer.

'The wanderers return,' Bill looked at Peter. 'Been for a mud bath?'

'Something like that.'

'Tell me.' Bill pressed.

'We didn't find anything in the cellar.' Trevor stumbled towards a chair. He felt weak, impotent and exhausted. And there was no prospect of rest in the near future. Not until Lyn had been found – one way or another. 'We found the tunnels. But they hadn't been used in years.'

'So your little trip was a complete waste of police time.'

'No,' Peter broke in. 'Now we know that the tunnels exist, and there's nothing in them, we can forget about them.'

'Something coming up on screen, sir,' Sarah Merchant interrupted, as the VDU began to flash.

'What are you doing?' Bill barked.

'Cross-checking and cross-referencing the alibis. Any that don't match will come up.'

'What time-scan have you programmed?'

'Ten to twelve o'clock this morning, sir.'

'There's bound to be some discrepancies,' Bill commented. 'If only in the way people remember things.'

‘You do realise there are no patients on this list?’ Peter reminded.

‘Obviously not, since we haven’t interviewed any,’ Bill retorted.

‘For my money, our villain has to be a patient.’

‘One thing at a time, Peter.’

The first name flashed up on to the screen.

‘Angela Morgan?’ Dan read.

Sarah pressed the return key on the computer, and Angela Morgan’s statement flashed on screen.

‘Worked alone in her office between ten and eleven and then went for break eleven to eleven-twenty in canteen. Returned to office, where worked alone until twelve,’ Dan read.

‘You can’t think our killer’s Angela Morgan!’ Peter exclaimed.

‘No,’ Bill said flatly.

‘But if she was alone, where was Tony Waters?’ Dan asked.

‘Check Tony Waters’ alibi,’ Bill ordered Sarah.

Sarah keyed in Tony Waters’ name. The information appeared on screen.

Slept alone at home until twelve. Entered hospital at twelve-forty-five. Saw no one. Alibi unsubstantiated.

Bill left his chair and tapped Dan on the shoulder. ‘Bring him in.’

Before Dan had time to respond, Michelle knocked and opened the outer door.

‘Mr Waters to see you, sir.’

‘Superintendent, I’ve only just discovered that your officers have knocked a hole in the wall of the cellar. I’m surprised that I have to remind you of our previous conversations regarding the age and condition of this building. They could have undermined the foundations...’

Bill opened the door to the inner office. 'Shall we discuss this in private? Inspector Evans, please join us.'

Dan followed Bill and Tony into the room, and closed the door behind him.

'Is there an intercom in here?' Peter asked.

'They'd hear if I switched it on,' Sarah replied.

'Got a glass?'

'If there's anything we'll find out about it soon enough. How about you carry on running that programme.' Trevor pulled up a chair alongside Sarah's.

'You weren't in the hospital this morning?' Bill asked Tony.

'No, but I've come here to... '

'Complain? We'll get around to that later. Right now we'd like to verify your movements this morning.'

'As I said to Constable Grady,' Tony continued testily. 'I was at home asleep until twelve o'clock.'

'Because you worked late last night?' Bill asked.

'Because I've worked late several nights. What is this?'

'This is one of several interviews of hospital staff who cannot account for their movements during the time Lyn Sullivan disappeared.'

'That's ridiculous. You can't suspect me... '

'We suspect everyone, Mr Waters,' Bill said formally. 'What time did you get home last night? What time did you go to bed? Would any of your neighbours have seen your car...? '

Trevor and Peter were staring intently at the screen, watching the computer cross-match alibis, when Dan walked into the outer office.

'Can't break his story.'

‘Try booking him?’ Peter suggested.

‘On what charge?’

‘Make one up.’

‘This isn’t a dropout that we’ve picked up with a pocketful of hash. He’s educated, he has connections, we haven’t enough to pin a parking ticket on him. And, unfortunately, he knows it. He’s already shouting for his solicitor.’

‘Does any part of his alibi check out?’

‘No one to check it with. When he got home last night his wife was asleep. She left before he woke this morning. He has an alarm clock, not a wake-up call. No one telephoned him. He has no neighbours near enough to see his car coming or going. This morning he saw no milkman, no postman – no one. Even his daily cleaner called in sick last night so she didn’t work this morning.’

‘So where do we go from here?’ Trevor said, impatience making him angry.

‘I was wondering if it’s worth tackling this from a different angle,’ Bill suggested. ‘You two could have a chat with Tony Waters’ wife. Chances are, if there is any funny business, Carol Ashford would know about it.’

‘You know what they say about wives.’ Peter left his chair and looked around at the mud smears left by his trousers. ‘They’re always the last to know when the husband goes a wandering.’

‘We’d like to talk to Sister Ashford,’ Trevor said to the trainee nurse who walked out into the ward corridor to meet them.

The girl looked at her watch. ‘She’s just about to finish her shift.’

‘This won’t take a moment.’ Peter stepped past the nurse, and Trevor followed.

'I'll get her, if you'd like to wait.' The girl opened the office door.

Peter walked in and looked through the glass window that overlooked the corridor. He pulled down a roller-blind, screening the room from the rest of the ward. The click of high heels on vinyl tiles echoed down the corridor. The door opened.

'Sergeant Collins, Sergeant Joseph.' Carol Ashford entered the office. 'Staff said you wished to speak to me?'

'We do,' Peter answered.

'Then you won't mind if I sit down. I've been on my feet all day.' She sat behind the desk, and waited for them to speak.

'We'd like to ask you a few questions about your husband,' Peter began.

'Tony? If you think it will help.' If she was surprised she showed no sign of it.

'Could you tell us what time you left your house this morning?' Peter began.

'Six forty-five, the same as usual.'

'And your husband?'

'He was in bed asleep.'

'What time did he come home last night?'

'Some time after I fell asleep. Could you give me some indication as to what this is about, Sergeant Collins?'

'We're trying to establish his movements over the past two days.'

'Are you saying that Tony is a suspect?'

'What do you think?' Peter asked. When she didn't reply, he continued. 'He's the only member of staff who can't account for his movements between the hours of ten and twelve this morning.'

‘The time when Nurse Sullivan disappeared?’ She sank her face into her hands. ‘Where did he say he was?’

‘Sister Ashford, is there anything you want to tell us about your husband?’ Peter probed.

When she didn’t answer, Trevor pressed. ‘If you know anything, anything at all, about Lyn Sullivan’s disappearance, please tell us. Otherwise we’ll almost certainly have another corpse on our hands. Please, you knew Lyn...’

She dropped her hands. ‘I’ll tell you everything I know, Sergeant Joseph. I only hope that it will be enough.’

Patients on geriatric wards are routinely bedded down earlier than those on other wards. In the intervals when Carol Ashford wasn’t speaking, the silence was filled with small, soft noises; the quiet whirr of the electric clock on the office wall, the last tentative notes of evening birdsong in the garden, the voice of the officer stationed in the foyer making radio contact with headquarters.

Carol was speaking to Peter, but she looked at Trevor. ‘My husband was charming when I met him. I believed that he possessed every quality I’d ever looked for and wanted in a man. He was handsome, courteous, considerate; he had a marvellous sense of humour. His parents adored me, and they were wealthy on a scale I’d only dreamed about. They’d given Tony everything; the best schools, the best university, the confidence to talk to people – important people that is. He had influential and glamorous friends, he took me to the right places – you can have no idea how overwhelming that can be to someone like myself who was brought up on a slum of a council estate. When I first met Tony...’

‘In this hospital?’ Peter interrupted her.

‘No, Greenways in Kent. He seemed so sophisticated, so wonderful, I couldn’t believe my luck. That he’d actually chosen me to be his girlfriend.’ She lowered her long, thick eyelashes. ‘The first time I went out with him, I was swept off my feet. Literally. He knows how to treat a woman. Flowers, chocolates, cards, presents. I married him eight months after I met him, and by then we were both working here, in Compton Castle. He comes from this area. We moved down soon after his mother was diagnosed with cancer. A week after her death, his father shot himself. It was – ’ Tears filled her beautiful navy-blue eyes, but they didn’t affect the clarity of her voice. ‘It was then that I think he became unhinged. He adored his parents. He was an only child. Or perhaps he’d been unhinged all along, and I’d simply chosen to ignore his mental state because I didn’t want to confront his problems, or see any flaws in my Prince Charming.’

‘Exactly what are his problems?’ Peter asked.

‘His cruelty,’ she admitted. ‘He has a sadistic streak. It started when I didn’t get pregnant straight after our wedding. Our sex life changed,’ she whispered. ‘He started to beat me.’ She rolled up the sleeve of her sweater and revealed black and purple bruises that encircled her upper and lower arms. Pulling down the roll-neck collar, she showed them multicoloured contusions on her neck. ‘And his demands increased with his brutality. Nothing I did was good enough for him. In the kitchen, our home, in bed, in work – you must have seen what a perfectionist he is. I have never managed to keep a domestic help for more than three months, although I pay double the going rate. He’d begin to criticise their work, and then they’d leave...’

‘Do you know of any links between your husband and the missing girls?’ Peter pulled out his notebook.

‘With all the girls that were found dead, except Vanessa Hedley.’

‘Go on,’ Peter ordered abruptly.

‘I have no proof except a couple of letters and intercepted telephone calls. But I know, Sergeant Collins,’ she looked Peter in the eye. ‘I know that he had affairs with all three of them, and when Lyn disappeared this morning I feared the worst.’

‘Why?’ Trevor interrupted.

‘Because I saw him talking to her yesterday afternoon in the ward office and saw the way that he was looking at her.’

Trevor had a sudden flash of memory. Tony Waters’ chair pulled close to Lyn’s. White-blond and black hair touching as their two heads bent over the notebook in her lap.

‘I’m afraid for Lyn and I think he took her. You know Lyn, Sergeant Joseph,’ she appealed to Trevor. ‘I can’t imagine her agreeing to go anywhere with Tony, not so soon after she broke up with Karl Lane. And if Tony asked, and she refused...’ tears poured down her cheeks. ‘I believe that he could have abducted her.’

‘Where do you think he’s hidden her?’ Trevor asked.

‘If I knew, I’d tell you. There have been nights, so many nights, when he hasn’t come home at all. And there’s one more thing; he’s impotent.’

‘You mean he can’t make love?’ Peter asked bluntly.

‘He’s capable of performing the physical act, after a fashion, if that’s what you call “making love”. But he can’t have children. And since he found out, he’s resorted to...’ She burst into a paroxysm of weeping that made further questioning impossible.

Peter smiled at Trevor. ‘Got the bastard.’

‘But not Lyn,’ Trevor said bleakly. ‘We’re still no nearer to finding her.’

Peter put a call out for a woman police constable to take care of Carol Ashford.

‘I would like to go home,’ Carol pleaded, through her tears. ‘I’d like to shower, change my clothes.’

‘We may need you again,’ Peter said. ‘And I’m reluctant to let you go until we’ve finished questioning your husband. There may be something else you know...’ The telephone rang and he picked it up. ‘That was Michelle,’ he turned to Trevor. ‘Bill’s suggesting Sister Ashford could join Jean Marshall and Michelle in a hospital flat. Spencer Jordan has volunteered his.’

‘How long do you intend to keep me, Sergeant?’ Carol Ashford demanded.

‘Just as long as it takes to get your husband to tell us where he’s hidden Lyn Sullivan,’ Trevor answered.

Tony Waters was stunned. ‘Superintendent, the whole idea is bizarre, the fabrications of an insane mind. You simply can’t believe...’

‘The mind is your wife’s,’ Bill broke in. ‘You had the means, the opportunity. On your own admission, you know this place inside out.’

‘Where have you hidden Lyn Sullivan?’ Peter stopped pacing around the room and loomed threateningly over the table where Tony was sitting.

‘Nowhere! I haven’t even seen the girl. I want to call my solicitor – now.’

Bill picked up the telephone, and slammed it down in front of Tony. ‘But I warn you; make that call and we’re charging you.’

‘With what?’

‘Four counts of murder and five of kidnapping.’

‘That’s absurd. You have no proof. If you did, you’d have taken me to the police station.’

‘To all intents and purposes this is a police station. And the reason we haven’t moved you is a six-foot, slim, attractive black-haired nurse you’ve hidden somewhere on these premises. Is she still alive?’

‘I wish I could help you, Superintendent. But I know nothing.’

Peter produced the statement Carol had signed before Michelle had taken her to Spencer’s apartment. ‘Do you deny having affairs with Claire Moon, Elizabeth Moore, and Rosie Twyford – and receiving phone calls from them at your home?’

‘I might have received one or two calls from them, but...’

‘Go on’ Bill pressed.

‘Receiving phone calls is not a crime. And even if they did call me, the chances are that those calls were connected with business.’

‘Like the affairs you had with them?’

‘Affairs, like phone calls, are not crimes,’ Tony countered.

‘And the bruises you inflicted on your wife?’

‘Carol enjoys rough lovemaking.’

‘Lovemaking?’ Peter sneered. ‘From a man who fires blanks.’

‘What the devil do you mean?’ Waters turned crimson and Peter knew he’d hit a raw nerve.

‘You can’t have children.’

‘Whether I can father children or not is none of your damned business!’ Tony Waters turned purple with rage.

‘Where is Lyn Sullivan?’ Peter thrust his face close to Tony’s.

‘I swear, I haven’t seen her since yesterday.’

‘You didn’t take her?’ Bill asked sceptically. ‘You didn’t grab her from the hostel?’

‘No.’

‘That’s not what your wife told us.’

‘Carol? But she knows – she – ’

‘Knows what?’ Peter asked.

Tony remained silent.

‘Your wife has made a statement.’ Peter waved it in front of Tony. ‘She confirmed that you had affairs with all three women.’

‘That doesn’t make me a murderer.’

‘No, but it doesn’t mean you’re able to engage in normal lovemaking either.’ Peter stabbed at Tony’s Achilles heel.

‘For pity’s sake, I’m normal. Just ask Jean Marshall.’

An eerie silence fell over the room. Trevor rose from his chair and slammed the door on his way out.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Trevor stumbled as he flung himself down the steps. Peter, who was running close on his heels, reached out and steadied him.

‘You’re going to see Jean Marshall?’

‘You thinking what I’m thinking?’ Trevor asked.

‘Either our esteemed administrator or his wife is lying,’ Peter replied. ‘The question is which one. Taxi?’ he shouted to the driver of a police car, who was standing nearby, chatting to the constable on duty. ‘To the halfway houses, and step on it.’ He dived into the back of the car.

‘You’ve been on duty since Constable Grady escorted the two women inside?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Our little bird is still cooped up,’ Peter gave Trevor a grim smile.

‘If this little bird proves to be the one I think it is, I won’t be buying any birdseed until I see her for myself.’ Trevor led the way into the building.

The Trust had tried and failed to turn the communal area on the ground floor of the halfway house into something resembling a private home. Still life prints of fruits and dead pheasants that no one would willingly chose to hang on their walls were the only ornaments in the beige-carpeted and magnolia-painted rooms. The coat rack in the hall was bare, as though no one dared to use it. All the adjoining doors were open, including one to the cupboard under the stairs, which held a neat display of cleaning tools; vacuum cleaner, brushes and mops. The kitchen

surfaces were bare, and the spotless stove had a disused air.

Peter and Trevor saw Spencer sitting on the edge of an uncomfortable upright chair in the lounge, playing chess with a slim young man Trevor recognised as a past inmate of his ward.

‘You’re here to see Jean and Carol,’ Spencer guessed. ‘I’ll take you up.’

‘Don’t disturb yourself.’ Peter went to the foot of the stairs. ‘Just point us in the right direction.’

‘Top floor, it’s the door facing you at the top of the stairs.’

‘Thanks.’ With Trevor lagging behind, Peter climbed the first flight of stairs. Five closed doors greeted him, all fitted with Yale locks. As he began on the next flight of stairs, a man rose to his feet from the top step.

‘Slacking on the job, Andrew?’ Peter asked.

‘Resting my feet before you dump the next load on me,’ Andrew replied.

‘Anyone gone in or out?’

‘No. And apart from some classical music, it’s been as quiet as the grave.’ Andrew pushed a coffee cup into the corner behind him.

‘When did they give you coffee?’ Trevor winced in pain as he tried to put his right foot on the floor.

Andrew glanced at his watch. ‘About an hour and a half ago.’

As there was no bell, Peter banged on the door. There was no response. ‘Constable Grady, it’s Peter Collins. Open up.’

The silence that fell after his frenzied banging hung heavy with foreboding.

‘Got a key for this door?’ Peter asked Murphy.

‘No.’

‘Run downstairs and get Spencer’s,’ Trevor suggested.

‘No time.’ Peter put his shoulder to the door and heaved. The wood splintered and the door swung inwards, its lock hanging free. He barged through the tiny hall into the living room, tripping over Michelle Grady, who lay on the floor, still holding a coffee cup in her right hand. The dregs had spilled over the beige carpet, staining the area around her head. Jean Marshall was lying on the sofa.

Peter knelt between them. ‘They’re both breathing, hopefully just tranquillised. Call an ambulance.’

Spencer superintended the evacuation of the hostel before the paramedics dashed upstairs.

‘What I can’t understand,’ Murphy said, ‘is how she got out. I was in touch with our man at the back and our man downstairs every ten minutes and neither reported any unusual sightings.’

Peter opened the window and leaned out. ‘There’s barely four foot between this building and the next. If she climbed up instead of down, she could have...’

‘Jumped across?’ Trevor suggested.

‘I don’t know if you noticed, but she’s an athletic-looking girl.’

‘I noticed,’ Trevor rested on the arm of an easy chair.

‘Can I come in?’ Spencer hovered in front of the splintered wood that had once been his front door.

‘The bird’s flown the coop, so there’s no need to ask,’ Peter replied.

‘One of the girls in the house next door saw the commotion and came round. She says she hung her Mac on the rack by the door, but now it’s gone.’

‘What colour was it?’ Trevor asked.

‘Green. She’d only just bought it...’

Trevor didn't wait for the rest of the sentence. He turned to Peter. 'Car park?'

'I'm ahead of you'

An officer had been on duty in the car park since six o'clock. He insisted nothing out of the ordinary had occurred; only the usual staff had come and gone.

'Sister Ashford?' Peter asked.

The man gazed at him vacantly.

'Tall, slim, blonde, blue-eyed, beautiful,' Trevor elaborated.

'The one married to the chief administrator?'

'That's her,' Peter confirmed.

'She took her husband's BMW. She said her Peugeot was giving her trouble, so he'd offered to take it to the garage.'

'Take us to mobile HQ,' Collins ordered the police driver he'd commandeered.

'Why not follow her?' Trevor demanded urgently.

'Because she could be anywhere,' Peter snapped. 'And because, if we're going to find Lyn Sullivan before it's too late, we'll need all the help we can get. And in my opinion we should begin with the person who knows the killer best. Tony Waters.'

Tony Waters was still sitting at the conference table at HQ. Dan was thumbing through computer printouts of the interview reports and Bill was bawling down the phone at the officer who'd been manning the gate when Carol Ashford had driven out of the hospital.

'Don't tell me that you didn't know she was a suspect – every person in this hospital is a suspect... '

‘Mr Waters?’ Trevor pulled out a chair alongside Waters. ‘Have you any idea where you wife could have gone?’

He stared at Trevor through hollow eyes. ‘I don’t know. She didn’t keep in contact with anyone from her past, and she didn’t have many friends. Lots of acquaintances; people she met through clubs, charity committees – that sort of thing. But no real friends.’

‘The house. You think she might have gone back there?’ Trevor pressed.

‘I don’t know.’

‘Do you keep money and your passports in the house?’ Peter took the chair opposite Trevor’s.

‘There’s money in the safe. Our passports too.’

‘She has the key to the safe?’ Peter asked.

‘It’s a combination lock, she knows the number.’

‘There’s no point in both of us going.’ Peter said when Trevor rose stiffly to his feet. ‘You’d slow me down. As Lyn wasn’t in the car Carol drove out, carry on looking for her here. I’ll keep in touch. Mr Waters, you’d better come with me. We may need you. Dan?’

‘I’m with you.’

‘All cars leaving the hospital have been searched thoroughly for days. Lyn Sullivan *must* be hidden somewhere in this hospital,’ Trevor stressed to Tony. ‘Please. You know this building better than anyone. Do you have any idea where Lyn could be hidden?’

‘Do you think I didn’t think of that when Vanessa Hedley disappeared?’ Tony retorted acidly. ‘Everywhere, absolutely everywhere has been thoroughly searched by your people and mine.’ He followed Peter and Dan out of the door.

*

*

*

Tony gave the police driver precise directions to his farm, but the driver twice missed turnings in the winding country lanes, and they lost frantic minutes while he manoeuvred turns in impossibly narrow spaces.

When they finally reached the farmyard, it was floodlit, with two large Dobermans barking and circling crazily by the front door.

Tony climbed out of the car and called to the dogs. They stopped barking and ran over to him. He pulled out his keys and shut them in the conservatory. Peter walked to the front door. He held out his hand.

‘Keys,’ he said to Tony.

‘I’ll open it.’ Tony seemed strangely reluctant to hand them over.

‘Stand back,’ Peter ordered. ‘I can smell gas.’

‘Then shouldn’t I...’

Tony didn’t have the chance to say another word. Dan lifted him off his feet, and yanked him back while Peter inserted the key gingerly into the lock. He pushed the door open tentatively with his fingertips.

‘You on mains or Calor gas?’ Dan asked Tony. But he never heard the reply to his question.

A deafening explosion ripped through the house, blasting the front door off its hinges. It caught Peter’s shoulder as it hurtled back, carrying him to the centre of the yard in a hurricane of shattering glass and shooting flames that blew the windows, roof and walls outwards. For five full minutes all Dan could do was lie flat on the ground, his nose buried in the dirt, as he watched flames lick out of the building into a strange, red unnaturally silent world. He saw Peter was lying, eyes wide open, as he lay half buried beneath a heap of smouldering debris.

Covered in shards of glass, their driver had managed to stagger back to the car. Dan saw his mouth move as he

yelled down the radio phone for the fire brigade, back-up units, and ambulances.

Tony had been partly shielded by Dan's massive figure when the full force of the blast had struck, so he wasn't as badly hurt as the other three men. Dan could only watch as Tony scrambled to his feet and ran towards the house. A blackened, shrivelled scarecrow, skin blistering and bubbling was crawling through where the front wall had stood only minutes before.

Tony took off his coat and flung it over the scarecrow's baked flesh.

'I couldn't bear it.' Words left the lipless mouth.

'Bear what, darling?' Tony cradled what was left of Carol in his arms.

'I thought you'd leave me for one of those girls. That's why I took them from you. I didn't want to kill them – just keep them away from you. But I couldn't hide them forever, and I couldn't hurt them, so I buried them. It was easier that way – even the dog. It was always in your office...'

'Where's Lyn?' Dan crawled over the debris in the yard towards them.

'Vanessa saw me. I injected her with air. It's a quick way to go – I couldn't –'

'Where's Lyn?' Dan reiterated.

Peter stumbled towards them cradling his left arm. 'She was in the hall; she lit a match as I opened the door...'

'She was expecting me.' Tony looked down at what was left of his wife. She was quite still, her sightless eyes staring up into his.

Peter sank to the ground. 'Damn her for dying. She can't tell us where Lyn Sullivan is now.'

Dan put his hand on Peter's shoulder. He turned his back on Tony who continued to cradle the mutilated body of his wife. He could find no words of comfort to offer the man, but he could and did offer privacy – of a kind. 'You're going to hospital, Peter,' he said as the first siren sounded in the distance.

'Peter's in hospital but he's not badly hurt,' Dan reassured Trevor before turning to Bill and Harry Goldman who was visiting the mobile HQ. 'Carol Ashford turned on all the gas appliances in the house and lit a match when Peter opened the door. Peter was blown back by the blast; his back and arms are scorched, and his collarbone broken, but after a couple of days in hospital and a few weeks' rest at home, he'll be back to normal.'

'And you?' Bill asked.

'Slightly deaf...'

'Slightly pitted,' Bill commented looking at the burn marks on Dan's face.

'They treated the driver for superficial cuts and burns. Tony Waters is in shock. They're keeping him in overnight.'

'Damn Carol Ashford,' Trevor cursed. 'We haven't a clue where she hid Lyn Sullivan...'

'I've a feeling if we don't find her soon; we may as well stop looking.' Bill paced across the room. 'We have to be missing something. All of you, think!' Bill went to the table and thumbed through the search reports before looking at the team leaders sitting around his desk. 'Close your eyes and think back to our last search. Relive it in your mind. Crawl through it, step by step...'

Step by step – Trevor mentally inched his way around the cellar. He recalled the tunnel – the flagstone floor – Tony Waters and Jimmy Herne relating stories

about the place – the bare, once padded cells that didn't offer enough shelter to conceal a fly – the room where the rubbish was kept – the mortuary – Carol Ashford in the mortuary – the dogs going wild over her perfume – the geriatric corpse with the yellowed skin and thick horny toenails – the corpse in the garden – the corpse that had been stolen because the mortuary had been left unlocked. Why had it been unlocked? Because someone had thoughtlessly left the door open. Someone who had removed a body. A body that shouldn't have been there – a body that had to be hidden in a room rarely used – Vanessa's body.

White-faced, he left his chair.

'Where you off to?' Bill demanded.

'The mortuary.'

Harry and Dan stared at him.

Trevor picked up his stick and hobbled as fast as he could through the door, down the outside steps, towards the rear of the building. Once he reached the corridor he raced along, Dan and Harry Goldman lapping at his heels. Switching on lights as he went, he rushed to the male mortuary, and heaved at the door.

'Damn, it's locked.'

'Of course it is.' Harry was close behind him.

'Do you have the key?'

'A master key, I'm not sure it fits these old locks.'

The two minutes it took Harry Goldman to open the door dragged an eternity. As soon as it was open, Trevor burst in. He paused and stared at the bank of drawers. Which one? The top left-hand?

He heaved on the handle. It grated sluggishly. He tugged at it again. The same corpse was still inside. He recognised the feet that looked as though they'd been wrapped in yellow parchment. The face was covered by a

sheet. Peeling it back he uncovered the body of the old man. Thrusting his hands beneath the surprisingly light corpse, he lifted it out and laid it on one of the zinc-covered tables. Beneath it was another sheet; thick, lumpy. Scarcely daring to breathe, Trevor drew it aside.

The white face of Lyn Sullivan stared up at him, eyes open, muscles immobile. He could hear Dan calling down his radio for a doctor. Trevor laid his hand on her sweater and felt her heart beat. Slow, but definite.

‘She’s alive.’ He leaned against the table. The hand of the corpse rolled aside and hit his back. ‘She’s alive,’ he repeated, only just beginning to believe it.

EPILOGUE

‘Thanks, Trevor. That was a good film and a good meal.’

‘The film was good,’ Trevor agreed. ‘I have my doubts about the fish and chips.’

‘Perhaps it was the company.’ Spencer pushed his bicycle clips on to his trouser legs and opened the front door of Trevor’s new home.

‘Shall we do the same next week?’ Trevor suggested.

Spencer managed a tight smile. ‘Yes, I’d like that.’

Trevor stood on the step watching Spencer ride past Peter who, arm in sling, was walking up the path.

‘Came to see if you’d like to go out for a drink after all the hassle of moving.’

‘Some other time.’ Trevor led Peter past the lounge and dining room, both carpeted in plain green Wilton but devoid of furniture, and into the kitchen. ‘There’s still one or two things I need to do.’

‘One drink?’

The telephone interrupted them. Trevor picked up the receiver. Peter leaned against the fridge, and listened to the one-sided conversation.

‘Yes... yes... fine... yes... see you a week Monday, then. Yes... look forward to working with you. Goodbye.’

‘You took it, then?’ Peter watched him replace the receiver.

‘What?’ Trevor asked.

‘The job Dan offered.’

‘You knew about it?’

‘There’s been talk of nothing else down the station. Special Crimes Sergeant. You won’t forget us poor sloggers in the Drug Squad when you’re lording it in your

new office, bored out of your mind, waiting for a murder to happen, will you?’

‘Would you let me?’

Peter saw a pile of dirty dishes in the sink. ‘Want me to tackle those?’

‘With one arm?’ Trevor smiled. ‘I was just about to load the dish washer.’

Peter studied the shining antiseptic surfaces of the gleaming blue and white kitchen. ‘You’ve done well for yourself here, but do you think you’ll survive uncluttered cleanliness?’

‘I can but try.’

‘Must have cost a bomb.’

‘A small one,’ Trevor agreed. ‘I couldn’t have done it if the sitting tenants hadn’t bought my old flat.’

‘I don’t suppose you could,’ Peter said wistfully remembering the house he had handed over fully furnished to his undeserving ex-wife. ‘Come on, just one quick one.’

‘Tomorrow evening,’ Trevor compromised.

‘I know you and your tomorrows.’

‘I’m busy,’ Trevor said impatiently. ‘Tomorrow night or nothing.’

‘You’ll slide back into a depression if you’re not careful. Staying indoors, moping around... what did you do in Cornwall?’

‘Eat, sleep, play with my brother’s kids.’

‘My point exactly. You may have bought a great house, but what’s the point in hanging another millstone around your neck if all you’re going to do is spend every spare minute thinking about furniture and fittings, instead of having a good time? It’s what you do, not what you own that’s important.’

‘I’m grateful for your advice,’ Trevor said. ‘But I’m tired. I’ll go for a drink with you tomorrow.’ He ushered Peter back down the passage towards the front door. ‘Right now all I want is a bath and an early night.’

‘I can take a hint.’ Peter dumped a bottle of wine he’d been carrying on the floor next to the door. ‘We’ll drink that tomorrow – after the pub.’

‘See you around nine?’

‘I’ll be here.’ Peter turned back as he stepped on to the garden path. ‘They’re not prosecuting Roland for mishandling that corpse.’

‘That’s not surprising. There isn’t much you can do to a man who steals a corpse from a mortuary, carries it out to a garden and attacks it, except lock him up in an institution. And as he’s already there, there seems little point in wasting taxpayers’ money on a trial.’

‘He’s locked up now,’ Peter said. ‘But what will happen to him when he’s released?’

‘The same thing that will happen to all the others,’ Trevor said philosophically. ‘He’ll be out in the community again.’

‘Think we should apply for doubling of manpower?’

‘Either that or a new prison. See you.’

After he closed and locked the door, Trevor checked that all the downstairs windows were locked. He loaded the dishwasher, tidied round, switched off the lights and looked into the empty lounge and dining room. Tomorrow he’d choose some furniture – perhaps start off in the antique shops. If he couldn’t find anything there, he’d visit one or two of the better class furniture shops. There was no hurry. He was going to be in this house a long time, so he could afford to take a few months to find the right pieces. He’d already furnished the master bedroom; it was large enough to take the television, video and chaise-

longue he'd bought, as well as a king-size bed. The builder had turned the fourth bedroom into a walk-in dressing room and wardrobe. That had made all the difference to the upstairs and still left two guest rooms. Enough for any visitors.

He opened the fridge, stowed away the wine Peter had brought and removed a bottle that had been cooling all day. He walked slowly up the stairs, concentrating on putting one foot in front of the other. It wasn't easy without his stick, but he was getting there. Another two to three months, the physiotherapist said, and then he'd be walking properly again.

Switching on the small lamps at either side of the bed, he opened the French doors to the balcony that ran the full width of the second floor of his house. Sitting here, he could only be overlooked from the beach, and at this time of night it was deserted.

He set the bottle and two glasses on the wrought-iron pub table he had bought in a second-hand shop in Cornwall, and sat on one of the matching chairs. He took his time over opening the wine, drinking in the beauty of the glistening path painted by the moon on the shimmering surface of the sea while listening to the quiet hiss of the waves as they broke on the pebble-strewn shore.

'I might have known I'd find you out here.' Lyn moved behind him, her hair wrapped in a towel, another wrapped around her slim inviting body.

'Wine?'

'If I didn't know you better, I'd think you were trying to get me drunk.'

He poured her a glass and handed it to her.

'If we're going to sit out here, I suppose I'd better put on something more substantial than this.' She stepped

back into the bedroom, and he followed her. Reaching out he held her close for a moment, revelling in the warm, sensual feel of her and the rhythm of her heart beating against his. As she raised her face, he kissed her slowly and deeply.

‘You’re not sorry I moved in with you?’ she teased.

‘Someone has to make sure that you stay in one piece, and if you carry on working the way you did today, you’ll save me a fortune in cleaning bills.’

‘I won’t cramp your style, then?’ She wrapped her arms around his neck allowing the towel she was wearing to fall to the floor.

‘I’m not sure I had a style before I met you.’ He kissed the hollow above her collarbone.

‘The wine’s going to get warm,’ she warned.

‘There’s a cool breeze.’

‘That’s all right then.’ She pulled him back on to the bed.

‘Lyn?’ He looked into her eyes as she unfastened the buttons on his shirt.

‘Yes?’

He smiled at her. ‘Nothing.’ He kissed her again, and there was no need for more words between them for a long time.

Lyn was a miracle that had transformed his life. And, experience had taught him that miracles shouldn’t be analysed or questioned. For once he’d struck lucky, but it wouldn’t last – it never did, and in this case it couldn’t. There were thirteen years between them; a wealth of bitter experience on his side, and youth and beauty on hers. But for now at least, she was his. He had learned a hard lesson in Compton Castle, but he had learned it well.

Now was all anyone ever had. And this now was more than he deserved.

Katherine John



Katherine John is the daughter of a Prussian refugee and a Welsh father. Born in Pontypridd, she studied English and Sociology at Swansea College, then lived in America and Europe before returning to Wales and a variety of jobs, while indulging her love of writing.

She lives with her family on the Gower Peninsula, near Swansea.

Also by Katherine John....

BY ANY NAME

A bloodstained man runs half naked down a motorway at night dodging high-speed traffic - and worse. Cornered by police, admitted to a psychiatric ward suffering from trauma-induced amnesia, all he can recall is a detailed knowledge of sophisticated weaponry and military techniques that indicates a background in terrorism.

When two armed soldiers guarding his room are murdered and Dr Elizabeth Santer, the psychiatrist assigned to his case, is abducted at gunpoint a desperate hunt begins for a dangerous killer.

Terrorist - murderer - kidnapper - thief whatever he is, he remembers a town in Wales and it is to Brecon he drags Elizabeth Santer with the security forces in all-out pursuit. There, a violent and bloody confrontation exposes a horrifying story of treachery and political cover-up. Is Elizabeth in the hands of a homicidal terrorist or an innocent pawn? Her life depends on the right answer.

ISBN 1905170254

Price £6.99

WITHOUT TRACE

In the chilly half-light of the dawn a bizarre Pierrot figure waits in the shadows of a deserted stretch of motorway. The costumed hitch-hiker's victim is a passing motorist. The murder, cold-blooded, brutal, without motive.

Tim and Daisy Sherringham, doctors at the local hospital, are blissfully happy. The perfect couple. When an emergency call rouses Tim early one morning, he vanishes on the way from their flat to the hospital.

Daisy is plunged into a nightmare of terror and doubt...

ISBN 1905170262

Price £6.99

MURDER OF A DEAD MAN

Jubilee Street –the haunt of addicts and vagrants – is a part of town to be avoided at all costs, especially when it becomes the stalking ground of a brutal and ruthless murderer.

A drunken down-and –out is the first casualty, mutilated and burnt alive. But his grisly death raises even more problems for the investigating officers, Sergeants Trevor Joseph and Peter Collins, when they discover that their victim died two years earlier. So who is the dead man? And what was the motive for the bizarre crime?

While they seek a killer in the dark urban underworld, the tally of corpses grows and the only certainty is that they can trust no man's face as his own.

ISBN 1905170289

Price £6.99