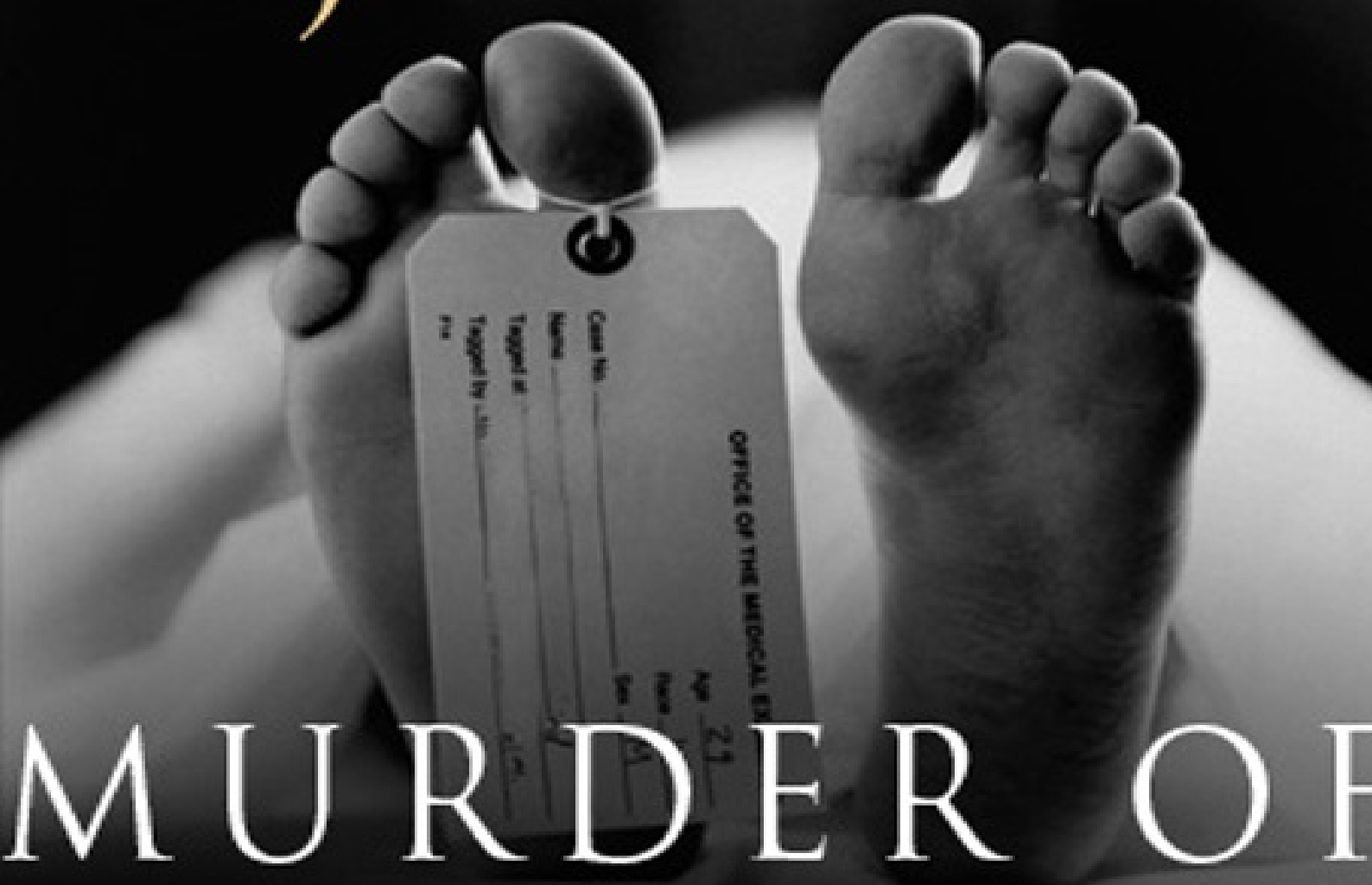


KATHERINE JOHN



MURDER OF
A DEAD MAN

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PROLOGUE

A chill hush pervaded the basement of the General Hospital. Someone standing close to the lift shaft or to the staircase leading down into the entrails of the building might hear the distant hum of the boiler that fed scalding water into the heating system. The boiler worked well; too well. The temperature on the wards rarely dropped to a tolerable level.

The muffled clanking of a trolley being wheeled into an elevator, followed by the remote clatter of equipment, reverberated through the stairwells, but the sounds only served to remind that the bustle of hospital life had no place down here. Even the corridors that led out from the brilliantly lit, white-tiled hall that covered three quarters of the floor area were deserted, stretching emptily into blind, secretive corners.

When night fell, even seasoned staff accustomed to death's presence on the wards avoided the passages that led down to the steel double doors below ground level. Behind them were stowed the General's failures. The patients who'd succumbed despite the care, skill, and technological advances.

A young man with the unhealthy pallor of someone rarely exposed to the sun bent over a trolley. His hair fell forward, covering his face, his spectacles slipped, and his hands trembled as he concentrated on the task in hand. And while he worked, the powerful lamp set low overhead burned, stinging his eyes and searing his neck.

He paused and glanced nervously over his shoulder. Shaking his head at his foolishness, he flexed his rubber clad fingers before resuming his kneading of the stomach of the cadaver he was laying out. He had watched the procedure often, knowing his turn would come, but never thinking that it would come so soon. That Jim would call in sick tonight.

They usually spent the greater part of their night shift in the porters' station, drinking tea and scanning old copies of *Playboy*. But not tonight. It was only half past two but there had been three deaths already and two calls from the wards warning of more to come.

Clenching his fists, he pressed down hard. Air wafted from the corpse's open mouth. It lingered in the chill, bright air, a final sigh that made the attendant's blood run cold. He pushed down again trying not to look at the face or think of the man this had been. The tags attached to the wrist and ankle detailed a name and number, but he remembered only the age. Twenty-seven – born the same month and year as him. Even the casualty sister had been affected by the tragedy of such an early death.

Why hadn't he given a thought to his future when he had opted to read philosophy? If he'd studied accountancy or law he would be equipped for a profession. He wouldn't be here, in this ceramic and steel house of the dead. A repository where corpses were stowed, until the ceremonies were over and they could be forgotten.

He flinched when the telephone shrilled. Peeling off one rubber glove he left the corpse and picked up the receiver.

'Mortuary!'

'Ward Eleven. We need you immediately.'

'Can't you get a porter, I'm laying out.'

'No porters available.'

'A nurse.'

'We're short staffed. Down to two on the ward.'

'I'm working single handed.'

'We all have our problems. It's an old lady in a four-bedded ward. People are awake. It's upsetting them.'

'I'll be there.'

He replaced the receiver and returned to the corpse he was laying out. The body was flat, legs straight, arms parallel to the body. The eyes were closed, but not the mouth. He taped the jaw, and as he did so, looked at the face for the first time. The features were regular, even. The kind his girlfriend admired when she wanted to tease. The man had been tall, over six feet, with thick, dark hair. Why wouldn't he have given to have had hair like that? His had always been thin, and was now receding. He pulled off the second glove, tossed it into a bin and picked up a fresh pair from the box. There wasn't anything so pressing that couldn't wait the quarter of an hour it would take him to go to Ward Eleven.

The sheet he picked up rustled as he draped it over the corpse. It was silly of him to bother but he didn't want to be faced with the uncovered body on his return. Dark hair, pale skin; so lifelike and so dead.

He pulled an empty trolley from a rank lined against the wall and wheeled it into the corridor. Regulations demanded that the mortuary be manned at all times, or else locked. He'd read his contract and signed it but it hadn't taken him long to discover working practices were very different from rule book ordinances. He had not forgotten the terms of his contract, simply learned to ignore them, as did the other attendants and porters. There was often no option since the place was understaffed. Besides, it would be a bind to have to dig his keys out of his pocket and lock the door when he would only have to repeat the procedure on his return.

The nurse had said there were other patients awake, so he'd chosen one of the new American-style carts. The body was deposited in a box-like hollow and a lid dropped down to cover it. Then a sheet was placed over the box. Simple, but effective. A flat sheet didn't draw the curious stares a shrouded corpse attracted, but the box carts never fooled a patient who'd witnessed the disappearing act.

He recalled the nurse saying, "It's upsetting them." Upsetting who? The staff? The patients? Visitors? – Of course visitors. Ward Eleven always had relatives staying over. Sitting by the bed, pacing the corridors, waiting for the end to come. And it nearly always came during the hours of darkness. Or did it just seem that way?

He reached the lift, parked the trolley and pushed the button for the eighth floor. He didn't have to wait long. The elevator ran smoothly to the seventh floor then shuddered violently, finally jerking to halt on the eighth.

'You took your time.'

'I came as quickly as I could. I'm the only attendant on duty tonight.'

'This way.' The staff nurse marched ahead of him. He'd been right about the relatives. A woman stalked them, an anxious frown creasing her face.

'Staff...'

'I'll be with you in a moment. Here.' She pushed open the door to a small ward. The curtains were drawn around the bed nearest the door. He wheeled his trolley through the gap bumping into a student nurse who was dismantling a drip. She looked up, her eyes heavy from lack of sleep. He opened the box on the trolley.

'She was a dear,' the student whispered. 'Never complained.'

As she helped him lift the emaciated, slack-jawed figure from the bed on to the trolley he made a decision. Tomorrow – he wouldn't go to bed right away, he'd shower, change, take a walk to the Job Centre and look at the boards. If there was nothing there, he'd buy a paper and go through the situations vacant column. There had to be something better than this.

'Thanks. I'll take it from here.' He reassembled the box, and straightened the sheet ensuring the folds hung down, obscuring most of the trolley. The staff nurse nodded to him as he returned to the lift. The woman he'd seen earlier turned her back as he passed. He saw the look on her face and wondered if the extra the hospital had paid for the wagons had been worth it.

The lift was still on the eighth floor. There wasn't much call for movement between wards in the

early hours. He pressed the button, opened the doors and wheeled in his load. The juddering was repeated as he descended into the basement. The door opened on to the deserted corridor.

He pushed the trolley towards the mortuary. Halting in front of the door, he looked around. He had no reason to do so. There had been no sound, nothing to alert him to the presence of anything untoward. Only a feeling of unease.

He took a deep breath. He was a grown man, a philosophy graduate. There was nothing to fear down here. As Jim had put it. "Our clients may not be happy with their lot, but you'll never know any different. You won't get a peep out of them."

He pushed the front end of the trolley through the doors. Then he froze.

The young man's corpse was sitting bolt upright on its trolley, facing him, the sheet draped in folds around the waist.

Jim had warned him that it could happen if all the air wasn't expressed from the stomach. But he was too horror-struck to wonder about the reason.

The torso facing him was white and finely muscled, with a mat of dark hair on the chest. But the porcelain gleam of the chest was in glaring contrast to the bloody, purple-blue pulp where the face had been. Only the eyes remained. The irises dark, the whites bleached, staring out above scraped cheekbones. Below, teeth grinned in a lipless aperture.

He continued to gaze, mesmerised, registering stumps where the ears should have been, black holes between the eyes where the nose and nostrils had been torn away. The ragged hairline above the naked cranium. One word echoed through his mind as the scream finally tore from inside his throat. Flayed.

The face had been skinned as neatly and completely as his father had skinned the rabbits he'd skinned on their farm back home. But why would anyone want to skin a dead man?

CHAPTER ONE

'Two, four, six, eight, who do we want to date – turn – jump – hop – scotch –' The young girl balanced on one leg before swooping down and retrieving a flat piece of marble from one of the squares painted on the surface of the playground. Placing it next to her foot she hopped, sending it skidding further down the geometric pattern of white on black tarmac.

'It's my turn after Hannah.' A plump child elbowed her way aggressively to the front of the queue of girls.

'No it's not!' The girl who had possession of the hop-scotch hovered, one foot in mid-air. 'It's Kelly's.'

'So there, Miss Bossy Boots.' The girl who'd been elbowed aside reclaimed her place.

The children's voices, eager, high pitched, carried across the school yard, out through the railings to an alleyway where a painfully thin man lurked, watching their game. His face was grimy with ingrained dirt, his chin black with stubble, his shoulder-length hair matted. A rusty black overcoat flapped at his knees, revealing ragged trousers stiff with grease. The only splash of colour was in his shoes, bright red baseball boots with luminous blue laces.

He shrugged his shoulders, easing the weight of the knapsack he was carrying. His eyes, keen and feverish, watched every move the young girl on the hop-scotch made. She was an attractive child. Tall for a junior school pupil, slender, with none of the puppy fat that characterised her playmates. Her silver-blonde hair was brushed away from her face and plaited into a ripple that extended to her waist. Her eyes were blue, a deep cornflower blue that shone like painted enamel in the drab surroundings of the school yard. She was easily the prettiest girl in the group. A swan in a sea of ugly ducklings. The grace and beauty of the woman yet to emerge could already be seen in her willowy figure.

'Miss! A dirty old man is watching us.'

The voice was shrill, the speaker a small boy who sat apart from the others at the foot of the railings. A middle-aged woman wearing a grey woollen dress and a lumpy, home-knitted blue jacket dashed towards the gate from the other side of the yard. Games were abandoned as all the children within earshot turned and looked into the alley. The man ran off.

'That's my Daddy!' Abandoning the precious stone that entitled her to first turn of every game, Hannah tossed her plait over her shoulder and darted out of the playground before the middle-aged woman could reach, let alone stop, her. She bolted across the narrow road without giving a thought to traffic. The squeal of brakes was followed by the muffled curses of a driver.

'Daddy!' Hannah screamed, but the man kept moving. 'Please stop.'

He looked back. Tears had cleared grey-white gulley down his cheeks.

'Daddy! You're not my daddy...'

The man broke into a run again, leaving the child sobbing on the pavement.

'Come on, Hannah, there's a good girl.' The middle-aged woman reached her.

'No!' Hannah refused to take the woman's hand. 'I don't want you. I want my daddy!'

'Whoever it was is gone now. Come back into school.'

'He looked like my daddy until he turned around. I thought he was –'

'You can sit in Mrs Jones's room. We'll send for your aunt. You can go home early. Would you like that, Hannah?' The woman led the child back through the school gates.

Another member of staff tapped the teacher's arm and mouthed, 'Police?'

The teacher shook her head. 'Ring the bell and get the children inside. Then telephone Hannah's aunt. If the headmaster and Miss Davies think it's warranted, they'll contact the police.'

'Happy birthday, dear Trevor,' Peter Collins sang to his colleague Trevor Joseph as Lyn Sullivan walked through the door of the darkened living room of Trevor's house carrying a chocolate and cream gateau ablaze with candles.

'He's not your "dear Trevor", Peter, he's mine,' Lyn set the cake on the table in front of the crowd gathered around Trevor.

'So he must be,' Peter agreed. 'No one's given me a cake or a party since I was five years old.'

'Difficult to organise when you spend every off-duty minute in that disgusting White Hart,' Sergeant Anna Bradley, Peter's colleague and companion for the evening observed.

'How do you know it's disgusting? You've never set foot in the place.'

'I don't need to step inside. You only have to look at the outside.'

'Time to blow out the candles, Trevor.' The smile on Lyn's face was strained. After six months of living with Sergeant Trevor Joseph of the Serious Crimes Squad, the kindest thing she could think of saying to her friends and family, was that police officers were "different". And they were. In the hours they kept, their habits, their lifestyle, their sense of humour – especially their sense of humour – and whatever went for the force in general, went doubly so for Sergeant Peter Collins of the Drug Squad.

Trevor's closest friend could be difficult at the best of times, and it had been a while since she and Trevor had enjoyed the best of times. Four months to be precise, since a relationship, begun with so much promise, had deteriorated into grinding days of separate work schedules interspersed with solitary leisure times of missed opportunities. No matter which nursing shift she opted for, she invariably returned to an empty house. Whether she worked days, mornings, afternoons or nights, Trevor's hours on the Serious Crimes Squad rarely coincided with her own.

It had taken a mammoth amount of juggling at the psychiatric hospital where she worked as a staff nurse, endless liaison over the telephone with Trevor's immediate boss, Inspector Dan Evans and his colleague Sergeant Anna Bradley, plus numerous semi-serious threats to Trevor before she'd felt confident enough to arrange this party. Even now she was waiting for the telephone to ring and summon half her guests away. So much so, she'd been unable to eat more than a mouthful of the buffet of cold salmon, cold sliced meats and salads she'd spent the last three days preparing.

She consoled herself with the thought that, once the candles were blown out, the drinking would begin in earnest. With luck Trevor would soon be too plastered to go out, even if he was called. The first evening he'd spent at home for over six weeks, and she'd been stupid enough to invite thirty other people.

'Blow out the candles, Trevor. You're wasting drinking time,' Peter grumbled.

Trevor took a deep breath and blew over the cake.

'I don't appreciate cream being blasted on to my best bib and tucker, mate, even by a birthday boy,' Andrew Murphy, who'd been a constable all his working life, flicked a fleck that had landed on his tweed jacket back in the direction of the cake.

'After some of the places that jacket's been, a blob of cream isn't going to make any difference to Andy. It might even disguise the blood and tooth marks.' Anna handed her plate to Lyn. 'Large piece please, with a double helping of cream.'

'How do you put up with her on your squad?' Peter asked Trevor who was cutting the cake into thick, uneven slices.

'A better question might be, how does Anna put up with Dan and Trevor?' Lyn eased the slices onto plates and handed them around.

'Three more promotions and I'll be able to push any sergeant in this town into clerical duties,' Anna smiled through a mouthful of chocolate and cream.

'Five more promotions and I'll be able to order all policewomen back to paperwork, housework and bed work.' Peter touched his glass to Trevor's. 'Here's to an all male force.'

Anna looked Peter in the eye. 'Just wait until I'm your super, Sergeant.'

~~'I doubt there's a man on the force who has the faintest notion what sexual equality means,'~~ Lyn gave Peter a withering look.

'I give all my women every opportunity to take their turn on top, as you'll soon find out, Anna' Peter wrapped his arm around her waist.

'I take it your past conquests used the vantage point to watch for something better coming through the door.' Anna took his hand from her waist and dropped it.

Bored with Peter's banter, Lyn took the empty cake plate into the kitchen. Every inch of work surface was littered with abandoned plates, screwed up paper napkins, half-chewed chicken wings, dirty glasses and knives and forks. She opened the bin and the dishwasher. After scraping the plates she began to stack the crockery and cutlery into the machine. When it was full she switched it on and debated whether to wait until the load had finished, or wash the overflow by hand.

'I apologise for my tactless colleagues.' Trevor crept up behind her and kissed her neck. 'You should have invited your brother and the nurses from the hospital.'

'This house isn't big enough for my friends as well as yours.'

'Then you should have just invited yours.'

'For your birthday?'

He turned her around. Her eyes were on a level with his. She was six foot, barely an inch below her own height. He kissed her on the mouth, thoroughly and slowly. Her irritation with Peter Collins, and the evening in general, dissipated as she recalled exactly why she'd moved in with Trevor eight months ago.

'Thank you.'

'For what?' she asked.

'My birthday party. And for being here, with me. But would you mind very much if I organise something for just the two of us on your birthday?'

'If I could have been sure you would have made the effort to be here, I would have done just that this evening.'

'Are you on duty this weekend?'

'Of course. Don't tell me you're not?'

'I was hoping we could go down to Cornwall.'

'To your mother's farm?' Her dark eyes sparkled at the prospect. She'd never met his family. He'd told her about his mother, brother, sister-in-law, nieces and nephews and she'd spoken to them on the telephone, but all of Trevor's protestations to the contrary had failed to reassure her that they approved of her living in his house.

'I want to show you off.'

'They might not like me.'

'They'll love you.' He kissed her again. 'And we'll be able to visit all the secret dens I built when I was a boy.'

'For an offer like that I'll swap my shifts.'

He pulled her closer, until their bodies meshed. 'We could go upstairs.'

'Someone might notice.'

The kitchen door burst open, slamming painfully into Lyn's spine. Peter pushed past.

'We're dying of thirst out there, mate, while you're having it off with Florence Nightingale in her room. Some bloody host you make.'

The drizzle-filled, saffron glow of the street lamps highlighted the filth that clung to the rusty black overcoat despite its sodden state. The trousers were more ragged than when Hannah and her teacher

had seen them earlier. Oblivious to his state, the derelict clutched his bottle, staggered and fell to his knees as he entered the seaward end of Jubilee Street.

Coarse laughter echoed around the four storey terrace of superficially elegant houses. Daylight would have revealed rotting wood and peeling paint on the graceful eighteenth century facades; roofs dipping alarmingly in their centres, and more windows shored with wood than glass. But the drunk was in no state to look at his surroundings. He was only aware that he was in the vicinity of what he called "home". The grand town houses built on the wealth of merchant shipping, were in the final throes of decay. The few still habitable had been leased by the council to the churches and voluntary organisations who struggled to house the town's homeless.

The drunk's bottle rolled from his grasp. A man walked up behind him and retrieved it. The drunk looked up.

'Got change to spare, mate?'

'Have this one on me.' The stranger handed him a fresh bottle.

The drunk unscrewed the top and drank deeply. 'Good stuff,' was the only intelligible sound he uttered as the unaccustomed warmth of whisky flowed down his throat. 'You're a good mate. One of the best – bloody good –'

'Let's get you behind this hoarding and out of the worst of the rain.'

'Too bloody soft, that's your trouble. Haven't been on the road long enough. It's sheltered enough out here.' The tone had become contentious. The man who offered the bottle grew wary. He knew what men who lived on the streets were capable of.

'For you perhaps,' he said quietly. 'But you've half a bottle inside you.'

'You complaining I've taken too much of your booze?' The drunk tried and failed to focus as he handed the bottle back. He attempted to sit up, lost momentum and fell backwards, sprawling on the fouled pavement.

'I gave it to you because I want you to have it,' his companion explained. 'But we're in the open. You know what the others are like. One whiff of that bottle and it'll be gone.'

'I'll look after it.' The voice slowed as the fuddled mind digested the gravity of the threat.

'Up you get.' A hand gripped the back of the dirty coat. The sharp sound of tearing cloth echoed around the street but the drunk managed to remain on his feet – just – and only with help. Tottering close to the man who had given him the bottle, he reeked of the fetid, sour filth he'd lived and slept all winter.

'One more step.'

The drunk fell headlong behind a hoarding advertising a lager that would, if the picture could be believed, attract young, voluptuous females. Rolling over he held up his arms.

'More!' he begged.

The whisky bottle again changed hands.

'Good stuff –' the bottle fell from his fingers. His companion watched it roll over the rough ground until it clattered to rest against a lump of concrete. The contents gurgled into a puddle, mixing with the rainwater.

The man looked up and down Jubilee Street. It was deserted, just as he'd hoped it would be. The hostels for the homeless closed their doors early. They had to because the demand for beds greatly exceeded the supply. Anyone who'd lived on the streets for any length of time knew there was nothing for them in Jubilee Street at this hour. Queues started forming at five o'clock. The Salvation Army and lay charity hostels were invariably full before six, the Catholic one, which was fighting a losing battle against lice and fleas, a little later. At eight the police came down and moved the stragglers on. But despite the intermittent police presence, few wandered among its precincts after dark. And tonight was no exception.

The pavements shone dull, grey satin except where potholes had been filled with gleaming black puddles. Rain continued to fall, soft and silent. No footstep, no whine of a car engine disturbed the silence. Lights burned in the ground floor windows of the hostels, but no sound came from them.

The man stared dispassionately at the drunk lying at his feet. Eyes closed, legs spread wide apart, snore ripped noisily from his throat. He was dead to the world. A smile creased his companion's face as he thought of the old adage.

He slung the bag he was carrying on to the ground. Opening it, he removed a plastic bottle of clear liquid, a tin gallon can and a hunting knife with a six inch hooked blade. Time to set to work.

Father Sam Mayberry, who'd been working late on the Catholic hostel's account books, heard the scream. A piercing, bestial cry of pure agony. It took him precious minutes to unbar the front door. The first thing he saw were the flames soaring behind the hoarding. As he ran closer, crying out for someone to call the fire-brigade, he saw the dark shape in the centre. It ceased screaming momentarily after he reached it.

When the telephone rang, it came almost as a relief. Lyn picked it up. She looked across the room where Trevor was talking to Anna and Peter. He must have had a few, not to have even heard it.

'Lyn, is Trevor there?'

She recognised the lilting tones of Trevor's superior's Welsh accent.

'I'll get him for you, Dan.'

'I'm sorry, but –'

'It's all right,' she interrupted the inspector. The first thing she'd learned as the live-in girlfriend of a police officer was that "but" meant cancelled plans. As one disgruntled wife had complained to her at the police ball, even funerals, marriages and births – especially births – came second to police emergencies.

'I'm sorry, Lyn.' Trevor slid his arms into the sleeves of his quilted anorak. Anna was already outside in the car the inspector had sent to pick them up.

'Stop apologising. I expected it.' Lyn stood back as the door to the living room opened.

'But you've gone to all this trouble...'

'Don't worry, mate. We'll enjoy ourselves without you.' Peter stood in the doorway a drink in one hand, a cigar in the other.

'I've no doubt you will.'

Peter picked up the sarcasm in Trevor's voice but ignored it. He drew on his cigar as he retreated back into the noisy room, leaving a trail of acrid smoke in his wake.

'I'll be back as soon as I can.' Trevor reached out intending to embrace Lyn, but she stepped into the kitchen away from him.

'I won't wait up.' There was an edge to her voice he didn't have time to soften.

'See you.' He opened the front door and strode down the garden path. The car was parked, blue lights flashing at the bottom of the narrow driveway.

'You took your bloody time,' Anna said. 'What's the problem? Needed one more double brandy to convince yourself that it really is your birthday?'

Twenty minutes later, it wasn't only Trevor who was wishing he'd had one more stiff drink. Detective Evans was waiting for them in the middle of Jubilee Street, police cars and fire engines parked either side of him. Behind him the forensic team was busy winding "scene of crime" tape around poles cordoning off an area of waste ground and pavement the size of a football pitch. In the centre, behind scorched hoarding, were the smouldering remains of a fire that had blanketed the street with the stench of burning flesh.

'No more bloody water or foam. Please!' Patrick O'Kelly, the pathologist from the General

Hospital who was police pathologist on call, shouted to the firemen as he hoisted his leg over the tape.

‘Sorry about your party, Trevor.’ Dan stuffed a peppermint into his mouth as Trevor and Anna climbed out of the car.

‘So am I,’ Anna retorted.

‘You were enjoying it?’ Dan asked.

‘Glad someone was,’ Trevor said.

‘What we got?’ Anna shied away from the maudlin note in Trevor’s voice. There was nothing worse than a copper whose personal relationship was foundering. She recognised the symptoms because it was a familiar scenario. Police work didn’t make for happy marriages or long-term relationships. Her last one had disintegrated when her boyfriend had been interrupted once too often during the crucial stages of passion by the telephone at her bedside.

‘We’ve a body, or what’s left of one.’ Dan indicated the smoking ashes that Patrick was peering at as he pulled on his rubber gloves, boots and sterile white paper overall.

‘Doesn’t look like there’s much left,’ Trevor commented.

‘Murder?’ Anna asked.

‘That’s what Patrick is here to find out.’ Dan led the way towards the tape barrier.

‘Bring the tent up here before these ashes blow all over the docks,’ Patrick shouted to his assistant who was heaving a heavy wooden box from the pathologist’s car. ‘Any witnesses?’ he asked Dan without looking up from the blackened mess.

‘Sam Mayberry.’

‘Father Sam Mayberry?’ Trevor checked.

‘He said he knew you.’ Dan offered his peppermints to Anna and Trevor. ‘He heard a cry. It took him a few minutes to unlock his door. By the time he crossed the street all he could see was a burning mass with a screaming blob in the middle – his words, not mine.’

‘He saw no one else? Didn’t hear anyone running away?’ Trevor asked.

‘No.’ Dan looked towards the church hostel. Sam Mayberry, short, round and diminutive, was standing in the doorway talking to Captain Arkwright who ran the Salvation Army shelter. ‘But I only spoke to him briefly. He might have something to add.’

‘Is there anything to indicate this could be murder?’ Trevor had worked with Patrick many times. During the initial stages of an investigation every word had to be dragged out of the man. The pathologist avoided making statements until he was one hundred percent certain of his facts; a trait that usually meant a slow start to investigations into “suspicious deaths”.

‘I can tell you that if he or she was alive when the fire started, he or she didn’t last long.’ Patrick rose to his feet and straightened his back. ‘And petrol was used.’

‘How do you know?’ Dan asked.

‘The smell.’ Patrick waved the forensic photographer forward. ‘Once the site’s been tented and photographed I’ll take a closer look. When the body’s ready for moving I might be able to tell you more.’

Anna groaned; her hopes of returning to the party dashed. ‘It’s going to be a long night.’

‘And that’s before you begin questioning the hostel inmates,’ Dan said.

Trevor didn’t say a word. He had been posted to the Serious Crimes Squad for eight months, for months longer than Anna, and he knew exactly how long a “long night” could be.

‘You didn’t hear, or see anything before the scream, Sam?’ Trevor asked.

‘As I told Inspector Evans,’ Father Sam Mayberry, who rarely used his title outside of church meetings, and never in the hostel, continued. ‘I was sitting in the office, trying to work out the accounts –’

‘The time?’ There was a nagging pain between Trevor’s eyes. The dry, metallic taste of hangover tainted his mouth. His stomach heaved at the smell that hung in the atmosphere despite another shower of rain. He wanted to be home and in bed with Lyn. But he licked his pencil and held it over his notebook.

‘A quarter past twelve. I looked at the clock in the hall. The door to the office was open.’ Sam’s gnome-like features crumpled with the effort of remembering. ‘There was a scream –’

‘And before then?’

‘Nothing out of the ordinary. Rain pattering...’

‘It was raining?’

‘Light but steady, like now. I got wet when I ran outside.’

The revelation warranted another scribble in the book.

‘I wasn’t even sure if the scream was human. I jumped up and ran to the door.’

‘What exactly did you see?’

‘As I told the inspector. A dark figure in the centre of a fireball. It looked like a cartoon shape of a man.’

‘Standing or sitting?’

Sam Mayberry frowned. ‘Possibly kneeling.’

‘Why kneeling?’ Anna asked.

‘Because the figure was too close to the ground to be standing upright and its arms were waving the air, as if clawing at its face.’

‘At its face?’ Trevor looked up from his notebook.

‘It might have been the face or the back of the head. I can’t say which. The fire was so bright he was just a dark silhouette.’

‘And you noticed no one else in the street?’

‘I didn’t look,’ Sam answered in his soft Irish brogue. ‘I shouted for help. Afterwards I gave the poor soul the last rites.’

‘Thanks, Sam.’ Trevor stowed his notebook and pencil in the top pocket of his shirt. He’d carried them there even during his birthday party. Habit? Lyn would have said conditioning. ‘We’ll need a formal statement, but it can wait until morning. Looks like we’re going to be here all night. In the meantime if you remember anything else –’

‘I’ll call the station and ask to speak to you, or Inspector Evans or Peter.’

‘I don’t work with Peter any more, Sam. He’s still on the Drug Squad.’

‘Then you’ve been promoted?’

‘A sideways shift.’

‘Was the victim still screaming while you gave the last rites?’ Anna moved closer. The light from the street lamp fell on to her face. Harsh, unflattering, it threw her strong features into relief, emphasising the determined set of her jaw, the line of her Roman nose and her eyes, hooded, deep set in her raw-boned skull.

‘Thankfully no, because by then quite a crowd had gathered. Captain Arkwright had come out and Tom Morris and half of their hostel inmates behind them. Everyone wanted to see what the commotion was about.’

‘Did you notice anyone there who shouldn’t have been?’ Unlike Trevor, Anna had no notebook to hand. Without asking, she reached into her colleague’s pocket and removed both book and pencil.

‘That depends on what you mean by “shouldn’t have been”.’

‘The population of Jubilee Street is, to say the least, fluid,’ Trevor explained.

‘The inmates vary from night to night. Especially in my hostel. We all have our regulars. Captain Arkwright caters for the ladies, Tom Morris the younger folk, I tend to get the old hands, but we all

get casuals who stay only one night. Some are looking for work and when they don't find it they move on, some, the lucky ones, have places to go to. A few disappear from Jubilee Street and are never seen again. I like to think that for them, especially the youngsters, one taste of the streets was enough to make them swallow their pride and return home.'

'But there were people in the crowd you didn't recognise?' Anna persisted.

'Of course, but none from my own hostel. I've only taken in regulars tonight. But I can't speak for Tom Morris, or Captain Arkwright. They're good people, and like me, they're fighting a losing battle against the authorities to keep their shelters open.'

'I read something about that,' Anna said. 'Isn't the council trying to shut the hostels so they can redevelop this area?'

Sam nodded. 'The church leases my building from the council, same as the Salvation Army. We pay a peppercorn rent, but they can close us down any time they chose. And as Tom is seconded directly from Social Services, which is run by the council, he's even more vulnerable than us.'

'Leaving the homeless with the doorways and the underpasses in the centre of town.'

'No disrespect intended, Sergeant Bradley, but seeing as how your colleagues move them on from there, and the pier was pulled down a while back, it will leave them with nowhere,' Sam shook his head. 'They'll end up dying from hypothermia. One hard winter will be all that's needed to kill most of them.'

'Perhaps that's what the council wants.' Anna returned Trevor's notebook to him.

'I refuse to believe that any man truly wishes another ill.'

'The council's not a man, Sam. It's a hard, inhuman, faceless institution. I thought you'd have learnt that by now.' Trevor pushed his notebook back into his pocket.

'Patrick's ready to move the body. We'll give the boys a hand to push this crowd back, then start interviewing the hostel inmates.' Dan's massive six-foot-four frame loomed towards them.

'Has Patrick found anything yet?' Trevor asked, once they were out of Sam's earshot.

'The victim was human. Either doused with petrol, or had doused itself, prior to igniting. The only recognisable bits are a boot with a foot inside, and a charred skull.'

They returned to where Patrick had prepared the remains for removal. A body shell and bag were laid out in front of the tent that had been pitched to protect the ashes from the wind. Patrick moved his gloved hand delicately among the warm embers, lifting each charred discovery carefully as though it was a precious object. He stared at one piece for a few moments then waved it in the air. 'Cheekbone.'

Trevor stared at the flattish dark bone. Threads of wormy flesh clung to its contours.

'It was resting against this.' Patrick pointed to a piece of dressed stone he'd swathed in plastic. 'The weight of the body must have pressed down on it, cutting off the oxygen. As you see it's barely singed.' He squinted at the piece of bone again, then took a pencil torch from his top pocket and shined it directly on to his find. 'There's something here that looks like knife marks slicing diagonally into the bone.'

'Are you saying what I think you're saying?' Dan queried.

'It could be that this portion of the face was cut off before the fire was set.' He took a plastic bag from his case and slipped the section of bone into it, holding it against the light. 'Whoever it was did a good job. Look at that stump on the side. It's clean cut, not burnt. The ear was taken off before the fire reached it.'

CHAPTER TWO

‘Didn’t you know what it would be like when you moved in with Trevor?’ Peter emptied the dregs from the glasses he’d hunted down in the living room into the sink.

‘Trevor warned me,’ Lyn conceded. ‘Perhaps I didn’t want to believe him.’

‘They say love is blind. I didn’t realise it was deaf as well.’ Peter pulled out the bin, hauled up the edges of the black bag inside and tied it into a knot.

‘How do you manage? With your girlfriends, I mean.’

Peter looked at her and kept the quip he’d been about to toss about “not managing” to himself. Despite her extremely desirable body; her long black hair and enormous dark eyes made her appear younger than her twenty-one years.

He’d noticed Lyn before Trevor had. Watched her as she’d worked as a nurse on the ward Trevor had landed himself in after he’d been injured, and reluctantly left her alone. Not because of Trevor, his friend had been too out of it to notice her at the time, but because of her age. She’d looked so clean and innocent – far too innocent to cope with the baggage a detective the wrong side of thirty carried around with him.

When he discovered she’d moved in with Trevor, he’d slapped his friend on the back and called him a “lucky bastard”; a degree of envy was permissible between friends. But he knew if he took one step closer to Lyn now, he’d run the risk of starting something he wouldn’t want to stop. And ruin his own good friendship. A friendship that had endured since he and Trevor had joined the force together as rookies.

‘I don’t have a girlfriend.’ He lifted the bag out of the bin.

‘Anna –’

‘Anna and I fight in the station and, occasionally, in my flat, but not in my bed. The biggest thing between us are our differences. You invited us both, we came.’

‘There’s nothing more to it than that?’ She sounded disappointed.

‘Only banter.’ He opened the back door, deposited the bag in the dustbin, shut the lid and returned to the kitchen. He took his time over washing his hands, delaying the moment when he’d have to look at her again. He was policeman through and through. Conditioned to interrogate, question, detect criminal activity, and somewhere in the process of conditioning he had lost touch with his emotions. It was bad enough when they surfaced in the form of sympathy for a victim during a case, impossible when he tried to deal with them in his private life.

‘You were married once.’

It was a statement, not a question, and he realised Trevor must have told her. ‘It was a disaster.’

‘Because you were never there for her when she needed you?’

‘Because we wanted different things from life.’

‘If you were that different why did you marry her?’

‘Too much moonlight, too much booze. Why does anyone marry? For her, I think it was the nesting instinct. She wanted a home and with my salary taken into consideration she qualified for a large mortgage and a better house.’

‘That’s a foul thing to say about someone you lived with.’

‘Foul maybe, but true.’ He looked at the clean, simple lines of the blue and white kitchen. Her taste was – is – horrendous,’ he corrected himself. He’d become so used to relegating his ex-wife to the past he occasionally had trouble remembering she was alive. ‘Fitted carpets with patterns that knock you in the eye. Fence to fence garden gnomes. Collections of knick-knacks that covered every inch of the house, even the kitchen worktops, and all inscribed with *A Present From Brighton* in gold ink.’

‘You’re joking?’

‘I’m not. ~~Less than a year after taking my trip down the aisle I began drinking in the White Hart~~ had to find another home. I simply couldn’t face all those gnomes every time I got pissed...’

‘Peter!’

‘In the end she found someone who understood her and the gnomes, so we split.’

‘Trevor told me you gave her the house.’

‘I couldn’t have lived with myself if I’d made the gnomes homeless. Not even a jumble sale would have taken them.’ He folded the fresh bag he was holding into the bin. ‘It’s a sad story,’ he said with gravity he intended to be mocking, but didn’t quite pull off. ‘And in the force a common one. The super’s wife left him.’

‘I heard. And Dan Evans is a widower.’

‘He joined as a widower,’ he said.

‘And Trevor lived with a girl for six years.’

He leaned back against the cupboards. So this was what she’d been building up to. He had no intention of telling her anything Trevor hadn’t. Lyn was Trevor’s business, not his. Just as Trevor’s past was his own, and no one else’s, unless Trevor chose to share it with them.

‘He told me about her,’ she sensed that Peter disapproved of her prying into Trevor’s past. ‘Her name was Mags and after she left him he couldn’t even live in the flat they’d bought together.’

‘He bought,’ Peter corrected. ‘Mags never contributed a penny. But then Trevor has always been a soft touch. Makes a point of paying all his ladies’ bills.’

A deep blush spread over Lyn’s face.

‘Oh hell!’ He opened a can of warm beer that was standing on the work surface and drank it. ‘It didn’t mean that in relation to you.’ He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

‘It’s not money.’ She stared at her reflection mirrored in the blackened glass of the window. ‘I would love to hand over my share of the mortgage every month. It would give our relationship some permanency. As it is, I never see Trevor. I feel as though I’m in the way. As if I’m nothing more than an encumbrance.’

‘You are important to him, Lyn. Probably the only thing that means anything in his life.’ Peter wanted to but didn’t dare dry the tears that were falling from her eyes. ‘And, I guarantee that while Trevor is living with you he’ll never look at another woman.’

‘How can you be so sure?’ She wondered if he suspected the scenarios of “the other woman” she’d imagined every time Trevor stayed out all night.

‘You came after four years of celibacy. You might not have realised it, being so much younger than him, but ardour isn’t normal for a man of his advanced years, it’s the result of living like a monk.’

‘You’re incorrigible.’ Despite the derisive tone in her voice, her tears turned to smiles as she picked up the dishcloth and wiped down the work surfaces.

‘He used to worship women from afar from time to time, but after Mags that’s all it was. Admiration from a distance. He may have even spoken to one or two, but if he did, I swear it was only in the line of duty.’

‘You’re not as bad as I thought you were.’

‘Tell me where the Hoover is and I’ll clean up the living room and redeem myself even more.’

‘It’s three in the morning.’

‘The wall between you and next door is solid, isn’t it?’

‘Yes, but...’

‘I hate to see a mess, woman.’ He opened the broom cupboard in the hall. ‘I’ve found it.’

Ten minutes later Lyn and Peter’s combined efforts had returned the house to pristine condition and Peter was walking down the beach road to his flat. He’d unbent enough to peck Lyn on the cheek.

when he'd said goodbye, but only when the door was open, and they were public enough to remove the temptation to grab her, and give her what Trevor should have – if he'd had any sense.

After Peter left, Lyn walked around the house switching off lights, checking doors, moving objects already set in their allotted places. Eventually she could find no more excuse to linger. Climbing the stairs she went into the master bedroom. The present she'd intended to give Trevor at bedtime was lying on his pillow, where she'd put it before laying out the buffet. She picked up the small box, plumped out the blue velvet ribbon that held the silver wrapping paper in place, and laid it on her bedside table. In the bathroom she stripped off the short black dress that left little to the imagination and stood under a hot shower for half an hour. She wouldn't have admitted it to Trevor, but she was spinning out time, hoping she'd still be awake when he returned.

When she finally slid beneath the duvet on the king size bed, she picked up a book from Trevor's side of the bed. It was a guide to the West Country. She realised that he must have bought it with the trip to his mother's farm in mind. Perhaps he was aware of the way she felt after all.

She tried to read but in the end sleep overtook her, and when the alarm went off at six-thirty, the first thing she saw on opening her eyes was the silver and blue package. She had spent yet another night alone.

* * *

'Is that the last one?' Trevor asked Tom Morris, the social worker seconded from the council to the voluntary organisation that ran the hostel. He had been impressed by Tom's gentle handling of the inmates and the respect he commanded from even the most difficult of them, despite his youth. More than twenty-five or so, Tom was good looking and personable. Fond references to a wife had made Trevor wonder how well Mrs Morris coped with a husband, who, on his own admission, slept out six nights of every week. Judging by the smile on Morris's face, better than Lyn.

He watched Morris run his finger down the list of names in a grease-stained ledger. 'Twenty-seven'

Trevor shuffled through the papers in front of him. 'Twenty-seven,' he reiterated.

'Then that's it.'

No one had expected to get anything from the inmates of the shelters other than their identities, but Dan had insisted that they take a hostel each and check everyone who'd slept the night in Jubilee Street, if only for elimination purposes, because Sam Mayberry had seen the fire before any inmates had left their beds.

'Glad to see Serious Crimes being thorough. Once these places open in the morning there's no telling where the guests go.' Superintendent Bill Mulcahy stood in the doorway of the dilapidated hall with a miserable expression souring his face that had its origins in more than the dismal surroundings. 'Patrick's waiting for us in the mortuary.'

'I've finished, sir.' Trevor looked at his watch. Seven-thirty. He would have liked to have gone home, seen Lyn, showered and changed, but he knew better than to ask Bill for the privilege.

'Afterwards we'll set up a case conference in the station.'

'Sir.' Trevor went to the door. He had a sudden craving for the brandy he'd left at home. He wondered if it was a sign of alcoholism. He'd never wanted a drink in the morning before. He knew it was morning because he followed Bill out of the lamp-lit hall into drizzle-filled grey light, but his body clock was still set to night. Deep velvet night; time to go to bed and cuddle Lyn.

'I want everything in Zone A tagged and in the laboratory within the hour.' Bill's voice echoed across the taped area where white-suited, rubber-gloved and booted figures had switched off the torches to comb the ground in the dawn light. Trevor recognised Andrew Murphy and Chris Brook among the searchers. Judging by the pained expressions on their faces they'd stayed at the party long enough to get hangovers.

‘Found this in Zone A, sir.’ Andrew held up a plastic bag that held a whisky bottle.

‘That’s an expensive brand to find down here,’ Trevor observed.

‘Probably thieved from one of the bottle banks for the smell.’ Bill walked away.

‘Zone A is within ten feet of the body?’ Trevor asked Andrew.

‘Yes, but we’ve been ordered to comb the ground as far as the waterfront.’

Trevor took a last look at the damp, chilled searchers as he climbed into the back of the car. Ran did hold some privileges. At least it was dry in the mortuary.

‘Don’t touch those,’ Patrick warned. ‘They’re waiting to go to forensics.’

‘What are they?’ Anna squinted at a blackened mess that looked like a clump of burned roots.

‘Hands. It’s a slim hope, but they might be able to lift prints from them.’

‘Off those?’ Bill studied the twig-like structures.

‘The skin is still attached in one or two places. You never know your luck. There may be a identifiable partial print.’

‘I’ll believe it when I see it.’ Bill turned from the specimens destined for the Forensic Laboratory to the slab where Patrick had laid out the remains of the incinerated corpse.

‘It’s laid toe to head, or as near as we could set it up, given what we have. The foot was intact in the boot. It’s bagged on the slab behind you,’ Patrick said to Dan. ‘The other foot was reduced to a few spoonfuls of ash. Pick it up,’ he encouraged Dan who was peering through the plastic. ‘It’s distinctive. I doubt many men wear red baseball boots with blue laces, even in Jubilee Street.’

‘Men?’ Bill questioned.

‘That’s not a woman’s foot.’ Patrick pointed to the long, thin, splay-toed foot at the bottom of the slab. Thickly covered in black hairs, its top was seared by a brown scab. ‘His sock is in the bag next to the boot.’

Trevor studied the foot and felt as though he was looking at an exhibit in an art gallery.

‘Is this the sock?’ Dan held up a bag containing a luminous green sock topped by a crust of blackened, blobbed rib.

‘Melted nylon,’ Patrick explained. ‘One or two bits are attached to the ankle bone; also some rubber from the shoe has stuck to the sole of the foot.’

Anna looked from the slab to the tiled wall. She’d never liked post-mortems. As soon as news had got out about her transfer from Vice to Serious Crimes, Peter and Andrew had delighted in spinning her yarns of Patrick’s idiosyncratic post-mortem habits. At the time she’d assumed they’d been exaggerating. Now she wasn’t too sure.

‘Did you remove the foot or was it severed?’ Trevor asked.

‘Severed by burning. We had fun trying to assemble him. After intense fire it’s never easy trying to work out which bit is what, particularly if the body’s found in a crouched position as this was. Leg bones badly charred, virtually no flesh or muscle left, pelvic bones burned, but enough left to determine a male even without the foot. Torso...’

Bill interrupted Patrick. ‘It looks like a rack of ribs my wife once cremated over a barbecue.’

‘Head, now that is interesting. The left-hand side has burned away, but not the right. The petrol was probably thrown in a haphazard fashion. Fire can be fickle. Petrol burns itself and whatever it comes into contact with, but it goes for the soaked bits first, and when the body was doused by the firemen the flames hadn’t reached one or two places. The foot, for instance.’ Patrick picked it up.

‘You said the body was crouched?’ Dan prompted.

‘One knee drawn to the chin, hands over the head which was face down, on the thighs.’

‘Sam said something about him moving his hands up to his head.’ Until that point Trevor had gazed at the remains with equanimity. But it suddenly struck him that a few short hours ago this had been a living, breathing man and anyone, himself included, was only a match and a can of petrol away from

becoming just one more item in Patrick's overcrowded work schedule.

The pathologist indicated another bag on the slab next to those that held the hands and boot. 'Clo – thick enough to be the remains of a coat. Wool and synthetic mix, black, can't tell you any more, but the forensic boys might be able to.'

'Thanks,' Dan said caustically. 'Just about every vagrant in Jubilee Street wears a black overcoat. It seems to be the stock item of the charity shop.'

'This is what I showed you on site.' Patrick picked up a bag that lay next to the brittle remnants of the skull.

'That the bit you said had knife marks?' Dan rummaged in his pocket, pulled out a bag of peppermints and offered them round. Patrick and Bill were the only ones to take any.

'Which makes me think our victim didn't kill himself. We've had suicides who've torched themselves. There was a spate of them in the seventies and early eighties. We've even had a few who've mutilated themselves facially, but we've never had one who's done both.'

'There's a first time for everything,' Bill spoke with the air of a man who'd seen all life had to offer.

'If he did it to himself, where's the knife?' Patrick asked. 'Even if the handle burned we should have found the blade. The marks are here, here and here.'

Trevor, Bill, and Dan peered at the diagonal, gaping sloughs in the bone. Anna glanced at them from a distance. 'There's not much flesh adhering to this section, although it hasn't been as badly burned as the rest. It's my guess, that the flesh was scraped away before the fire started. I've X-rayed the cuts and I'd say they were probably made by a keen, honed, not serrated, hooked blade. Possibly a hunting knife.'

Dan gazed at the fragment and put it into the context of a face. It took him a few moments to make out the beginnings of an eye socket at the top edge of the cheekbone. 'Sam said the victim was screaming when he ran out into the street. Can you slice that much off a man's face without killing him?'

'Good lord yes. Cases have been recorded where men have lost their faces in accidents and not even realised for a few minutes what's happened to them. These injuries could have certainly prompted the screams your witness heard.'

'Would the injuries have killed him if the fire hadn't?'

'Impossible to say. There's virtually nothing left of the lungs. We've tried freezing and slicing the couple of slivers we found, but there's not enough to tell if smoke was inhaled or not. All I can say is I don't think he could have lasted long in an inferno that intense. The end of the screaming was probably the end of the man.'

'So we've a male, wearing red baseball boots with blue laces, black woollen coat – possibly vagrant –'

'In that get-up in Jubilee Street, I'd say undoubtedly vagrant,' Anna interrupted Dan in the hope of speeding things up.

'All the homeless I know who hadn't found a bed in one of the hostels would have moved on from Jubilee Street by that time of night.'

'You an expert on down-and-outs?' Anna regretted snapping at Trevor the instant the words were out of her mouth.

'Not as much of an expert as Peter.' Trevor was as exhausted as Anna but had learnt to keep his temper around his superiors.

'Age?' Dan asked Patrick.

'From what is left of the skull between twenty-five and forty-five.'

'You can't bring it any closer than that?'

‘We may know more when I parcel up the teeth and what’s left of his jaw and send it to the dental pathologist. The boots are size ten, but his feet were eight and a half, and whoever owned the boots before him had stretched them. The big toe had broken through the canvas and the stitching on the side had split under the strain.’

‘Hair colour? Eyes?’ Dan pressed.

‘The hair on the upper part of the foot is very dark, almost black.’

‘You have washed it?’ Bill asked.

‘Yes.’ Patrick glowered over his glasses. He’d never learnt to appreciate police humour, preferring his own peculiar brand. ‘As for the eyes, I didn’t find one.’

‘Can we have a picture of the boot?’ Dan asked.

Patrick shouted for his assistant who handed over a selection of digital photographs he’d printed out. ‘I’ll send over my report as soon as it’s processed.’

‘Appreciate all you’ve done.’

‘Any time, as long as it’s not in the next four or five hours. I’m for bed.’ Patrick snapped off his gloves and tossed them into a bin.

‘You all look like hell, and I’m feeling generous,’ Bill conceded as they left the mortuary. ‘The most pressing thing is to get a fix on the identity of the victim, so I’ll pass the photographs on to the day shift. You can all go home, get a couple of hours sleep and meet back in the station for a briefing, say –’ he glanced at his watch. ‘It’s ten now. Five suit everyone?’

‘Why not?’ Anna replied. ‘Let’s turn day into night.’

‘When you’ve worked on Serious Crimes as long as I have, you’ll be grateful for sleeping time whenever it comes,’ Dan opened his car door.

Trevor walked through his front door and called out Lyn’s name, although he knew there was little chance she’d be in. He went from room to room, looking for a note. There wasn’t one. All evidence of the party had been cleared away apart from the leftover sausages, cold meats and salad in the fridge. He took a cold sausage and glared balefully at the salad. If the stuff was so good for you, why had so little of it been eaten?

Feeling guilty because he had left Lyn to tackle the mess on her own, he kicked off his shoes and climbed the stairs. If he’d lived alone he would have crashed out just as he was, clothes and all. Because he and Lyn shared the same bed, if not always at the same time, he showered first, although he was so tired he actually slept for a moment or two as he leant against the shower door. A minute later, damp and smelling of Lyn’s cold cream soap he fell into bed and plunged into a deep unconsciousness that left no room for anything. Not even thoughts of faceless burning men – or Lyn.

‘I’m coming!’ Anna Bradley pulled the belt of her towelling robe tight around her waist and thundered down the stairs of her one up, one down starter home. She wrenched open the door to see Peter on the doorstep, his new BMW parked on the kerb behind him, a smile on his face.

‘I thought you might need a chauffeur.’

She frowned, sleep still numbing her mind. ‘Why? There’s nothing wrong with my car –’

‘It went in for a service yesterday morning. I picked you up from the garage, which is why Andre gave you a lift to the party.’

‘Oh hell!’ Trevor’s birthday party felt as though it had taken place last year, rather than last night.

‘Super’s called a briefing,’ he reminded her.

‘It’s not due to start until five.’

‘It’s a quarter to.’

‘Blast!’ She turned her back and walked up the stairs.

‘Want me to make you coffee?’

‘And food. Food, I must have food. I’m starving.’

He shut the door behind him. Rounding the partition that screened off the entrance from the rest of the house, he stood, disgusted at the mess that faced him. He hadn’t helped Lyn clear up after the party out of any finer feelings than an overriding passion for order and cleanliness in all things domestic. As his wife had found out to her cost, he loathed clutter, and was paranoid about dirt. The state of Ann Bradley’s living room appalled him.

It was too small to hold the torn and grubby two-seater settee and matching chair she’d bought in a junk shop with the intention of re-upholstering. The scraps of carpet that could be seen, beneath the layers of newspapers, magazines and bulging plastic bags, appeared to be beige and in desperate need of a shampoo. Beer bottles, a half-empty bottle of whisky, three squashed diet coke cans, coats, towels and tea-towels were strewn over a folding table pushed into a corner next to two non-matching upright chairs. The brown and white Scandinavian-style curtains looked as though they hadn’t been washed in years and the windowsill, like the window, was covered by a layer of grime that extended over two dead potted plants, assorted mummified insects and a dirty glass.

He walked over the newspapers to the kitchen area, tucked in the back corner behind a breakfast bar. The rubber soles of his shoes stuck to the vinyl as he stepped off the litter strewn carpet. A blind was drawn over a window above the sink. He tried to raise it and it fell into the stainless steel basin which was filled to the brim with cold, scummy water, plates and bowls.

The mess was worse than the living room. Plates, cups and glasses, their surfaces thick with congealing food and furry mould were piled on the galley counter. He gingerly opened the fridge. The light flicked on revealing a piece of hard yellow cheese delicately drawn with a map of blue mould and a bottle of greenish separated milk.

‘Coffee made?’ Anna was halfway down the stairs, pulling a sweater over her head.

‘I’ll buy you one to go in Macdonald’s.’ He shut the fridge.

‘Couldn’t find anything?’

‘I was afraid of catching something if I looked any longer.’

‘I suppose the place is a bit of a mess.’ Her tone was defiant, his reply honest.

‘I now know why you always want to go back to my place.’

‘I wanted to see how you lived before letting you in here, but your flat is sterile. It lacks character.’

‘At least it’s passed a health and safety inspection.’

‘So would my bedroom and bathroom.’

‘That an invitation?’ He studied her critically. The place might be a mess, but she wasn’t. Her short blonde hair was brushed away from her face, wet and gleaming from the shower. Her black slacks and grey pullover were clean, fresh and newly pressed, and she smelt of magnolias; but despite her assurance he couldn’t help wondering if chaos reigned upstairs as well as down.

‘I suppose it is.’

He was surprised by her answer. Their four dates, two of them videos and take-aways in his flat, had been surprisingly chaste, especially for him. He hadn’t been able to quantify why until that moment. Anna had the same faults as his ex-wife, if anything magnified, and he’d been too mesmerised by her body to see them. But it was a magnificent body. Worth enduring a little squalor for.

‘How about right now?’ he suggested.

‘Why not? I’m sure the super won’t mind us missing the briefing.’

‘Cars break down all the time.’

‘Even new BMWs.’

‘Tyres blow out on BMWs same as Fords.’

‘Seeing as how you disapprove of my housekeeping, sure you wouldn’t prefer the blow out happen outside your place? That way you could enjoy a tussle on guaranteed clean sheets’ There was

peculiar glint in her green eyes. He cursed softly under his breath. Was she or wasn't she leading him on? —

'Bill's waiting.' He cut his losses. For the first time in his life he'd didn't quite know where he was with a woman.

'Excuses, excuses. That's what I always get when I make a man an honest proposition. Seems to me that in spite of all your promises you're terrified of a female getting on top of you, Peter. In more ways than one. Well, we going to this meeting, or not?' She pulled her keys out of her shoulder bag, walked down the stairs and out through the door leaving him feeling like an adolescent who'd just failed an initiation rite.

'Sam Mayberry identified the shoes,' Bill informed Trevor and Dan. 'They belonged to a vagrant known as Tony. And any minute now we're going to get a good look at him.'

'There are photographs?' Dan dipped a plastic stick into a polystyrene cup of coffee.

'Sam mentioned that a team from the local television station were poking around Jubilee Street last month. They filmed a documentary on the council's plans for the re-development of the area. They interviewed Sam, Tom Morris and Captain Arkwright, and most of the vagrants who weren't camera shy, including our Tony.'

'You've the film they took?' Dan made a wry face as he sipped the bitter brew.

'Producer said the film wasn't finished. I told him we weren't critics, just needed to see whatever footage he took of Tony. Andrew's picking him, the film and Sam up.'

'What about Tom Morris and Captain Arkwright?' Trevor asked.

'They knew of this Tony. But Sam knew him better, which is why Sam is coming and they're not. Good evening,' Bill greeted Peter and Anna. 'Nice of you to join us.'

'Peter?' Trevor raised an eyebrow.

'Our victim was a junkie, hence the Drug Squad presence,' Dan explained.

'And every time Serious Crimes digs itself into a hole it can't get out of, it requisitions my help. Peter smiled as he sat next to Anna.

CHAPTER THREE

‘That’s all there is. Fix, then oblivion. Drink or fix, sleep. Always looking for the next fix or drink. And living in hope that we’ll get it.’ The voice was educated, flat, diluted by futility. The speaker was tall, painfully thin and filthy. The pupils of his eyes were dilated. He glanced uneasily from side to side nervously searching – for the next drink? The next fix?

‘What happens when you haven’t the money to buy a drink or a fix, Tony?’ The voice was female, professional.

‘You go out and look. You have to walk around. Look –’

The camera panned down the filthy clothes that hung loosely on the emaciated body. A long, black overcoat, threadbare, torn and stained. A crumpled, horizontally-striped shirt that must have cost someone money before it had been pushed into a charity sack. Jeans, scabrous and broken. Feet in oversized red baseball boots with blue laces. The camera climbed again, focusing on a pair of skeletal, fidgety hands; the fingers encrusted with brown scum, the nails split and blackened. Someone out of camera sight handed over a cigarette. Clean hands passing swiftly over grimy ones, careful not to touch.

The lens followed the cigarette being carried to the man’s mouth. Cracked, dry lips opened to display the yellowed chipped edges of neglected teeth. The face contorted, and the eyes closed as smoke was drawn deeply into lungs. The exhalation was slow, every moment of nicotine-stained sensation being savoured to the full.

‘A man who makes the most of every little pleasure.’ Nigel Valance, a freelance producer who worked occasionally for the local TV company, sat back in his chair.

‘A man who made the most of every little pleasure,’ Peter contradicted.

‘Quiet!’ Bill paused the remote until silence reigned in the room.

‘And tonight, Tony?’ The same female voice.

‘Tonight?’ No matter what angle the camera took, Tony’s eyes refused to meet the scrutinising gaze of the lens.

‘You went to the DSS this morning, for your payment,’ she said. ‘Do you have enough left for a beer in the shelter tonight?’

‘Bastards wouldn’t give me nothing. Said I had to wait.’ He gripped the glowing end of the cigarette tensely between the tips of his thumb and forefinger and swayed on his feet.

Trevor had spent enough working time in Jubilee Street to profile the man and a hundred like him. If it had been Tony’s day to go to the DSS the money would have been off-loaded on to the first of the licences prepared to serve him. That’s if he was on drink. The pupil dilation said otherwise, and there were enough cheap varieties of dope on offer down in the dock area to buy all the hostel “guests” a few hours of oblivion.

Judging by the state of him on film, he wouldn’t have even been awake if someone hadn’t shaken him for the benefit of the rolling camera. Whoever had planned the documentary had needed a dossier to give an Oscar-winning performance of a man at the end of his rope and they’d settled on Tony because someone knew addicts. Catch a man sleeping after a trip and you’ve got compliance. Wake him up and he’ll jump through hoops if he thinks it will finance his next fix. What had they offered? Money or dope? It wouldn’t have taken much of either. Pity they hadn’t filmed him when whatever he was on was wearing off. Another couple of hours and it would have been a different story. Watch the raving lunatic who’d kill his grandmother for a ticket to temporary oblivion.

Trevor looked along the table. Bill, Dan, Anna, Andrew, Sam Mayberry and the documentary maker, Nigel Valance, were watching the screen intently. But Peter caught his eye. The quick glance

they exchanged was enough. Peter's thoughts were running along similar lines to his own. But Peter's patience was shorter.

'Do you really expect people to fall for this "poor lost soul" crap?'

'Pardon?' Nigel turned his pony-tailed head and looked at Peter through weak blue eyes rimmed by gold wire spectacles.

'You want the world to feel sorry for a junkie who's an hour off a downer when he'd be prepared to do anything or anyone to fund the next trip?'

'He told us it was drink.'

'And I'm Santa Claus.'

'That might explain...'

'What?' Bill paused the disc again.

'What comes next? Father Mayberry and Constable Murphy described the man you were interested in and I put all the footage I could find of him on this disc.'

'If there's more to come let's watch it,' Bill hit the play button.

'We were in Jubilee Street for two weeks...'

'Quiet!' Bill ordered, and all eyes focused on the screen again.

Another interview, this time with Captain Arkwright who eloquently pleaded for more understanding and financial support from the community. A longer one with Tom Morris who reiterated the message of the Salvation Army worker directly to the camera, but more forcibly. Even Peter was tempted to put his hand in his pocket.

'He's very attractive,' Anna commented.

'He's married,' Trevor warned.

'With looks like that, who cares?' Anna glanced slyly at Peter.

'Doesn't he simply exude sincerity? He was a treasure. An absolute gift to a documentary maker.' Nigel enthused. 'Blond hair and blue eyes are often photogenic, like yours, Anna...'

'You two know one another?' Peter interrupted.

'We did,' Nigel winked at Anna.

'Years ago,' Anna said in a tone that warned off both Nigel and Peter.

'But Tom has more than just his looks,' Nigel continued. 'He's wasted where he is. I told him to go for a career in advertising or presenting. His looks and sincerity could take him to the top.'

'Possibly he appears sincere because he believes in what he's doing,' Peter suggested.

Cut to a queue forming outside the hostel. It was still light – mid-afternoon? A man along the queue, Tony huddled into his black overcoat and bright red baseball boots stood between two men. One, who could have been any age between thirty and fifty, had dirty blond hair, a round face and cheerful empty smile. The other was as tall and dark as Tony, but, unlike Tony, his eyes were heavy and dull in his lean face. Trevor wondered if it was lack of interest or – drug damage.

'Know them, Sam?' Bill asked the priest.

'The dark one is Vince. We've learned to tread carefully with our guests, and that one in particular is very withdrawn.'

'He still around?' Dan reached into his pocket for his peppermints.

'I didn't see either of them last night, but that doesn't mean anything. They're regular casuals, you know what I mean. They sleep with us when they can afford it and on the streets when they can't. We sometimes go for days without seeing them.'

'They a pair?' Peter leaned forward on his elbows.

'They're usually together. The dark one is – not quite himself.'

'Mental case?' Peter diagnosed.

'I believe they've both been discharged from Compton Castle.'

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