

THE FEATHERS

By rcheydn

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The Feathers is a work of fiction.

If there is any resemblance to any real person, living or dead, it is certainly not intended and is pure coincidence.

Of course there are indeed references to real persons relating to actual events. But they are accurate references and are used to knit together the fiction without in any way altering the facts.

Any references to government persons or positions are invented.

Yet if any similarities are deemed derogatory to any person, living or dead, in any way by any reader, the author points out again that this story is fictional and therefore no slur is intended.

About the Author

rcheydn worked as a journalist for newspapers and magazines throughout Europe, Australia and the Far East for a decade before entering the world of public relations. For the next twenty-five years he was a senior PRO in the United Kingdom, Australia and, for almost 20 of those years, in Hong Kong.

Then he established his own public relations company in London which is regarded as one of the most innovative agencies of its kind.

The Feathers, is his latest novel.

The Catskinner was his first foray into the political thriller genre.

Crime or political thriller writing are not his exclusive interests. He is also the author of a children's book *Keepers of the Deep*.

rcheydn is now working on his next project.

Cover

By Graphicz X Designs

Dedication

For Molly C

CHAPTER ONE

The adage that your entire life passes before your mind's eye in the split second before you die is not true.

The mini-cab driver knew that for a fact; she was certain that nothing could be further from the truth.

In her case death was painfully long drawn out suffering, and apart from the odd fleeting moment her total attention, her absolute concentration was focused on her personal agony.

Death in truth had yet to come, but she had tasted it many times she believed over the past six days and she prayed that the final darkness was close, very close.

Her torment must, had to, end.

There could be few who would not understand had they been aware of what the plump, not especially attractive 37-year-old Ukrainian, had been through.

For one day less than a full week Grazyna Litavincuk had been eating herself to death.

CHAPTER TWO

It has often been said that a week is a long time in politics.

For the new, and for many voters, not eagerly anticipated coalition government the traditional honeymoon was short lived. In fact it barely got off the ground.

On the day it came into power it inherited a fiscal deficit of enormous proportions by any global yardstick.

There was also the ongoing major scandal involving politicians' expenses that led to Members of Parliament being ridiculed and reviled.

With barely a year into their rule the government was faced with a massively damaging new scandal surrounding one of Britain's most popular newspapers which was found to have hacked into the private telephones of some of the most high profile and vulnerable people in the society.

This led to the two top policemen in the country having to resign and other officers being investigated for taking payments from the press in return for supplying confidential information. The national police force was rudderless.

And then within weeks London and other major cities experienced the worst riots in decades.

Not that the previous government had fared much better in its formative years in government. In the latter part of the 1990s the Labour Party won a stunning general election victory after many years in opposition. The future could not have looked better. There was a new, modern Prime Minister with a whole new approach to politics and the government of the country.

Yet there is another political characteristic that can be relied upon and which history has shown irrespective of the hue of the ruling party. Before too long the rot will set in. And for that new, fresh Labour government it began with the type of scandal that has wrecked governments before it and will almost certainly bring down governments in the future.

The then Foreign Secretary had in the glare of public brashness shed his wife of two decades, shown scant regard for public opinion in quickly marrying his diary secretary twenty years his junior with whom he had enjoyed a somewhat strange and dark affair, and continued to leave political debris in the wake of a succession of overseas forays and domestic comments. His blunders, his perceived lack of tact and arrogance were indicative by then of the New Labour government, it was freely said, which had been rushed into power at Westminster in enormous numbers and with deep hope barely a year and a half before.

The new coalition government might rue their difficulties but even the charismatic Labour leader a decade and a half before faced his own problems which were not confined to his Foreign Secretary's peccadilloes. The Prime Minister and several of his Cabinet colleagues had already had their halos tarnished as well, and as a result the Party itself of even more serious import than the administrative organ of Government was under attack from inside as well as out. The broadsheet and tabloid media both found they had ample opportunity to criticise.

Yet the new coalition government's honeymoon also was shorter lived than everyone expected.

In the *London Diary* column which appeared thousands of miles away in the South China Morning Post, Hong Kong's leading English language newspaper, I had written: "*While this new government is losing its way others are finding theirs.*" These others, I maintained, included a new underbelly of British society which could be reflected in the American experience of a decade or two before.

The United States might account for three quarters of the world's crazies, but Britain was second on the dubious honour board without having to rely on the carnage of Northern Ireland. Children not even in their teens were killing. Teenagers hunted neighbourhoods in packs, praying on lone women, the crippled, the aged. More

seasoned thugs resorted to vicious violence in the commission of crimes. And the streets and highways of the country were witnessing road rage to a breathtaking degree.

“If something is not done to take English society back to what it was, then our future is a place we will look at in awe,” I had concluded.

But if a week is a long time in politics, decades can be an eternity.

Governments may be new. They may be of a vastly different hue. Their problems however may be very similar.

The riots that shook the very foundations of British society up and down the country did more damage to the new coalition government that came into power at the end of the first decade of the Naughties than the politicians’ expenses scandal, the police corruption allegations, even the phone hacking disgrace.

*

“Of course the recent disturbances, or rioting if you will, cannot be excused, but can it be right to have young people incarcerated in adult jails, even just overnight, for what many would consider minor offences, as petty as stealing a can of soda in a supermarket? Can it really be that prisons for twelve to fourteen-year-old criminals, each one of whom will cost the tax payer more than five thousand pounds each and every week, are the way we should be proceeding in this battle?”

The questioner was the host of the popular nightly current affairs programme on terrestrial television. Renowned for his directness, viewers waited for the answer from the junior minister seated a length or two across the studio table.

Adrian Thomason was an example of the new administration in that he had been a Member of Parliament just six years, but found himself in the position of being responsible for the management of crisis flashpoints. His two university degrees and single term experience of backbench politics, when it came down to it, were not always adequate. Crisis management was an exciting prospect when the onus was on somebody else’s shoulders, but when it was you who had to stand at the dispatch box fielding awkward questions while the fixed camera rolled and the tourists gazed down from the Strangers’ Gallery above, and as the hecklers grinned at your discomfort, Opposition backbenches took on a new, more appealing character.

Thomason felt the same, if not worse, when it came to appearing on television. Talking to journalists outside the Home Office building or over a lunch was fine. Such occasions could be controlled. Sitting in a television studio, live, being watched by millions of voters who were only too well aware, if one was honest, that the question being put was fair, was far worse.

“Let’s make one thing clear,” Thomason began. “This government inherited the problem from the previous administration. If we did not carry through with it, the money would have been wasted anyway and I doubt you would be sitting there smirking and accusing

“I am not smirking and I have accused you of nothing,” broke in the seasoned interviewer. “I merely put to you what so many are asking, and that is, is it the best way to proceed. If you feel the need to be defensive about it, perhaps the critics might be right after all. On the other hand.....” He left an inviting opening.

The junior minister sensed he was heading for deeper water if he was not careful. Back-peddalling was often an ill-advised strategy he had learnt; rather a reasoned change of tack was what was needed.

“What we’re saying is that the money had already been committed under the previous government and we had no option but to continue with the programme. But it is not going to result in colleges for criminals as has been claimed.”

Thomason could feel the situation improving, that matters were regaining some equilibrium. No doubt the Secretary of State would be watching and would be noting

his success. Perhaps a note would be made so that when the Prime Minister reshuffled his Cabinet the next time around this performance would stand him in good stead as a solid reliable spokesman in a tight spot.

So he added: "We are not going to allow teenagers to be locked away so they graduate as hardened criminals. Certainly there is no chance these institutions will provide a .. a a ... training ground for monsters like the one out there now. These short sharp shock institutions will afford no time for these youngsters to sit around planning crimes of the century when they get out. They will be far too busy for that." He paused for effect. "We are talking rehabilitation here. Firm, tough even. But rehabilitation, not graduation in lessons in crime."

He was back in control. He had explained that the previous government had committed the funds, the new government was committed to ensuring they were allocated in the best possible manner, and young offenders locked away would emerge as improved citizens.

The interviewer sat back.

In the brief silence when he rubbed his jaw with a thoughtful forefinger and arched his famous eyebrows, Thomason saw the gaping hole he had dug himself.

"Monster?" asked the interviewer. "Did you say we had, that we have, a monster on the streets out there?"

CHAPTER THREE

Grazyna Litavincuk could not focus her eye.

She swirled uncontrollably in an imagined mist of heavy steam, horribly disoriented, with hot pain streaking down some parts of her body while in others she could feel nothing.

Reasoning had disappeared, and her memory suffered such lapses that events of the last week seemed like an unbearable nightmare lasting a single day.

There were no gaps however, no pauses, no let up in the torment.

Somewhere from behind, or was it above or below, she didn't know, there was a sound.

A groan.

A throaty rumble which rolled across the clouds of mist like empty oil drums across a concrete basement floor.

She could not decipher exactly where it came from. It reached her ears and filled her with dread. She had heard the sound many times before and knew what was to follow. Her nightmare was to continue.

*

The call on her mobile was from a client she knew.

He was a lobbyist who ran his own office from Westminster. His accounts, he had told her, were a mixture of commercial operations, venture capital groups which required piloting around the British political scene, and a foreign government. There was also a human rights pressure group. He shuttled between London and Brussels and Strasbourg for meetings with Members of the European Parliament and Commission, and London and Geneva where the United Nations committees on human rights, the rights of the child, economic and social rights and so on met. When he flew out from Heathrow, he called Grazyna.

This time he was off to Geneva again where he was scheduled to meet a delegation of human rights activists pressing the human rights committee to strongly urge the British and Irish Governments to repeal what they saw as extremely draconian legislation on detention. He would be there for three days and then would return directly to London.

Grazyna was to meet the evening flight at Heathrow and take him to his St John's Wood apartment which overlooked the underground railway station. It was a routine run for her.

The traffic to the airport was normal, the drive lasting around three quarters of an hour. Along the way they chatted about books, people they shared a vague common connection with, and Grazyna's new plan for getting rich, the one to get her out from behind the wheel of the G registration Saab.

"Actually, there is quite a call for desktop printing and I have this friend who can set me up with all the equipment cheaply." Grazyna faced forty-five degrees through the windscreen, keeping both eyes on the road ahead while at the same time turning in the direction of her passenger. She spoke with an urgency which suggested she had no need of air, that she did not have time for breathing. The words ran on from one into the next in what became an endless, breathless stream.

"Well, not cheap really," she continued, "but a lot cheaper than I would have to pay without his help. I've known him for years and we used to work together when I was doing the advertising for the Guardian. He's now really successful and drives around in a Merc 500. Or it might be a 600. Whatever. He's done pretty well and he says he can get me started."

Grazyna had no trace of an accent even if she did look like her Eastern European name. She was a little over five feet tall and weighed in around sixty eight kilos. A lot

of it was in her thighs. When she met someone for the first time they drew on their recollection of Russian shot putters and the women who sat at the end of Moscow hotel corridors monitoring the comings and goings of foreign tourists. She looked the part. However, while her father was a burly Ukrainian he had left the country after the war in 1950 and been settled in Australia. That was where he met Grazyna's mother and spent the next twenty-five years of his life working on the railway lines with a pick and shovel.

When he died, Grazyna felt it was time to leave. She flew straight to London and had not left, except for annual holidays to Spain, Portugal, France and once to Switzerland for an ill-fated romantic skiing trip. She had visited Australia only twice since she left, the last time to see to her mother's funeral arrangements.

All of this her passenger knew, and more as well. They had become quite friendly over the last nine or ten months.

"Same flight this time," she asked.

"Yes. It gets in around 7.15 I think. OK?"

Grazyna smiled. "OK. If there's a problem I will let your wife know and arrange someone else to take the job. Either way, you'll be met. Have a good trip."

She watched him hoist his suit bag over his shoulder and disappear into the terminal. As she turned to check the traffic behind her, and began edging away from the kerb, there was a tap at the front passenger window.

She stopped abruptly.

*

Only snatches of this Grazyna recalled during the last six days.

She remembered she had been to the airport. She could not remember how things had happened after that. There was the knowledge that she had met someone, someone she could not place and whose face she could not recall. It might have been a man, a woman; she was not sure. Perhaps it was a man. She knew where she was now, even if she did not know how she got there.

Hell existed, and she was in Hell.

*

At the sound of the knocking on the car window Grazyna had braked sharply and turned. Looking through the glass was a man. He was not smiling but looked anxious, questioning, appealing. His nodded slightly.

Grazyna leant across the front seat and rolled down the window.

"Yes," she said. "What do you want?"

"Are you a mini-cab?" asked the man.

"Yes," repeated Grazyna.

"Are you going back into town? Can you give me a ride?" He was probably in his thirties, pleasant looking, dressed in a casual jacket and light beige trousers. His pale pink shirt and predominantly red tie were an excellent match. The arched eyebrows lowered and a smile of even teeth spread across his face. "You would save a life if you would."

Normally Grazyna would not pick up a passenger without prior arrangement with the radio control centre. A journey to Heathrow would often involve a pickup for the return trip either from the air terminal or an address nearby. But this time, it had been a solo run.

"I am just going off," Grazyna said through the window. "Where do you want to go to?"

“North London. Hampstead Garden Suburb.” The man suddenly squatted and looked pleadingly at Grazyna. “Please. I really would be grateful. I have to get home and the taxi queue is about a mile long.” He spread his open hands on the window sill.

Grazyna made her decision. “OK. I suppose I can. But if control calls and I have to pick up another ride along the way you might get home later than you think.”

The man smiled again, opened the rear door and tossed onto the back seat a brown leather travelling bag.

“Thanks,” he said as he slid into the seat next to Grazyna. “This is great. You don’t know how good this is.”

Grazyna eased into the traffic, and as she began a fast one sided conversation, she mentally added the fare and presumably a generous tip to her special bank account she had dubbed her Escape Fund.

She did not know this trip from Heathrow airport would be her last.

CHAPTER FOUR

I have been a kitchen worker, a salesman of shirts and saucepans and children's toys in a leading department store in Oxford Street, a distributor of leaflets around my local pub area, a tele-ads salesman, and a policeman. I have also travelled some. Now I am a writer. Not a bad record for someone who went to a red brick university and read politics, philosophy and economics.

I am thirty. Soon to be thirty-something. I cannot do anything about that. I am single and I have no plans to change *that*. Playing the field is not a description which fits me too snugly, though I am I honestly believe as popular as the next man in my circumstances. I have girl friends; they number in the plural, but they are friends, and the last time I was more than friends with a woman was almost seven years ago.

She was a nursing sister with a name out of the Fifties. Constance. Constance Cummine, with an *e*, not a *g*. In a way that was typical of me. I seem to attract the extraordinary. She worked at the St Margaret's Hospital on the bank of the Thames, opposite the Houses of Parliament, in the operating theatre where some of the country's most significant heart surgery is carried out. With long auburn hair, happy blue/green eyes, freckles fanning out on either side of her nose, Constance was anything but a Fifties girl. She was most certainly a woman of the Nineties with a self assurance and broad minded attitude to life that made our months together invigorating. Sexual exploration took on a deeper meaning for me as Constance with the auburn hair and I filled our infrequent hours together in laughing, sweating embraces in my small apartment, in bed and breakfast accommodation in Cornwall and Devon where we spent a few weekends together, and on stony earth in wooded countryside. Nor did she, it turned out, mind who knew of her wantonness. I did though, which was why my life changed dramatically as a result.

It was while I was on the verge of drunkenness with some of my sales friends that I made one of the biggest, certainly one of the least thought through decisions, of my life. I would leave London; no, I would leave Britain.

The pub on the corner of the street where I worked the telephones, trying to close out full or half page, full colour or mono, sales with chief executives and managing directors of large companies around the world, was fairly rough and ready. But it was after all just down the street, a few minutes walk during the lunch break, and anything more salubrious was over the bridge on the other side of Paddington railway station.

It was during one of the occasional after work sessions when another of the salesmen, a black would-be stage actor, remarked on his relationship with Constance. He did not say how he knew her, but that he knew I was seeing her.

"She's nice," he said. "Nice."

"Mmm," I answered simply. The Guinness was working. The pressurised hard sell day was starting to blend into a warm, relaxed evening.

The actor took a deep swig of ale. "She is nice, isn't she Jason?"

The other salesman with us smiled. "Oh yeah. Constance is nice alright." He too drank from his glass before turning and calling to an older man behind the bar who wore his hair long, greasy, tied back with a blue string. "Constance, Ben. She's nice isn't she?"

The man named Ben did not smile. He looked straight at me. "Are you Constance's latest?"

When I said I was seeing her, Ben simply said: "Hrrmph" and turned away.

The budding black Olivier sought out the bottom of his glass. "A lot of people know Constance, Zachary," he said. "She has very many friends, if you take my point."

I took his point very clearly indeed. Suddenly I was sober.

Within a week I made my mind up, and took the first steps to carrying through my plan.

*

Flying into Hong Kong is an experience not to be missed.

Like travelling to India where life takes on new meaning, where the visitor can understand instantly that how and where he lives is not so bad after all, arriving in Hong Kong by air cannot be repeated elsewhere. It is simply a unique happening.

Mind you, now that the new international airport has been opened on what was once a small island to the west, which was beheaded and levelled, the landing in Hong Kong is less adventuresome. The flight path in is more sedate and the view out of the cabin windows offers less.

When I went there the old Kai Tak airport in the heart of one of the most densely populated areas on earth operated, and planes plunged onto the mile long finger sticking out from Kowloon into the harbour in a sudden hurry. The aircraft seemed to drift across rooftops and then slice between high-rises so passengers could see families eating their meals or watching television screens. There were skid marks on the roofs was what I heard from new friends. I knew there weren't, but it would not have surprised me if there were.

The bustle of the place assaulted my senses like a damp cloth. There was also the heat. And the smell, a smell special to Hong Kong that disappeared with the old airport for some reason. Perhaps it was the proximity of nullahs. Whatever, it was an unpleasant smell which returning residents such as I sought out because it meant we were home.

Hong Kong was home to me for five years, the first three as a probationary inspector with the Royal Hong Kong Police. That was what Constance had done to me. For me. When I realised that I was one of many lovers she had taken I took flight.

Acquaintances of mine had headed east the year before to become secretaries and librarians and I had recently seen an advertisement for police officers in Hong Kong. So when I decided to abandon British shores I naturally thought of where they had gone, and because Hong Kong was still a Crown Colony then, yet sufficiently removed from my past and present life, it seemed to fit the bill exactly. It all sounded exciting, challenging.

A visit to the Hong Kong Government Office in Mayfair, followed by completion of the necessary applications forms, an interview and subsequent medical and I was soon on my way. To say the transition from telesales in Paddington in London to probationary police inspector in the Far East was marked would be doing an injustice to the English language. The change was mind blowing.

The first six months of my life in the "territory" as so many called it in deference to its soon to be changed sovereignty, was spent at the police training school in Aberdeen where sampans and motorised fishing junks which were floating homes to entire families huddled as flotsam.

I learned the arts and craft of policing. I patrolled the crowded streets in summer khaki or winter blue uniform with pounds of electronic and manual artillery hanging from my waist.

I loved it. I felt powerful. I was earning a respectable income, in a respectable profession, and taking full advantage of it. Life was fast and furious. I worked twenty-four in every thirty-six hours and played hard in the interval. I was involved in the investigation of major crimes which the vast majority of policemen back home would not even dream of confronting, and when off duty I drank copious amounts of the local San Miguel beer and had as many local women as I could afford to lay my hands on. There were exceptionally alluring oriental Constances everywhere and what others thought did not matter. Life felt good. Life felt very good.

In fact, my life was being eroded. After the second year I realised all was not well at all. My health was holding up but my conscience, if that is what it really is, was not. I am blessed/cursed with believing in the rightness of doing the right thing which is not

the same as believing in living the Christian way of life or not doing utterly foolish things for the unadulterated pleasure merely of doing so, but it is to me inhibiting in that there always comes a time when something inside me says “enough. Stop what you are doing. Get back on the tracks and start again.”

So I did.

When my three years as a probationary inspector were up I did not renew my contract. I packed it in. I did not try to explain it to those friends who eagerly signed on for another three year stint, but just told them it was not for me and that was that. They knew me well enough to accept my decision. But I did not leave Hong Kong. It was alright to move on from the Force but it was not alright just yet to move out of Hong Kong. Instead, I became a journalist.

I applied for a job as a reporter with The South China Morning Post where I had got to know a couple of reporters and sub-editors. There was no London holiday in between. In truth, it was six months before my parents knew of my changed circumstances. I just moved from a dangerous uniformed life in Mongkok to a fascinating cleaner life on the Island where I worked shorter hours, earned a lower salary and paid an obscene percentage of that salary as my share of the rent of a closet sized flat in Happy Valley. And I carried a notebook and pen rather than a .38 revolver, a baton, handcuffs, a portable radio and a number of other defensive and offensive odds and bobs. I was less well off, but once again, life felt good.

The pressure of working in the media in Hong Kong was greater than pretty well anywhere else. The reason is that there was no union protection in an industry where the proprietor had absolute control. If you did not produce, you were out. There were many other would-be Pulitzer winners out there chafing at the bit to accept a pittance to get on the treadmill which could in a comparatively short time lead to the heady heights of editorship conferring a considerable salary and even more considerable prestige; face.

So while I did not work twenty-four hour shifts any longer, I was constantly aware that if I did not pull my weight in the overall effort to fill the space between the advertisements I would not last.

For totally wrong reasons, trainee journalists such as I was were handed court reporting from very early on. It is considered a safe beat to learn the ropes, whereas practically anywhere else in the world that round is regarded as specialist, littered as it is with potential law suits. I guess in my case, the news editor reckoned he had less to worry about because I was a former police officer and therefore could be expected to niftily sidestep any of the legal potholes.

As it transpired it was pretty basic stuff with a group of us from different newspapers and radio stations gathering in the court building press room in the mornings to discuss the day's cases, some wandering off to actually sit in on them, and then all of us meeting up again later in the afternoon to compare notes. Then it was back to the office, slump down in front of the terminal and process the notes into non-litigious stories for inside pages. Routine, basic reportage. Albeit a collective effort.

From court reporting I progressed to political rounds which involved gathering up copies of speeches to be delivered in the Legislative Council chamber each Wednesday, composing introductions and then subbing down the rest. It also meant developing contacts within the various Government branches and departments and coming up with the occasional exclusive by-lined article.

For the first time I could put my investigative talents to good use. Politics and government are fine hunting grounds for those who like to ask questions. Yet it took a year and a half before the paper's editor decided that perhaps police rounds would be a suitable place for me.

Zachary Tighe, the former kitchen worker, salesman of shirts and saucepans and children's toys, distributor of leaflets, tele-ads salesman in England, and policeman in Hong Kong, finally became a serious writer.

That's what I am today. An investigative writer in my home town of London. One of my employers is Rupert Murdoch, who is a former owner of The South China Morning Post. He sold out long ago, but I did not. I kept up my association and still write the weekly *London Diary*. My column also appears in a popular afternoon paper in London.

In my latest column I covered what I saw as the deterioration of British society, not specifically or only since the new government had come to power, and more significantly not only because of the riots, but which had been happening for many years.

The problem as I see it is that we as citizens no longer have the responsibilities our parents and grandparents did. We have rights. This means that more and more is stacked in favour of the individual, which as a philosophy stands up, but as a practice leads undeniably in my view to a breakdown in society. It means that everyone, the bad guys included, has an escape route and can reject responsibility in the name of rights. Criminals exercise those rights and the authorities find themselves backed up against a wall with the result that more and more of the criminals are escaping their responsibilities, certainly escaping incarceration. The wrong message is being put out with the consequences being increasingly severe for our society.

That was the sideline subject of my last column. That law and order was under growing threat from more audacious and violent law breakers. It could not be long before Britain grew its own versions of the monsters that prowled the dark side of America.

CHAPTER FIVE

Mhhgg. Mhhgg. Ahhhhh!

The growl was almost sensual. Deep and guttural.

At another time it might have signified sexual satisfaction. It indicated satisfaction now, but not sexual.

It was bestial and Grazyna Litavincuk began to sob.

What Grazyna feared most moved outside her vision, behind her or somewhere in what she thought must be a corner of the room. She could not see it but knew what to expect.

She dizzily prayed that this time the lottery being played with her life would give up to her what she wanted.

Please let it be. Please oh please let the feathered note point at my heart.

Crazily she recalled the television advertisements for the national lottery which she gambled on each week.

It could be you.

A win would have solved her problems. Jesus, four numbers would have made most of her difficulties disappear.

From nearby there was a shuffling like a faint rustling of paper, followed shortly by again the sighing.

Grazyna's sobs became deeper. She thought her chest would cave in completely and her body shrivel up. The tears blinded her and the screaming began in her head, a screeching that had in the beginning burned her scalp and caused her brain to boil. Now it was a silent screaming, a deafening peel of anguish.

Grazyna could see the shape enter into her peripheral vision and then move into range. Through the tears and fear she could not put detail to it, but she felt it as it reached out.

Tentatively at first.

It fingered the nipple.

Then it cupped the breast, weighing it, and caressed it gently.

Mmmmggghhhhhh. Mmmmmgggghhhhhh.

It was meal time.

CHAPTER SIX

“MINISTER: MONSTER ON LOOSE” screamed the headline in The Mirror newspaper beside a picture of a forlorn looking Adrian Thomason.

“MONSTER STALKING OUR STREETS!” shouted its rival The Sun. In their front page picture the Home Office Minister was smiling, and the caption beneath read: “After creating panic with his monster claim, Adrian Thomason tries to shrug it off as a myth-quote.”

The more measured Independent ran the story at the bottom of Page One. It quoted Thomason as saying that his comments had been general in nature and that there had been a misunderstanding: “It was a throw-away line, which perhaps I was a little too casual with. But I can now set the record straight. We have the best police force in Europe. Our crime rate clearly is always too high because even one crime is one too many, but we are actually reducing the rate of violent crime.” He added: “The only monsters I personally know of are those which my children seem to enjoy blasting with ray guns on their PC at home.”

And a police spokesman supported the Minister in an issued statement which read: “The police at all times make every effort to apprehend law breakers of all kinds. The detection rate throughout the country compares favourably with rates elsewhere in Europe.” In what was obviously intended to show the absurdity of the press coverage of the television interview and to kill the story, the statement went on: “People break the law. The world of the police and the criminal is the real world. Monsters are in comic books and films. Comic book and film monsters are fantasy world creatures that the police leave to those with imaginations and who can put them to entertaining purposes.”

The other broadsheets had picked up the story also and gave it inside page attention. Despite the tabloid hype it was news that would proverbially die as quickly as the fish and chips it wrapped.

Or so the authorities hoped.

*

“Deliver me from fucking politicians!” Detective Inspector David Maguire gulped his favourite red wine, a Pinot Noir, through clenched teeth. “Can anyone explain to me why politicians, whatever shade they are, think they have to stick their bloody noses into every area under the sun?” He shook his head sadly. “If only they would stick to politics which they know something about allegedly and let the experts handle the rest about which they know nothing.” It was six thirty and Maguire and his best friend Martin Walden were in Gordon’s Wine Bar in Villiers Street.

They had been friends since they were youngsters, attending the same schools, shoplifting together from the local Paki news-agents, and later making a pact to become modern-day Batman and Robins in the Metropolitan Police Force.

Maguire had risen more quickly through the ranks but they had managed nevertheless to stay close and now were working together in the same serious crime unit. They had been working sixteen hour days for three weeks without a break, except for one Sunday when they packed their rods and went north to a stream Walden knew where the fish could not wait to leap out of the water into their creels. But naturally it had been nothing of the sort and they were glad in a way to get back into the office shortly after dawn the following morning since when they had been content with visits closer to home, like the wine cellar.

Gordon’s was an establishment they went to fairly frequently before taking the tube home to Wimbledon where they lived a few miles apart. It is three hundred years old and lies hidden from ordinary pedestrian traffic which walks past its scarred bottle brown door on the way from Embankment to The Strand. Its stone walls and roof

actually drip with condensation and the candles on the ancient oak table tops add to the dim intimate atmosphere.

“You know what the old comedians say about politicians,” said Walden. “If a hundred of them are standing up to their chins in shit, what do you have?”

Maguire had heard the punch-line more than a few times, but he was not in the mood today for jokes, old or new. There was quite enough shit as it was to go around thank you, and big mouthed politicians trying to make names for themselves did not help.

The junior Minister from the Home Office had really put his foot in it this time. Stupid bastard. Almost ruined everything. Not just hindered enquiries but really, one hundred per cent, fucked it up. There were minds, good minds, and more than just a couple, working around the clock to make sure dumb politicians like Thomason did not fuck things up. So what happens? Snafu. Situation normal. All fucked up. Well, not quite, but damn close.

“Oh Christ Dave,” tried Walden. “Come on. Let’s give it a break for an hour or so at least. This is already getting to all of us. If we’re not careful it will really knock us out.”

Maguire knew his friend was right. It was getting to him and to everyone working it. He had no similar experience to fall back on, no cushion of having seen it before. Nobody had, he was sure. There was not even a learning curve. One day you were a normal human being doing a normal tough job on the streets and the next you were hurtled into a world nothing could have prepared you for. Jesus H Christ! He was going home late at night, sneaking in so he would not wake Joanie, and refusing to talk about it when they awoke. For the first time in his life he was keeping everything inside and she was being left out.

What was it she said only the day before yesterday? Don’t treat me like I have done something wrong to you. That was it. He was starting to treat everyone on the outside as if they were guilty of doing something to him personally. But goddamit, how was he supposed to behave? As if it was all routine? Just get on with it?

His pager vibrated and he ripped it from his jacket pocket and glanced down. Outside, out from under the dripping cellar walls, he used his mobile to dial the call number and listened for just half a minute.

Walden looked up sharply as he reappeared. “What is it?”

“We gotta go,” was all Maguire answered.

As they walked quickly away from Gordon’s Wine Bar, Maguire said gravely: “It’s another one. He’s thrown away another one.”

*

Gerrards Cross nestles in woodland about fifteen miles along the A40 to the west of London. The homes in the area, made up of names such as Chalfont St Peter, Amersham and half a dozen others, are mostly three stories and detached, so it is considered stockbroker belt. It is on a normal day no more than three quarters of an hour by car, on a good day half an hour. By train it takes twenty minutes. It took David Maguire and Martin Walden twenty-five minutes.

An area of woodland, or pretend farmland as the locals regarded it, was cordoned off with black and yellow tape wrapped around saplings, and police cars were parked along the verge of the road, and uniforms moved around between the trees forty to fifty paces inland.

Maguire and Walden identified themselves and walked to where nobody else wanted to be any more, a rainproof ground sheet spread near a three foot high bush.

“Oh dear Jesus,” choked Walden. “What the godalmighty...”

Maguire dropped the sheet and walked away, ashen, less steady on his feet than when he had approached.

The body was like the others found in the last ten months.

CHAPTER SEVEN

I wrote:

Britain has been rocked by revelations that a serial killer is stalking the streets of the capital.

At least two women, possibly more, have been killed and their bodies mutilated. Rumours are rife that a modern day Jack the Ripper is on the prowl, abducting women and brutally murdering them after raping them and disfiguring their bodies terribly. Ritualism is being talked about, though this may well be the product of over-imaginative minds.

But whatever the full truth of the matter, someone or more than one killer, is loose on the streets and this city is panicking.

So far I had no more to go on than anyone else in the media. You cannot hide convoys of police descending on a quiet part of the country like Gerrards Cross, close to the Ministry of Defence's British Forces Broadcasting Service, and not have the press crawling all over the place asking questions in no time at all.

We knew a murder victim had been found, that it was a woman, that it had had no time to decompose, that it had been mutilated. And that it was not the first of its kind.

In an unusual development police sources have said that the body found was in a similar condition to another located in the Oxford area about three months ago.

They are trying to keep the case low key – not surprising given the public concern even at this stage and with so little accurate information being available – but rumours abound.

One of the most horrid suggests that the latest victim might have been mutilated before she was murdered. This probably gave rise to the reference to ritualism, a claim denied strenuously by New Scotland Yard.

The rest of my Hong Kong column was colour which added no material weight. Just more words to fill the space I was required to write each week.

My stories for the other publications I was UK correspondent for, in Toronto, Melbourne and Cape Town, were straighter, factual and therefore briefer in dealing with the killings themselves. They were not columns but regular news stories and I padded them out with comments from residents in the Gerrards Cross area, law and order activists, and Labour backbencher Tony Lawrence. He was a young Member of Parliament I knew personally and who had chosen law and order as one of his prime parliamentary interests.

The day after the story broke in the national press he caught the Speaker's eye during Prime Minister's Question Time in the Commons. It was a rowdy session as usual, most of the noise coming from the Prime Minister's own side of the House as they waved their Order Papers in the air and taunted the Opposition at every opportunity.

"Will the Prime Minister," Lawrence shouted over the clamour in the chamber, "Will the Prime Minister explain to this House what action he will take against the Junior Minister of the Home Office for creating unwarranted panic in the community with his claims of monsters roaming our streets, or if the junior Minister was in fact justified in his remarks that some evil killer is stalking citizens, will the Prime Minister please inform this House, and the general public at large, why we have not been warned by the police?"

The Prime Minister, uncharacteristically unsmiling, and handling a sheaf of papers at the dispatch box as he invariably did, adequately dealt with the question. He spoke in generalities, stressing that everything possible was being done to apprehend the person or persons responsible, and stating that there was no need for undue worry. The tabloid press, he said, should be more restrained in their banner headlines and not stir up unnecessary panic. Meanwhile the police would get on with their work in tracking down the murderer, a human murderer, not a fantasy beast.

The following two questions were dealt with easily and the Prime Minister's renowned grin reappeared. Unease returned, however, when he was asked near the end of his thirty minute question session if the deaths of the two women found were unquestionably linked and in what way.

The Prime Minister confirmed the body discovered at Gerrards Cross was being linked with the other which reportedly had been found near Oxford. The common factors were that both were women, both were rather well-built, both had been disfigured and while he would not be drawn on details of the disfigurement he indicated there were enough similarities for the investigating authorities to draw certain conclusions.

Then came the next bombshell.

"Can the Prime Minister tell us how many bodies have been found, that is how many the police believe might be linked to the one killer?" asked another Opposition backbencher.

The Prime Minister slowly approached the dispatch box. For security reasons, he answered, it would be inappropriate to go into too much detail but there were more than two.

The chamber erupted. "How many? How many? How many?" was the demand from both sides.

Finally, he stood again. "Four," he said firmly. "Four bodies have been found." All were women, all mutilated. All were suspected of being victims of the same murderer. The press had its story. A monster, real and not imagined, was indeed out there.

CHAPTER EIGHT

I met Joan Maguire the first time outside the Houses of Parliament.

It was probably bound to happen given everything that had happened already.

My office is down the other end of Victoria Street near the station and about five minutes walk from New Scotland Yard, so I was close to her husband's place of work. Then with the case being aired in the House of Commons and with the role played by Maguire and the interest I was taking in it, perhaps it was only a matter of time before we all came together. When we did it was on the pavement outside St Stephen's entrance where the tourists queue to get in to watch the quaint British system of Government in practice.

I recognised Maguire from television so made myself known to him. He was with his wife. He said he knew of my writing vaguely but had nothing to say about the murders, repeating it in answer to the series of quick questions I put to him as we sidestepped our way through the gathering tourists who eyed us as though we might be someone they should remember in case our faces appeared in some local American newspaper in the future and they could point to it at their club or at the local PTA and state they had actually seen us, almost touched us.

"Mrs Maguire," I then said, accepting that Maguire the police officer was not going to be drawn into feeding me any inside information. "What do you think about these killings, from a woman's perspective, not necessarily as the wife of a detective who is intimately involved in the investigation?"

I did not expect any response. In fact, I popped the question because I wanted to study her a bit longer. Her green eyes and blemish-free skin. And her mouth with its perfectly bowed lips. I am a lips man and cannot stand women without any. She wore a smart black suit with style, and unfairly I was surprised that such an attractive woman who carried herself so well was married to a policeman and not some successful City stockbroker or perhaps a lawyer of some note.

"What I think Mr Tighe is that as a journalist you should listen more closely to those you put questions to." Her eyes and those lips smiled as she gripped her husband's arm more tightly. "What I think from any perspective is totally irrelevant. What my husband thinks is what is important, and he has already told you he is not going to tell you anything." She sparkled as she continued: "So if you missed it the first time I am sure you've got it the second. Now, if you'll excuse us we have to get inside. There is someone more important we have to see. Bye now."

Where were those cracks in the pavement that we want to slip down into at such times? As they walked up the steps and disappeared past the uniformed policeman on duty I looked around to see if anyone had witnessed my embarrassment. To avoid any more I wheeled about and quickly headed back in the direction of my office.

Bloody hell. What a put down. What a woman. How on earth did he land her?

It took me fifteen minutes to briskly walk down Petty France past the old Home Office and former Passport Agency to my serviced room in Catherine Place near Buckingham Palace. Not for a minute did I stop thinking about Joan Maguire or allow her image out of my mind.

She had in an easy, devastating manner rubbed me out. She had erased me. But she had done it with class. I actually felt hurt. It did not worry me what Maguire thought but it did matter what his wife thought I realised. Her opinion was of consequence. I was momentarily shocked to realise that I wanted her to think better of me, to regard me as worth more than the reason for a wonderfully effective put down. The barb had penetrated deeply.

God, what a fool.

As I sat at my terminal trying to dredge a story from bleak mental depths onto the silver grey screen, I determined that if I was fortunate enough to find myself in eyeing distance of Mrs Joan Maguire again, I would redeem myself.

That chance would come sooner than I expected.

*

The police were getting nowhere with their enquiries.

Forensically they were filling pages and pages with information. Details of their own actions filled two drawers of a scarred metal filing cabinet which had been opened at the beginning of the year when the first body had been found.

Kay Roberts was a twenty-eight-year-old school teacher who lived in Earlsfield in south London. She and her friend, also a school teacher, had been at a friend's house on the other side of the city in Finchley Central on Boxing Day when, early in the evening she had left to drive home, leaving her husband, sufficiently under the weather not to want to leave. He planned to crash on the sofa for the night.

It was the last anyone would see of Kay Roberts until Wednesday, January 14 when her body was found at the back of a riding school a few miles away in Mill Hill. The manager of the riding school, out walking with her dogs, had seen what she thought was a prosthetic limb or part of a store dummy protruding from the brush beside a narrow stream. When the dogs dashed over to it and began snuffling and refused to be called away, she went to investigate. What she found physically knocked her to her knees.

*

At thirty-two, Maxine Hughes was a housewife and mother of an eight-year-old son, Nicholas. She lived with her computer engineer husband John, three streets away from her parents in Hove, Brighton. Everyone who knew her described Maxine as a happy, fun loving blonde who regarded her home town as the best place on earth. You could have the big crowded cities, she often said. She was more than content with her little square of paradise on the coast. In fact, she had been to London no more than half a dozen times in her entire life.

The last time she travelled on the train to Euston station was Saturday, May 2. Then for three weeks all trace of her vanished.

On Sunday, May 24 police were called to a refuse dump on the outskirts of Milton Keynes. Two brothers, regular visitors to the dump, had driven in around seven o'clock in the morning with a van load of garden rubbish which they unloaded and then began searching the other bins for anything worth salvaging.

Instead they found Maxine Hughes.

*

Virginia, or Ginnie, Hughes, aged twenty-seven, was found right in the heart of swanky London, on Friday, July 31, only about four hundred yards from where she worked. No relation of Maxine Hughes, Virginia had been missing just one week.

She was a bright and cheerful office manager with a Malaysian corporation whose British operations were centred in Dover Street, Mayfair. She was hard working, appreciated by her employers, and a lesbian.

The Friday before she had joined colleagues across the road at the Duke of Albemarle pub to celebrate the birthday of one of the divisional managers who flew into London on average three times every two months from the headquarters in Kuala Lumpur.

Ginnie looked forward to Mark's visits and enjoyed the occasional Chardonnay with him after work, usually on a Thursday. He generally flew back to Malaysia on the Friday so he could spend the weekend with his family. This latest visit though, he was due to stay on for two weeks, cooped up in one of the board rooms on the fifth floor

as details of a Geneva-based bank purchase were thrashed out. The small celebration on the 24th had been a welcome break.

After the pub closed it was decided the remaining group of six would drop into the Churchill, a dark pickup club of sorts around the corner in Piccadilly. It was not the sort of place Ginnie would be seen in normally, but as it was Mark's birthday she saw no harm. One glass of Champagne and a good deal of laughter later, around a quarter to one in the morning, she said her goodbyes and left to hail a taxi outside.

Her body was found by cleaners in the narrow lane off Berkley Square at ten past five two days later.

*

The police had no leads as to who was responsible for the deaths of Kay Roberts, Maxine Hughes, Ginnie Hughes and now Grazyna Litavincuk whose body was found at Gerrards Cross on Monday, November 2, nearly ten months after the first.

Yet they did know that whoever killed Kay had also killed Maxine, Ginnie and Grazyna.

That was without doubt.

The physical evidence was conclusive.

But there was no way they could explain it to the public.

Not yet.

Not until they had to.

CHAPTER NINE

He had failed again.

Four tries. Four failures.

His best had been nineteen days. Not even three weeks whereas the Masters had achieved more than a month he knew.

The worst was merely hours. Not days. Hours.

How on earth had they done it? What was he doing wrong?

This last one had not lasted a full week, in spite of the extraordinary care he had taken.

He had even cheated twice to ensure it was prolonged.

But still he failed.

This time big time.

He had to try again. He could not wait as long as he had before between attempts.

Something he was doing was not right.

What?

What was it?

He must try again.

Don't waste time.

Now.

He must try again right now while everything was fresh in his mind.

Tonight.

He would go out and get another one tonight.

*

“Right, ladies and gentlemen. We know what the position is. We know what we have to do. This is how we are going to go about it.”

The problem, Detective Senior Superintendent Alasdair Ford had explained, was that four women had been brutally murdered by an unknown serial killer or serial killers, possibly all in the capital, and then their bodies dumped in widely diverse areas. What the police had to do, the dour Scot also explained in simple language, was ask every possible question, investigate every possible and impossible answer, and correlate all information gathered.

“Now,” he said to the two dozen faces before him, “this is how we are going to go about it.”

Detective Inspector David Maguire squirmed on his plastic seat but did not take his eyes of the superintendent at the front of the room.

Ford had a reputation for slicing through red tape, sometimes at personal cost, and avoiding unnecessary verbiage often leading listeners to think him rude. He always spoke succinctly and when angry his voice slowed and his Edinburgh antecedents became more pronounced. For the next three hours the police strategy was drawn up.

The city was divided into four areas only, determined by compass points. Team heads were named and then told to pick their squads from their own areas. Each squad was to have no more than six officers. He wanted it to be a lean and hungry and quick investigation and apprehension, Ford told his men and women. He did not want it to be a cumbersome drawn out enquiry which enabled the popular tabloid press to latch onto loose ends and cause more panic than there was already.

Records of every known suspect would be taken apart, examined thoroughly, put back together, and then re-evaluated. A small team of just three profilers would then examine the shortlist, pruning it down to a “top ten”.

“This is England,” said Ford. “Not America where they could be expected to draw up a list of a score of red hot favourites in probably each of a dozen or more cities. Dangerously evil people. Here, I am confident we will have no more than ten. If that.”

There was a soft murmur through the room. Nobody could disagree with the assessment but the thought that there could be as many as even ten crazy killers out there, stalking victims and then doing to them what they all had been told and shown in graphic colour pictures, was numbing.

Only a handful of people in the room had been aware for some time of the magnitude of the case and the nature of the killings. The others had been briefed over the last twenty-four hours. It had been a frightful realisation for them all. The junior Minister from the Home Office who had turned the public spotlight on the cases had been right. Whoever was responsible for the murders was not human. It was a predator of a kind unimagined before.

Ford picked up his briefcase and stuffed a sheaf of papers inside. He lifted his head and thrust his jaw forward. "I want him, or them, badly. We need to apprehend him, or them, quickly. If we do not do this speedily, I fear for what will happen."

When he left the room, for a full minute there was quiet. Every police officer present knew what he meant. Then there was a great deal of movement and talk.

The hunt was on.

Without prejudice.

*

Maguire and Walden were assigned to watch a known criminal with tendencies towards GBH. Tendencies? More like a passion for violence, a fetish about seeing someone else bleed. Preferably someone he himself had caused to bleed though he also enjoyed just watching suffering. The pleasure was in watching a person's humiliation and anguish.

Denis Quilter had just a year ago completed time for killing his wife, but had served only five years because he had been convicted of manslaughter. It would have been murder and a much longer stretch except for the fact that when he smashed open her skull with the handle of a pick Mrs Quilter allegedly had been threatening him with a nine inch kitchen knife. He had the testimony of a friend who claimed to have witnessed the incident and said Mrs Quilter had been the aggressor. The jury suspected they knew why the poor woman had armed herself with a knife but suspicion was not sufficient.

While inside Quilter had told a cellmate on repeated occasions that he intended to get even with all women on whom he blamed his incarceration. He was not at fault. The trouble was the women he came into contact with simply would not understand their role in society. His society as he saw it. All women needed a good slapping from time to time, Quilter believed. In fact, more than occasionally they needed to be taught a really good lesson which was why at least half a dozen of Quilter's female friends over the years had been knocked about with such force they were hospitalised. All complained to the police Quilter had beaten them. All claimed he had acted like a crazy man. And all told the investigating officers at the time that he had threatened to slash their faces or cause some other disfigurement. All also withdrew their complaints after being visited in hospital by Quilter.

Since his release from prison, there had been rumours that Quilter was back to his old ways with the women he kept company with. There was even a rumour that during one of his drinking sessions at his local pub he had said that he could understand what drove the serial killer making the headlines. The pub landlord had told his local bobby that Quilter had smiled and winked, and said to take it from him, he understood, he knew exactly how the killer felt. It was scary said the landlord. It was like Quilter was saying he knew because well maybe because he was the killer. The beat policeman reported the incident at the end of his shift and Quilter's name was added to the list being examined by the profilers. After careful deliberation it was decided he should be watched.

So Maguire and Walden were assigned to him and now propped up the bar of the Red Lion freehouse in Camden. Quilter sat at a table with three friends five meters away arguing noisily about a football match which had been played the night before.

“He’s crazy enough,” Walden said. “A right psycho if you ask me.”

“Right,” answered Maguire. “But he just doesn’t fit. It’s just not right.”

Walden shrugged slightly. “What do we know anyway? Leave that to the profilers, the doctors. They’re the experts.”

Maguire grunted acknowledgement. They were the experts alright. They knew a great deal more about whackos than he ever would. But he felt Quilter did not fit this bill. He was too obviously wild. Too bent on lashing out at his victims. Random brutality. The killer they were hunting was an entirely different animal. He was not vicious like Quilter and his ilk. He was not a noisy thug. He thought in silence and worked quietly. Maguire believed the killer he sought was likely to be a thinker, someone you would walk by in the street or see at a gathering and note nothing remarkable, yet under that was the mind of someone without compassion, without feeling. A person who was dead inside. After all, what sort of person could do what he had done.

CHAPTER TEN

He waited in his vehicle outside the Bull and Bear in Streatham.

He had arrived around seven thirty, parked his car in the car park at the rear of the building, watched who went in and who came out and then at eight he walked in through the front door.

It was a spacious bar, larger than most because it used to be a church. Ironically the religion business in England was faring badly and had been for some years. Pews were often more empty than occupied and ministers preached to smaller and smaller congregations. Scandals had not helped. And the introduction of modern attitudes to try to spice it up was not working either. The Royal Family even was considered in some quarters to be partly responsible, with their broken marriages and infidelities. How could the ordinary mortal be expected to have unquestioned faith in the Church of England when the head of the Church himself had admitted sexual indiscretions and a breach of his vows? Nevertheless there might just be help on that front. The marriage of the young Prince Charming to his gracious young wife had huge appeal.

Just the same, a growing number of personalities had looked to the Papal belief, turning their backs on the traditional Anglican faith. So churches up and down the country faced closure or a new life in some other role. Even as pubs like the Bull and Bear.

It was refurbished so that the ground floor was open and airy, tables and chairs tucked away in corners and nooks and crevices with at one end the bar, a single long well-seasoned wooden bench that had come from a cruise ship long ago scrapped, behind which young men and women wearing Bull and Bear T-shirts pulled the pumps. Staircases climbed up to a second floor that was like a library balcony on either side. Indeed, shelves of books had been carefully set into the walls. Small tables looked down. There were no slot machines nor any music because the Bull and Bear was a drinking and talking pub, a popular location in Streatham for people of all ages to meet. Which was why he had chosen it. He had watched it for weeks, for the time when he would need to hunt again. Tonight he was hunting.

As he drank his pint of Green King he looked around the room. It was what one did, it was expected so nobody would take special notice of him. He was checking out the scene. His attire also would not draw exceptional appraisal though he was dressed well and was good looking in a seasoned tennis player sort of way. He had never found it that difficult to pick up women. He was, it seemed, what they liked. Until they got to know him better.

The Bull and Bear was around half full and there were about a dozen women, just three he could make out who were not attached to a man. They sat alone at a table on the balcony. Perhaps it was a girls' night out. They might be waiting for other friends, boyfriends maybe, to join them later. Or perhaps they were looking for someone to pick them up.

It was thirty minutes before one of the women, a rather plain mousy haired women in her late twenties or very early thirties, glanced at him and gave a short half smile. He half smiled back and turned to the bar to have his glass refreshed. He would not look at the women for another five minutes. Then he would. She would be impatiently waiting for his attention. If she was, she was his.

He would try really hard this time.

Very patient, very careful.

*

As they drove away from the Bull and Bear an hour before closing time the man turned to the woman who had told him her name was Paula, and smiled broadly.

She smiled back. She had enjoyed the conversation in the pub and found him to be witty, polite. She preferred a bit more ruggedness if she was honest with herself but he was very attentive to her which was attractive to her.

He dropped his hand to his lap, and then gently reached over and rested it softly just above her knee. She looked down but did not remove it. Her leg quivered ever so slightly.

Aaahhhhh.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I felt something stir.

When I saw her the second time something told me deep inside that Joan Maguire and I were not going to be enemies forever. That something knocking on the door of that isolated place in my gut where unexplained feelings dwelt told me that I and the wife of Detective Maguire were going to patch up our differences.

Where we met for the second time was the home of a friend of mine who had just had her first baby. What seemed to be an almost entirely Irish gathering was called ostensibly to celebrate Max's first few months of life. In fact it was an excuse for two dozen friends to get together and drink as much alcohol as possible and exchange good crack.

I was one of the outsiders. And it was not only my nationality which separated me from my Irish friends. They had a special relationship with one another which I envied then and still do. It was like they all belonged to the one big family with instinctive understanding of one another's thought processes. Certainly they had the same sense of humour and the same daring attitude to life. Perhaps it was all down to the troubles which separated the north from the south, Catholics from Protestants, but whatever it was there was a benign conspiracy among the Irish whom I had come into contact with. I was jealous of them in a way but still liked being around them. When I am their lust for living rubs off on me.

The new mother was holding forth in the kitchen to some of her friends about how easy Max was, how he had not interrupted her life as much as the wealth of advice she had been given predicted. He slept through the night, rarely cried, and all in all was absolutely a joyous baby. Oh sure, none of that would last, but for now he was a delight.

Most of the men were in the corners of the living room and spilling on to the small patio at the rear of the house with their cans of beer in one hand gesticulating with the other. The subject was rugby. If it wasn't a passion it was pretty close to it. More so as London Irish with their winger and fly half, both of whom were idolised by pretty well every woman then in the house, were known personally to more than a couple of the group.

Joan Maguire stood on the edge of the cluster of women her back towards me as I walked down the dim hall from the front door.

"Zack," called my friend and began to move towards me. Joan Maguire turned with the others and I saw her. What on earth was she doing here? Of all places why here? How did she fit into this group of largely younger Irish mishmash of professionals and skilled workers? Actually she fitted the group very well.

I had not detected it at our first meeting but I discovered that Joan Maguire was Irish through and through. She hailed from Dundork just north of Dublin where her father, now retired of course, was an engineer. One of five sisters she the second oldest, she had been a key member of the Cahill family for the final three years she lived there after her mother died suddenly from what the doctors said was a heart ailment that could not have been identified even if she had exhibited symptoms. In fact, Deirdre Cahill had been bouncy and fun loving right up to the end. Then one morning she felt queezy she said, and by the afternoon she had been rushed to the hospital where she passed away shortly before midnight. It was a shock not only for the family but for the large extended Cahill clan of friends and relatives.

Joan took it hard. She threw herself into her work and her studies while at the same time assuming much of the role left empty by her mother. Within a year three of her sisters had left home and only she and baby Vicky remained, determined to lessen the impact their mother's death had had on their father. The loss of his wife just about wiped him out as well. He resorted to the bottle for the first four months and if it had not been for the steadfast, and often ruthless, care and attention by Joan he would

have perhaps sunk too low ever to be saved. The task she had set herself had been monumental, yet at the end of three years she had kept her father dry and sane enough to stand confidently on his own feet, managed a troubled household and passed her bar exams. It was time to leave.

London was for Joan what it was for countless other Irish who crossed the rough strait: Simply the obvious destination. There was no question of North America or anywhere else. Simply London, in spite of the long history of enmity which existed between the two countries.

Joan moved around various suburbs in the south and west. Ealing. Hammersmith. Clapham. She joined a small firm of lawyers who handled conveyancing for their satisfactory living, and then moved onto a larger one operating in the same field but out of offices off Oxford Street instead of the dreadful Stratford where she had spent a year and a half. Now she had moved to London, she used to tell her sisters when she telephoned them in Dublin. Before that, she would say, she was scouting only.

She was also browsing only when it came to men friends. She never had trouble getting dates. It was just that she was particular when it came to anything more than the casual fun and games. So before David Maguire the only heavy relationship she had was with a South African veterinary surgeon. But when David Maguire appeared on the scene all other interests vanished. Joan fell madly in love and in under two years they were married.

*

“Thank you so much for coming,” gushed my friend. “I really began to think you weren’t going to make it.”

“The traffic as usual,” I shrugged. Earlsfield was a long drive south from where I lived and the congestion on the other side of Westminster Bridge had been a nightmare for drivers for more than a few months.

“Anyway you’re here now. Come in and get a much deserved drink.” She called out to her husband and then herded me towards the kitchen where she presented me with an iced can.

Beaming she said: “You know everyone don’t you?” and pointed to five or six women whom I had met before. “Joan Maguire. Have you met Joan? Joan, this is my good friend Zachary Tighe. Zack, Joan is a lawyer and is married to a policeman so watch your step. Joan, Zack is a journalist so you better watch what you say.”

That was when I learned there was more than merely being an intelligent policeman’s wife to Joan Maguire. She looked me square in the eye. “Zachary.” She held out her hand. It was firm, dry and warm. “So, you can’t be all bad then.”

The wetting of the baby’s head was a resounding success. Just about everyone had far too much to drink. Those who had exercised a modicum of control were still well over the legal limit to drive but were more able to control all their limbs unaided. I was glad to have survived as one of that small group.

Joan Maguire was stone cold sober and we had spent a good part of the night talking together. I told her one version of my life history, all the ups but none of the downs, doing my best to create a good impression and recover that ground lost so abysmally outside Parliament. I was damned if I was going to miss the opportunity.

For her part, Joan told me some of her background and a lot more of her husband’s successes displaying a very obvious pride in him.

“So you should be,” I ventured bravely. “I hear he’s a good detective.”

“Not just good.” Joan Maguire lifted her chin slightly and sipped her Chardonnay.

“David has been extremely successful. He has worked very hard to get where he is. He’ll go much further. This case will take him up the ladder also, you’ll see.”

She smiled at me suddenly, catching me slightly off guard. “Listen carefully, Zachary journalist Tighe. Watch my husband. There are a lot of bright policemen out there.

Many of them are absolutely straight and dedicate their lives to protecting the likes of everyone here tonight. David is one of them.”

I felt a tap on my shoulder and when I turned I saw the flushed face of my hostess. She draped an arm around my shoulders and whispered loudly: “I forgot to tell you Zack. Joan is devoted to her copper husband. Slobbery devoted.” She winked grandly. “Hope you have not wasted all your good moves.”

Joan was still smiling: “He hasn’t wasted anything. Actually he has been quite the gentleman. And an excellent listener on top of that. I think you could say that if he was a patient he was making a fine recovery.”

*

When I finally opened both eyes the following morning and recognised the bedside table and the alarm clock with its eardrum splintering ring I groaned and gripped my temples in the hope that pressure alone would dispel the fearsome ache which filled the cavity between my ears. I am never at my best when I am suffering the mother of all hangovers. I have had the best and have to admit I am a total failure at being able to exercise any degree of discipline. Usually I sulk for hours, feel horribly badly done by for all of at least one day and invariably vow never, ever, to drink too much again. I hauled myself into the bathroom, relieved myself and brushed my teeth twice to remove all the fur. Then I switched the radio on low and slumped onto the side of the bath willing the throbbing to go away.

That was when I heard reports that police had allegedly caught the serial killer.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Detectives Rogers and Johnston had been watching the suspect for two days. Two long twenty-four hour shifts without a break. They were strung out.

Their man was a pop star of two decades ago, or to be accurate, he was almost a pop star in the late seventies who descended into depths of public humiliation and degradation in the eighties. And in the nineties he had made no efforts to rise above his low self crafted station.

His relative success at the beginning of his career had earned him the adoration of a reasonable band of impressionable youth. It had, he apparently considered, earned him the right to abuse that adoration.

His first arrest was for behaving in an indecent manner in a public toilet in St James's Park after a performance at a Piccadilly club. The youth involved was only fourteen. It was for his sake and that of his family that the decision was taken not to prosecute, but it was the publicity surrounding this incident which put him on the downward slide to ruin. By the mid eighties he had been picked up more than a dozen times for offences involving young men. However, as they were all over the minimum age limit, and with the help of a lawyer of whom it was said he had a deep understanding of the mind of his client, he managed to escape jail. Then he slipped from sight. For more than five years nothing was heard of him. Nobody cared. Nobody enquired.

"This prick is the lowest of the low," Rogers remarked to his partner. "I hope he is the one we want so I can bury my fist in his gut so far he'll think he's been cut in half."

Johnston snorted as he rested his head on the back of the car seat, his eyes closed.

Try as he could, sleep would not come. It was his turn to rest while Rogers kept watch. But the last two days had been exhausting and he was now at that stage where nothing short of a bottle of whiskey would put him out. The best he could do was breath deeply and try to ignore the frequent comments by Rogers.

"You know he started out with young blokes." Rogers was keeping his voice low but there was venom in his words. Part of the reason for his talking was to keep from nodding off himself and losing the subject. The rest was to remind himself of the type of person he was watching. "He got tired of them though and moved on to more interesting victims. A genuine prick I can tell you."

*

When he resurfaced in London the one-time singer professed to be an international trader with close associates in Brussels and Sofia. It was never spelt out what he traded but it apparently was lucrative as he never seemed at a loss for money. He frequented the clubs of Soho and Mayfair. Always with women on his arms he had become brazenly heterosexual. But it was not long before rumours began of his relationships with the females he escorted. The dark glasses they invariably began wearing hid blackened eyes and it was said their clinging gowns were not always sufficient to conceal their bruised bodies.

It was late at night when the police station in Nottinghill Gate was treated to an amazing performance. Around twelve thirty the singer burst in through the front door and collapsed onto the bench against the wall sobbing. He was bleeding from the nose and the sleeves of his white silk shirt were drenched in blood. His trouser legs also were smeared and when the police examined him they found deep gashes along the insides of both arms and cuts down both calves.

Questioned, he stated that a female friend he had been entertaining at his home that night had in a frenzy, for no reason, launched herself at him with a kitchen knife screaming murder and mayhem. Slashing wildly she had almost killed him and the only reason he was alive was because he was able to wrestle the knife away from her and lock her in the bedroom.

As the police were preparing to race to the scene of the alleged confrontation, the woman herself crashed into the station. As he had told, she was screaming murder and mayhem. However, the murder she screamed was what the singer had tried to do to her and to support her claim she held up her right hand. Most of the little finger and pieces of all remaining fingers on the hand had been chopped off. The thumb dangled by a thread of bloody skin.

For the rest of the night and into the early hours of the morning the two protagonists screeched insults at each other, each accusing the other of vicious assault with intent to do much worse. It came to an end as quickly as it had begun, with the woman refusing to press charges and bawling at the singer “You fucking bastard!” as she staggered from the local hospital casualty and emergency floor clutching her heavily bandaged hand.

He too chose to proceed no further. But the background took on clearer meaning as he murmured to himself as he also left swathed in bandages “That’s the last time she’ll wank a strange prick.”

What also became clearer to the police over the following months, indeed years, was that he seemed to be drawn to situations where the women he was with managed to harm themselves. Some were accidentally stabbed. Others managed to cut themselves badly. A few went as far as actually mutilating their bodies by slicing off parts. They never preferred charges and he was never prosecuted. However the police did record each and every incident and entered his name into their special file category. The one-time pop singer Rocky James was listed as extremely dangerous to women. Someone who liked to cut them and cut them a lot.

*

Rogers heard the scream first and was out his side of the car in seconds.

Johnston shot upright, cracking his head on the lowered sun visor and upsetting a half empty cup of coffee on the dashboard. It splashed down his front as he too hurled open his car door.

The scream came again, louder and more hysterical, from the direction of the building they were watching where James occupied a large town house. The hall light behind the wooden doors was on and a shape or shapes could be seen through the bubble glass side panels leaping about.

As Rogers and Johnston ran across the street the doors crashed open and a naked woman tumbled down the steps to the pavement where she lay still. James stood legs astride at the top, the light at his back casting him as some dark apparition. In his hand he held a short tapering implement.

The officers knelt beside the body on the pavement and slowly turned her onto her back. As Johnston brought his knuckles to his mouth and bit down hard Rogers leapt up the steps and hurled himself at James.

“You bastard,” he cursed. “You fucking animal.”

The woman’s name was Gabriella Harris. She was forty-one-years-old. It would later be revealed that she had had the fingers and thumb of her right hand cut off. An ear had been severed. Her throat had been slashed and she had been stabbed three times. Miraculously she had survived each of these wounds in themselves but had died from a massive heart attack.

James was immediately charged with her murder and the police began making enquiries into his activities around the times of the disappearance of the other women who went missing and whose mutilated bodies were later found dumped at various locations.

It was only a very short time before the media put two and two together.

The monster which had terrified the streets of London for almost a year was at last under lock and key.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Paula Gibbons opened her eyes to darkness. A gag pulled at the corners of her mouth and she had trouble breathing through blocked nostrils. The disorientation and the need to fight for air frightened her greatly.

Deafness was something she would not will on anyone. Throat cancer and the removal of vocal cords, being a smoker herself, was another, and the thought of not being able to hear or to speak was a nightmare.

Blindness was immeasurably worse. The inability to see where she was going or what surrounded her was something she could not contemplate. Blindness forever belonged outside the reaches of her comprehension. Yet, here she was, unable to distinguish her surroundings, certainly not what was sharing her space.

In minutes though the impenetrable darkness lightened enabling her to make out that she was in a room with almost no furniture or anything else she could identify. At the same time she came to another realisation. She was lying on a bed with her hands secured behind her and her ankles restricted at the foot. She could not move. Blinking away tears which began to form in her eyes, Paula lay her head against the cold wall at her back and prayed.

Then she heard a noise from above. It sounded like approaching footsteps.

*

It was time.

He had carefully prepared everything and was ready to begin.

It had been simple up to now, as it was most of the time.

There were occasions when his meticulously thought out plans had gone slightly astray; through no fault of his but because of something which he could not possibly have accounted for.

But with very few exceptions his plans worked to the letter.

He expected nothing else.

He knew that the collection was the easiest part.

It was what came after which had failed him up to now.

Getting the woman here had been easy; with only a little force he had accomplished it.

Now she was below.

Waiting for him.

And he had prepared everything.

First, he had precisely written the words on a piece of paper. Two faint blue lines separated each word. They were in the exact same order as in the past.

Care.

Precision.

Exactitude.

He believed in them.

What he liked to call "deliberate precision" was essential for success.

Any wavering could be cause for failure and failure was something which gave him unbearable head pains.

He could remember sitting for hours clasping his skull between rigid fingers feeling the throbbing and the swelling inside. There were times when he believed his head would burst, spewing brain and blood over the walls, splattering himself.

After he had written down all the words, he slowly cut each into separate slips.

These he folded right to left, left to right, and right to left again.

Perfect little squares.

All together there were fifty-four.

He was certain he could have prepared more – the Masters had been known to start with a list of more than a hundred – but he knew it was needless. It would be impossible to get anywhere near a hundred.

At least not yet.

His dream of course was to emulate the Masters but he knew that right now that was impossible. It would take much longer to reach that point of excellence.

However, he would try.

And keep trying.

Practice makes perfect they say.

Carefully, with rubber bands that lay bunched next to the basket, he fastened a piece of paper to each of the feathers.

Next was the basket.

In the beginning he had used a simple bowl but after his initial two failures he changed tactics completely and began afresh.

Everything fresh meant he had a new chance of success every time.

Like those businessmen who flew between cities and countries each week or even more frequently. He used to think the chances of them being killed in plane crashes must increase each time they took to the air. But he read somewhere that such laws of average were faulty. Rather, each time the traveller boarded an aircraft should be counted as the first so the chances of dying in a crash did not rise with the frequency of travel.

It might not be true but it suited him to believe it.

So he started over afresh each time.

The basket was round, made of plaited wicker, with a Little Bo Peep arched handle.

He had washed and dried it immediately after the last time in readiness.

Into it he dropped randomly the folded pieces of paper.

They landed next to the feathers.

The large square of clear plastic was near the door in the corner of the kitchen.

Silently humming a tune he had heard on the car radio as they drove home he walked casually to the drawers next to the dish washer and removed a large pine handled carving knife. It was an ordinary kitchen carving knife that would be used for cutting up a roast chicken or slicing rings of boiled ham but it had been honed to a glistening edge.

He ran it under the warm tap, turning it this way and that, making sure it was clean.

It gleamed.

It was warm to the touch which was good. He didn't want it cold. He didn't want it to startle.

That was a joke. The knife would certainly startle.

Always it startled.

Just the sight of it brought cries and pleas for mercy, pleas which he mentally reasoned against with perfect logic, pleas which he might have explained simply could not be entertained.

He had on one occasion changed the carver for a short curved variety in the hope that its size would lessen the shock effect.

But he had been clumsy and as a result it had been one of his worst failures.

Not one he intended to repeat.

The large knife he rested gently in the basket.

The basket.

The papers.

The feathers.

The Knife.

He was almost ready.

Next, from the cupboard above the sink he took down a plate. It had bright coloured fruit designs on it.

And from the drawer where he had found the carving knife he took a sterling silver fork and spoon and knife.

The plate had been thoroughly washed already but the cutlery he now rinsed under the warm water and dried with a fresh linen towel.

These he placed in the basket as well.

He was ready.

*

She could now make out that she had been manacled to an iron bed, the legs having been cut down or removed completely because the mattress she was lying on was close to the floor.

Godalmighty, what was going on. What has happening to her. Was she having a bad dream?

Paula tried to sit up but before she got her shoulders and upper back more than a few inches up the wall behind her, handcuffs around her ankles started to cut in painfully and she cried out. As she jerked involuntarily the steel clasps around her wrists also bit.

Paula was terrified. She was in a place somewhere, she had no way of knowing where, and she was handcuffed to a bed in a space with no light at all. There were only two shapes she could vaguely define. In the area to the right of the bed, some way away, there appeared to be a table or chest. Directly at the end of the bed it looked as if a chair was placed. She felt as if she was on show. She had a feeling that she had been brought to this place, and fastened so she could not escape to the four corners of a bed, so that she could be watched by voyeurs. Or worse. It was only then that Paula realised for the first time that she was completely naked.

Oh dear God no. No, no, no, no. Please. Oh please no.

*

Bearing the cane basket by the delicate handle, he opened the door and flooded the steep staircase leading downwards with pale light. In the other hand he carried a torch which added extra brightness.

Placing the basket on the step in front of him he turned and pulled the door closed behind him leaving the wavering torchlight the only illumination. Slowly he began to descend the wooden steps.

After placing the basket on the sideboard in the corner of the room he turned and looked at Paula.

She looked back with eyes full of terror.

For some time he stood without moving studying her in the pale light, his eyes lingering on her thighs, her breasts, her fear-filled eyes.

He could see her choke back phlegm beseeching him.

For what?

To set her free?

To actually let her leave?

Surely it was obvious he would not, could not now.

Was she pleading with her eyes for him not to hurt her?

Was that it?

Was she promising him the world if only he would not hurt her?

Yet she did not have the world to give him.

She had nothing.

She was utterly at his mercy.

However he did not plan to keep her as a sex slave, to toy with her for his own gratification.

His intentions were quite different.

She was the fifth and he was confident that this time he would go further than he had with her four predecessors.

If he was careful, if he was extremely careful.

And if he was lucky with the feathers.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Something was not right about Rocky James. He did not quite fit the profile of the serial killer. Not the one responsible for the murder and mutilation of the young women, the one now commanding massive media coverage, the butcher who was now the most talked about mass murderer in the country.

Rocky James could not lay claim to the most victims. There were more than a handful who had been responsible for more murders but he was up there with the worst when it came to the brutality, the sheer viciousness of the crimes he had committed. He was in the minds of the policemen involved in the case definitely one of a kind. Yet, Detective David Maguire felt uneasy.

James was an animal. There was no doubt about that. One gigantic prized prick of an animal. Only a fully paid up member of a sub-species would take enjoyment in inflicting pain on a person like James did. Not only the physical act but revelling in the build-up to it. The evidence was that he would spend hours tormenting his women friends with what he planned to do to them. Then he would prolong their punishment as long as possible.

Fortunately though it was not ever as long as he hoped. The victims were not the kind to sit back and take it without putting up a fight and more than a few of James' lady friends knew how to fight when their back was against a wall. Invariably James came away with injuries himself.

Maguire wondered if James received some satisfaction from that as well. Was he a masochist as well as a sadist? Perhaps. But none of that convinced Maguire that James was the serial killer being hunted the length and breadth of Britain. One fact stood out for Maguire. Apart from his late wife, James was not believed to have killed anyone.

Maguire believed the real murderer was still out there. Preparing maybe for his next victim.

*

I was sitting in my office wrestling with indecision.

Should I pen my column for the South China Morning Post around the uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa or the aftermath of the home-made riots in England? Both had the weight. Both would be read with considerable interest in Hong Kong.

My decision was simple in one way, not so straightforward in another. Do I plump for historical events? Or do I go for sensation? Not an easy choice. Fortunately I was temporarily saved by the bell. When I answered the door who should I confront but a friend I had not seen in years.

John Dunstable was a man who had throughout his working career had jobs that most of us would die for. He had worked on respectable newspapers and then moved over to the civil service where he worked closely with many of those journalist friends he left behind. The departments he served were never crisis hit. He was not sent to the National Health Service. He avoided having to answer the criticisms levelled at the prison service. Foreign affairs he would most likely have been good at but those pitfalls he missed out on as well. Instead John was a spokesman for the Minister with responsibility for, among other soft areas, sport and entertainment. His office was in a bright and airy building in cultured Westminster, surveying a skyline hard to match anywhere else in the world, and when he wasn't there he spent a good deal of his time at high priced and highly prized events we could only dream of attending. Yet he was not happy.

John, whenever I saw him, would furrow his brow, wobble his head from side to side and whisper: "It's the pressure Zack. The pressure. It's the pressure."

What pressure I would wonder. Give me some of that pressure please John I would say to myself. Yes, please, share some of your troubles with me. Here, let me attend the FA Cup final for you. Or join the Minister on his next trip to Flushing Meadow, or the London games in 2012. I will gladly relieve you of some of that burden, I would imagine. Now, here he was. Back in my life after an absence of more than a year.

I gripped his hand in mine. "John boy," I grinned. "How are you? What brings you down to the slums?"

I had followed his pressurised lifestyle of course. Anyone interested in sport was aware of his travels and tribulations, though they were problems they would gladly have endured. His current Minister was a loose cannon who was wonderful fodder for the press but also it has to be said a slight problem for the press secretary, though I would still not have termed it pressure.

"A well earned escape from the foot-in-mouth department," he rejoined. He held my hand longer than I would have expected. "I have run away for two glorious weeks. This is my first day a free man and I happened to find myself down here near the palace when I remembered I had a friend in the Queen's neighbourhood. So here I am, on the loose and I could just about murder for a pint. What about it? Can you get away for an hour or three?" John took a step back and his bushy eyebrows shot up dangerously. "It will be your last chance for a while old mate. Tomorrow I pile into the Honda and head into the wild grey yonder. Twelve whole days driving wherever I bloody well feel like, whenever I feel like it. So what do you say? For old time's sake. A pint or ten?"

It was, as they say in the movies, an offer I could not refuse. Nor did I want to.

Murdering fellow Muslims and murdering English women could wait. A keg of real ale was out there waiting to be murdered by us. We adjourned as a starter to the Colonies just a few blocks away.

When we called it a day we had also been to Waxy O'Connors in Soho, O'Neils a short walk away, two more pubs whose names I could not recall and would never be able to remember though I would probably return to them at some stage in a future life, and finally to Gordon's Wine Bar in Villiers Street. I had been taken there about three months before by a contact I had and decided it was worth another visit. John took little persuasion. The thought of ending the evening with a nice glass of red and some quality cheese appealed to both of us.

We managed between us to drink two bottles of good red wine which was a serious mistake. Beer and wine do not mix with me normally and this night when I was still the victim of friendly Irish good cheer was different only in that it went more directly to my head, lodged itself there heavily for a time and then began to swirl in a most unsettling manner. As we were leaving Gordon's who should I bump into, literally, but Detective Maguire.

"Well, Detective Maguire," I mumbled. "How are you? Let me introduce you to my friend John Dunstable. John, this is Detective Maguire who has been leading the manhunt for our mass murderer. Super sleuth Maguire. The copper with the mostest. The most beautiful and charming wife included. Right Detective Maguire? You have the most beautiful wife in the Met don't you?"

Maguire said hello to John Dunstable and returned his attention to what he was doing before my interruption.

I persisted unwisely. "Oh come now. Don't be like that. I didn't mean anything by it. Just the truth. You can't sue me for telling the truth now can you?" Others might have detected a slurring of my words but to me I was speaking crystal clear English.

Before I could go on John took me firmly by the elbow and shoved me towards the door. "That's good Zack. Pick on a policeman why don't you? Very sensible. And find his vulnerable spot, like his wife." John kept herding me up the stairs and into the street. "Jesus old mate, do you have a death wish. Couldn't you see he wanted to drop

you? Rule one: Leave coppers alone when you've been drinking. Rule two: Don't forget rule one when you've been drinking."

Later I would remember thanking John for stopping me making more of a fool of myself than I already had. But that was about all I recalled of the latter part of that night. He was a pal who had in the nick of time saved my reputation.

Little did I realise how sadly I would remember the parts of that night I could recall and regret the parts I could not.

*

It was the next day Maguire decided for certain that Rocky James was not the serial killer being hunted.

Maguire had gone home with his mind in turmoil. Rocky James had been formally charged and would appear in magistrate's court the following morning. He was due to face a sample charge relating to the death of Gabriella Harris. Later, it was expected, he would be charged with the unlawful killings of the other women.

When he arrived at his small terrace house in Wimbledon, Maguire fixed himself a Pims and walked out into the rear garden. It was tiny but it was his wife's passion and the shrubs and other perennials which lined the borders and leant against the timber fences separating them from their neighbours were testament to the hours she spent digging and weeding.

Joan Maguire had never had a garden of her own before she and her husband moved to Wimbledon. As a single girl she had lived in digs off Bayswater Road in South Kensington and in Hampstead Garden Suburb. Her last flat, a small bedsit run by a single women's association, was in Highbury. All had had communal gardens of varying size and quality yet Joan had never actually had a garden which she considered enough of her own to want to spend time with it, or at least time to model it to her way. The Wimbledon house gave her own garden and in a way she had never felt before in her life it set her free. It was her release, her passion, her obsessive indulgence.

It was also often a sanctuary for Maguire himself. When he came home after a day, or longer, of living with the dregs of society, the little patch behind his house, nursed to perfection by his perfect wife, provided tranquillity for thought and day dreaming which allowed him to retain his sanity.

He carried his cool drink down to the fence absent mindedly examining the deep green foliage interspersed with the occasional splash of colour. He allowed his mind to drift across the events of the last twenty-four hours, almost distractedly analysing, dissecting, evaluating. It was a scanning process he had developed over the years of being a policeman in one of the most demanding cities in the world. Sift and discard. Look at a specimen of information, decide its relevance, and either file it away or toss it out. It was a system which served him well usually. There were occasions when it let him down but not to a significant degree. Most of the time he sifted out the unnecessary and kept a close eye on the necessary. Most of the time he was right in his judgements.

He sensed her presence and then felt his wife's arms circle him. She squeezed firmly and rested her cheek against his shoulder. "Tough?" she enquired.

"Tough," he responded and turned to brush his own cheek against the top of her head. It felt nice and he could smell a hint of shampoo. They stood together as one for a time and he could hear her even breathing and she measured his heart beat with hers. She loved him dearly and he desired her more than he believed he ever could.

"Any news, developments?" Joan knew from years of experience when to probe, when to put simple uncomplicated questions. Tonight was a time for understanding.

Maguire sighed and sipped from his glass. "We have charged Rocky James. He will appear tomorrow on one count and they will then prepare the others."

She could read the hidden message. "What's wrong?" she asked quietly. "Tell me what's wrong lover."

"Rocky James is not our killer," he answered simply. He broke away easily from his wife's grasp and strolled to the corner of the garden. A golden conifer which would soar to thirty feet if it was not pruned back filled the space. He tweaked a small end of a branch and immediately turned to face Joan, somewhat guilty of the act.

"I can't prove it, I have no evidence to the contrary, I doubt anyone would agree with me," he said, "but I know he is not guilty of the murder of those girls."

Joan walked up to him and cupped his face in her hands. "Then go out and prove it my love. To hell with what anyone else thinks. Prove to them that James is not the right man. Go and find the real killer."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I have this one solution to all my problems. It is a system which allows me to relax completely, to blow away any cobwebs which might be tangled up in my brain or to erase worries which encroach on my peace. It never fails.

After a year in Hong Kong I could speak a smattering of the local Cantonese dialect, I knew a northern Chinese restaurant from a Guangdong restaurant, and I had convinced myself that there was no better beer in the world than San Lik, the slang way of pronouncing San Miguel which identified you as a resident which in turn identified you as being off limits when it came to overcharging or harassing. Well, not completely off limits, it was Hong Kong after all. I had become a resident. Still a *kwailo*, but a resident foreigner.

At the end of three years I had become more proficient in all these areas and had also grown to two hundred and fifteen pound with a paunch that I had to haul back over my belt and jowls which Marlon Brando would have died for in his role as the Mafia Don.

I recall sitting in the office at the Post one Saturday. It was a slack period and I was reading that day's edition of the paper. An advertisement caught my eye. I know it did, though not specifically at the time, because I was conscious of the extra pounds I was carrying and it was an advertisement for a karate association which enticed its readers in the heading to get fit and only at the bottom to learn the art of self defence. I read it a number of times. Then I showed it to a colleague who agreed it might be fun to visit the dojo one night, watch a class, and if it did not seem too violent we would probably have a go at it. From my first night I was hooked.

The sensei was a young Japanese man called Kenichi Namikata. He taught karate as the Japanese learn it in Japan, beginning with the meaning of karate, the spiritual behind the physical, and when he moved to the self defence he carried the spiritual teachings with it so that it became an experience, a way of life, actually a process of living your life.

For the last two years of my time in Hong Kong I trained with Namikata Sensei four times a week for two hours each session. I learned much. About friendship and trust. I suffered pain and elation in competition. I also lost forty pounds. But one of the things I learnt then and which I practice today is that karate can convert into meaningless irrelevancies the events of a whole day. As soon as I put on my dogi, begin my warm up exercises which lead to forty minutes of high concentration physical power training, I lose all previous thoughts and enter the world of karate with its true teachings, and when I finish I am exhausted and totally refreshed.

I am not that tall, a fraction under six feet, and have little difficulty maintaining my ideal fighting weight of one hundred eighty pounds. I am also pretty fast and for three or four minutes can hold my own with just about anybody around. After that though, the old man syndrome kicks in and I am easily cornered. Wiles are not sustaining enough, at the end of the day proving inadequate for youth, stamina, superior speed and technique. So I confine myself to working out at home daily, or whenever I can, and forsake the pain at the dojo in Piccadilly. My system works well and I forget my troubles easily. However, even that spell can be broken as it was when a friend telephoned and insisted I switch on the television news immediately.

I had missed the intro to the story but the newsreader was just passing over to an outside broadcasting colleague who was standing facing the camera outside the Horseferry Road Magistrate's Court. For the next forty-five seconds I listened as she recounted the events that unfolded as Rocky James was transported to the court, apparently pleaded not guilty to the charge of killing his wife, and was then escorted back to his place of remand. It was after that that she said there were unconfirmed reports, supposedly emanating from reliable police sources, that James was also to be

charged with other murders, the implication being that he was the serial killer who was being hunted.

Almost unseen to the side of the screen, standing apart from the melee on the sidewalk, I noticed Detective Maguire. He was looking on, past the heads of the many other people who had gathered outside the court building to witness, or be part of, the circus surrounding the capture of the country's most sought after criminal. I don't know what it was but there was something about his expression. I could not put my finger on it but for some reason it struck me, he doesn't look right, he looks questioning. Unconvinced I think was the word that popped into my head. Why that should be so I had no idea. I was probably wrong anyway. Maguire was one of the lead detectives working the case and here he was outside the court where Rocky James had appeared charged with one murder and being linked, albeit unconfirmed, with the murders he was working on. So why he should look doubtful made no sense. As I was thinking these thoughts Maguire actually looked straight at me, or at least straight at the camera filming the reporter finishing her report and I thought for a moment he was looking through the screen at me, and then turned on his heel and walked away. The scene on my television quickly changed and returned to the anchor in the studio.

Sometimes a story requires a great deal of research. Something happens and your job is to follow it through with new angles, further and deeper probing, or move off at a tangent to get an extended take on it. This can take a long time and involve a great deal of effort. But the results can be very rewarding, very satisfying.

Other times the story sells itself. It is an event, a happening, that allows the words to flow freely and result in an interesting read. It might not be as fulfilling as investigative reporting but it can nevertheless be interesting, even entertaining, to put together.

Then there is the story that you think might be there. You are not certain, but your gut sends a message to your brain that says have a look at this, there might be something in it, it could lead to something pretty worthwhile. Detective Maguire slotted into that category. I had no reason to know that he could have a story for me. The story was already out there and every other journalist had it. Rocky James had been arrested and charged with one murder and would be charged it was said with the others. Every journalist would have access to that. So what was it about Maguire that gave me the idea he could be a story? My gut. That's all it was. My gut and the expression I thought I saw on his face outside the Horseferry Road court. He looked unconvinced. And that for some reason convinced me I should follow my gut instinct and see where it led me.

From my office to the Metropolitan Police Headquarters, or New Scotland Yard, in Broadway around the corner from St James's Park underground station and close to Victoria Street it took me less than ten minutes to walk. The original New Scotland Yard was located less than a mile away on Victoria Embankment. Then it was a red and white brick Gothic structure and was specially built as the new headquarters for the British police force. Actually the building was the site of the notorious Whitehall Mystery. The Yard museum reports that the Whitehall Mystery of 1888 involved a woman's torso being concealed in the cellar by night as the building itself was under construction.

There's a link. Another woman who was murdered.

That was by no means though the most famous case for New Scotland Yard. There was the wonderfully named Brides of The Bath Murders that involved three murdered women all found in their baths, the famous Dr Crippen, not to mention Jack the Ripper, and more recently the Kray Gang. New Scotland Yard had earned its global reputation for solving deadly crimes.

Of course the present New Scotland Yard building which replaced the Victoria Embankment headquarters around the mid nineteen sixties is very different and is a

plain stainless steel clad office block. The thing that distinguished it from other similar edifices around that part of the capital is the famous revolving sign outside which announces it is the home of New Scotland Yard. It is said the sign revolves no fewer than fourteen thousand times each and every day.

The Metropolitan Police Service, or The Met as it is known, is now the largest force in London and was founded by Sir Robert Peel in 1829 when its contingent was just one thousand officers. Today it employs more than thirty-two thousand and almost fifteen thousand staff. Its head is not a Commissioner. Right now it is an Acting Commissioner because the Commissioner was forced to resign following the revelations involving alleged police association with the media phone hacking scandal. Not that this tentative hiccup involving the leadership of the Met would have had a major effect on Detective David Maguire. He was too professional, too experienced, too single minded to be diverted by that. He was also too involved in the current series of cases to be distracted.

Yet distracted he looked as he walked up Broadway towards the main entrance to New Scotland Yard. He did not notice me straight away standing outside a few meters from the revolving sign above my head. When he did he stopped, shook his head slowly from side to side and I could see him mouth what I took to be a four letter curse.

“Detective Maguire,” I said as he approached me. “How goes the investigation? Or should I ask what new one you will be handed now that Rocky James is in custody?” “Piss off Tighe,” he said and went to move past me. Then he stopped and added: “I am not as well mannered as my wife so I hope I don’t have to repeat myself too often. Piss off.”

He stated to walk off again. “What makes you unhappy about James’ arrest Detective?”

He stopped and turned. “Jesus Tighe, what is it with you reporters? Why do you go around making things up? I have never understood that. Surely there is enough news in the world without you having to invent it. Is it just for the headline? Are you on a bonus for the best lies you can come up with? Why on earth would you ask me that? Why am I unhappy about the arrest of a serial killer? Why would it make me unhappy to have a scum of the earth murderer taken off the streets? Tell me that.”

“I saw you outside the court,” I said. “You know something. Or you suspect something is not right. Or unfinished. You’re a good copper but not a good poker player.”

Maguire stared at me and then turned his back. “Piss off,” he called over his shoulder. That’s when my gut sent me another message. Maguire didn’t deny my accusation a second time. There’s something there Zack my boy. Go dig it up.

So that’s what I resolved to do. Find out what it was about the arrest of Rocky James that bothered the experienced and highly professional Detective David Maguire and see where it led.

*

But first I had a column to write for my Hong Kong newspaper, the South China Morning Post. Back in my office flat I sat in front of the PC cogitating. The subject I decided had to be on the phone hacking. There was nothing for it. The story would simply not go away and was causing increasing trouble for the Prime Minister who had hired a former editor of the newspaper at the centre of the scandal, Rupert Murdoch’s News of the World, as his No 10 Downing Street spin doctor. He had already been arrested for allegedly being involved, had quit his government role while denying any wrong doing, but now was back in the limelight following further unpleasant revelations.

So I couldn't get away from the timeliness and news value of the subject. And even if it meant writing harsh things about my own profession and the media in the town where I worked, I had no alternative. So first I had to double check the sequence of events, the key element, leading up to the latest shock news.

It had its origins in a manner of speaking more than a decade before when the attractive Rebekah Brooks was appointed editor and led a campaign to name and shame paedophiles and seeking public access to the Sex Offenders Register which was now known as Sarah's Law. Then two years later, in 2002, schoolgirl Milly Dowler was snatched and killed, her body being found six months later. This girl would feature terribly again many years later at the height of the hacking scandal when it was found that her very mobile had been hacked while she was still missing.

In 2003 Brooks took over editorship of The Sun newspaper and was replaced at the News of the World by the man who would later become the spin doctor for the Prime Minister, Andy Coulson.

Over the next two years, up to 2007, various claims were made by high profile personalities, not the least of whom was the Queen's grandson and hugely popular prince William, that their private mobile phones had been hacked. Stories began appearing in print that could not have been obtained any other way it was said, and the upshot was that a private investigator was arrested, convicted and jailed for conspiring to intercept communications as well as actually intercepting voicemail messages.

Between then and 2009 there were a number of developments but nothing earth-shattering or worthy of banner headlines. Then suddenly it became known that News of the World reporters did hack into mobile phones of celebrities and politicians while Coulson was editor back between 2003 and 2007.

Parliament and police launched investigations. In 2010 Coulson headed up the government's media operation at No 10. Early the following year he resigned. More News of the World staff were arrested. The police investigation, that in the past had downplayed the extent of the hacking scandal, was stepped up as it was realised just how widespread and serious the scandal really was.

Major developments quickly followed. Coulson was arrested, Brooks resigned as CEO of News Corporation, a popular Assistant Commissioner of the Met resigned, the Commissioner himself resigned, and new evidence reportedly surfaced leading to further parliamentary probing.

The entire series of events revealed the most unsavoury side of British journalism, if not as a whole then certainly in part. And I am part of that world. Fortunately not News of the World which was shut down. An unbelievable penultimate end to the saga.

And that was roughly where I planned to end my column. But then as a last thought I decided to add something completely different, off the wall.

I wrote:

There can be no doubt that the reputation and credibility of the British media, so highly respected for generations around world, has been badly tarnished. It will take a long time indeed to rebuild itself.

There can also be no doubt that the reputation and credibility of the Metropolitan Police, so highly respected for generations around world, has been badly tarnished by this scandal. They have also done themselves a disservice for mishandling the early stages of the recent street riots that saw parts of the capital city as well as Birmingham, Manchester and other cities set alight and looted by roving gangs of hoodlums.

But let's not tarnish every single policeman and woman – or journalist for that matter – with the same accusations. There are good police offices as there are good honest reporters.

We are probably witnessing that positive side of the police as this article is being written. There have been a series of horror murders committed that have shocked the

nation. But a man has been arrested and charged in court with one murder, and if unconfirmed reports turn out to be accurate, he will be charged with others. Having said that, these are unconfirmed reports. It is not certain the man charged will indeed be charged further, if he is responsible for the other killings. Perhaps he will, and women up and down the land will be able to rest easily again. But it has to be said not everyone is convinced the serial killer is in custody. This reporter for one thinks even some police have their doubts. If not many, then at least one experienced, professional detective who is close to the case. As we say in the hopeful world of the press: "Watch this space".

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

*There was just the one remaining piece to put in place.
Turing away he reached into the basket and drew out one of the feathers.
Fixed to it was one of the paper squares.
Carefully he picked it off, unfolded it and read what was written on it.
Mhhgg. Mhhgg. Mhhgg.
He was happy with what he had read.
It was just the sort of thing he had prayed for.*

*

Paula was terrified.
What was happening? What was he doing? If he was going to rape her, what was he doing with the basket and notes that he pulled out?
She was lying naked on the bed. She was manacled hand and foot. Her legs were spread wide. Her total vulnerability was clear to see. She was at his complete mercy.
Paula began to sob deeply, so deeply she nearly choked. But he did nothing to help her. Just glanced in her direction fleetingly and then concentrated again on the basket.
He placed the feather and the piece of paper on the floor at his feet and sat on the chair with the basket on his lap.
Casually he reached into the basket again and withdrew the knife.
Oh dear god, Paula screamed in her head. Please god no. Please, please, please.

*

*For a little while he sat still staring at her.
He did not look into her eyes.
Nor did his gaze roam over her naked body.
Her breasts had no interest for him at this time.
Nor did her genitalia.
His eyes were fixed on her feet.*

*

Through her tears Paula could discern where he seemed to be looking.
He appeared to be ignoring the fact that she was naked and defenceless and completely at his mercy.
If he intended to rape or molest her he was not behaving as she might have expected.
This did not mean she did not fear him. She was petrified and if she did not fear he was about to sexually assault her she had no doubt he intended to do something terrible to her.

*

*He rose.
Holding the knife in his right hand he stepped towards the bed.
Mhhgg. Mhhgg.
He stood next to it for a few minutes and then reached down and gently caressed her right foot, rubbing his fingers across her toes one at a time.
His breathing deepened and he felt the arousal coming.
Soon he knew he would have an erection.
Mhhgg. Mhhgg. Mhhgg.*

*Slowly he bent at the waist and with the thumb and forefinger of his left hand he gripped the little toe on her right foot.
Then he brought the knife in his right hand from behind his back and leaning over began cutting her toe off.*

*

Though she could not see clearly between her tears and with her movements being restricted to a certain extent Paula felt the pain and knew was happening.
Again she screamed in her brain.
And she kept screaming even after he stopped cutting.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

David Maguire and Martin Walden were disagreeing.

“What makes you think that?” asked Walden. “You don’t have anything to go on. At least if you do you haven’t shared it with me.”

Maguire was getting angry. More angry. Not so much at his partner but at himself. The reason was he did not have an answer. At least not an answer that would satisfy Walden. He knew that. He knew also that had the roles been reversed he would be challenging Walden.

“I know, I know, I know,” he said. “It’s just...it just doesn’t feel right.” He shook his head. “The pieces just don’t fit.”

Maguire and Walden had been friends since their youth and had worked together for a number of years in the police. They knew each other as well as two men who had been friends for well over two decades could. They were close and had insights into each other’s characters, moods, tempers, thought processes. Much of the time anyway. There were times when one would have a sense of something that the other needed an introduction to. And even then there were occasions where no matter how detailed and lengthy the explanations were there would be no budging, no meeting of the twain. The current discussion was heading in that direction.

“The guy’s a prick,” said Walden. “A prick of the worst kind. He has a record as long as your arm with pretty well all of it for exactly the kind of thing he is now banged up for. He fits the profile perfectly. So what’s the problem?”

“I can’t tell you exactly,” replied Maguire.

“Jesus Dave, I don’t get it. How much do you want before you accept it? He fits the bill, he denies everything but then they always do, he claims not to have ever been in some of the places where they were found, yet we know from talking to others that he is lying. Even with what we’ve already got it’s enough to follow thorough on. And the longer we hold him the more we are going to find. Surely you know that inside you.”

“That’s just it,” said Maguire. “I don’t know it deep down. My gut tells me he’s just not right.”

“What’s not right about it?”

“For a start,” Maguire said, “this guy does not go around befriending new women all the time. His profile shows him to be a one woman man. He...”

“One woman? Shit Dave the bastard has had a harem of women over the years and he has beaten the shit out of all of them. And cut them badly, just as was done to our victims in the case.”

“But one woman at a time and for a period of time. Not different women for short periods of time. He gets one, shacks up with her or at least keeps her on tab for as long as she’ll stand him or until he knocks her about so much she pisses off, and only then tries to find another one.”

“What about the cutting and the chunks taken out of some of them? That fits James to a T.”

Maguire nodded vigorously. “Yes,” he said. “You’re right. But he does not cut them up and then dump them all over the country.”

“So far, or not that we know of. These victims could very probably be in addition to his women friends and those he really takes his aggression out on. The guy’s a real case and you know it. He’s capable of anything.”

“There’s one more thing,” said Maguire. “James hits his women. He kicks his women. He stabs his women. He slashes his women.”

“Like I say, he is a major prick.”

“How many of our victims have been stabbed? How many show any sign of being brutally assaulted either with punches or kicks? Or being hit with anything?”

Walden stared at his friend. “You’ve seen what he did to these women Dave. He did worse than knock them about a bit.”

“But that’s the point,” said Maguire. “He obviously did not knock them about.”

“What do you mean exactly?”

“These women have been mutilated I agree. Their injuries have been horrific. I give you all that. But not one of them, and tell me if I am wrong here, not one of them has any signs of being abused in the usual sense. Not one has been covered in bruises or even shown signs of ever having been knocked about in that way.”

Walden looked into the distance. One thing he did know about Maguire was that he was methodical. He pretty well all the time considered all aspects of a case. That was why he was good, why he was highly regarded as a good investigative detective. He didn’t go through the motions. He looked at cases from all angles.

“So, what you’re saying is that because none of our victims showed signs of physical abuse, apart from the injuries that are pretty damn clear, you reckon James is not our man.”

“Yes. Maybe,” said Maguire.

Walden remained silent for a few minutes. Maguire said nothing and waited.

“Bloody hell Dave,” Walden said eventually, “what you’re saying is you believe we have the wrong guy. That in taking this prick to court and with all the fanfare about that, that we are have to go back to square one. That the real killer is still out there?”

“I guess I am,” Maguire said.

“Shit,” said Walden. “What a bloody mess. If you are right, and I need to be convinced a little bit more I have to say, this will turn very messy indeed.” He stopped. Then added: “What the hell do you think the Super is going to say? Hang on, you are thinking that we have to go back to Ford aren’t you?”

Maguire looked squarely at his friend and partner. “I think we have to. If I am right, and if James is not the bad guy, and if this draws out as it looks like it might, we and everyone else are going to look like shit.” He then added: “Seriously, what do you think?”

Walden was quiet for quite a time. Maguire could almost hear the mental cogs grinding. “OK,” he said finally. “By your reckoning, correct me if I am wrong, James is definitely a candidate. A prized prick who beats and cuts his women. And while he cannot account for his whereabouts completely, and he denies ever being in the places of interest even though we know he is lying, and he has just murdered his wife after knocking her about and cutting her up, and he fits the psychological profile as well as anyone, you think he’s not our guy. And your reason is simply because our victims show no signs of brutality. Apart from numerous mutilations.”

“I guess that’s about it,” Maguire answered. “My principal thinking is the victims show no signs of battery. James is a thug who batters his women. Badly. Why not these?”

Walden sighed. “Fuck.”

*

Superintendent Alasdair Ford’s office was sparsely furnished.

The general public might have imagined that with all the money being loosely floated around the Met over the years that his office would be rather salubriously decked out with plush chairs, long mahogany tables, prints on the walls.

It did have a long table but it was not mahogany. Oak perhaps. And it sat ten at most. Along one wall there was a bookcase but even that was not crammed with legal tomes and such like. And the walls did have pictures hanging, but they were certainly not original. The most prominent in fact was a simple montage of alphabet graphics that in three rows of three spelt out the words Change Can Happen. Pot plants in two corners brought a semblance of the outdoors indoors.

Ford was sitting at one end of the table under the montage. He did not look very pleased. Maguire and Walden sat to his right. There was no-one else in the room.

“Tell me again,” said Ford.

For the second time in fifteen minutes Maguire began. He leaned his elbows on the table, coughed softly, and said: “What I am positing is that Rocky James does not fit the bill for our serial murderer. I think we might have the wrong man. I think we need to look further afield.”

Ford placed both palms on the table and appeared to concentrate on just how they should be spread. Without looking up he said: “No. What I mean is, tell me again from the beginning. I got the last bit. Tell me how you reached that conclusion.”

Maguire glanced at Walden who looked uneasy.

“We know how our victims look,” he began over. “We’ve seen their injuries. Some of the worst we’ve seen. If not the worst. Not the ordinary run of the mill as it were assault and battery. Far, far worse. So bad we don’t dare let on to the public.” He paused to swallow hard. “Whoever did that, not once but numerous times to numerous women, is not a normal human being. He, or she, though I think we must all agree it is a man and not a women who is responsible, is one of the worst kind. The injuries are horrific. But given that, they are not what we would expect to see as the result of what we have all seen in assault and battery cases. There is nothing random or frenzied about any of the wounds. They are all designed to inflict the worst pain. The worst disfigurement. They are all...predetermined wounds. Not something that would result from the normal woman beater’s fists and feet. Quite the opposite. Apart from the wounds there are no injuries. No bruises. No abrasions. Nothing.”

Maguire stopped. Looking squarely at Ford who had kept his head down and continued scrutinising his splayed hands, he said: “These are not the trademark injuries caused by Rocky James or anyone like him. This is, in my view, the handiwork of someone very different. Very different to anyone we’ve encountered up to now.”

Maguire stopped talking. He felt he had covered all the bases he had in his mind. What he considered fact intertwined with opinion. No more than that. No more than fact and opinion based on a lot of detective experience and professional knowledge.

The room was silent.

Walden shifted in his chair. “Sir,” he said. “Dave might have a point. More than one actually. Rocky James is a nasty piece of work there is no doubt. But as Dave says his trademark is knocking his women about. He leaves terrible injuries – hell the last one, his wife, he killed – but there’s nothing thoughtful about the way he attacks them. He loses his head and beats the living daylight out of them. He doesn’t think about it and methodically set about the damage he wants to cause. He’s just ruthless. So maybe....”

Superintendent Ford drummed his fingers on the table. He was a tall man with more than twenty five years experience in the police. He was a good police officer with an excellent track record. His dedication to work and the hours he devoted to the job could in part explain why his two marriages had not worked out. Separations were amicable but his former wives had finally tired of his eighteen hour work days and the brevity of his small talk. Police work was his life. The Met was his wife.

“On one hand you worry me Maguire,” said Ford at last. “Nothing quite sits with you comfortably does it? There always seems to be something you are not satisfied with.” He then lifted his head and looked at Maguire. “On the other hand, there are times when your unhappiness is justified. I am not convinced that on this occasion you are right. But I am convinced that we should double check our facts, our information, underline what we have, before we go any further.”

He paused and again concentrated on his hands. “So, what I suggest is this. Get a closer look at Rocky James. Go over what we have about the victims. Have a look at anyone else that might be on the radar.”

“Sir...,” Maguire began.

Ford held up a hand. "And finally, do all of this quietly. James has appeared in court. The word is out that we are considering charging him with these other murders. If we have to change our position on this I want us to be absolutely clear why. After the recent street disturbances our reputation can take no more hits. I trust I make myself clear on this."

Before Maguire and Walden could answer, Ford pushed back his chair and stood: "Right."

*

Superintendent Ford's concern was not misplaced. The Met had faced, and still faced, strong criticism. In the latest broadside a former senior officer from one of the main riot affected areas claimed that better preparation by senior police could have stopped the riots at that point, but which he pointed out were then copied across England. Indeed he went even further by stating that there was a disgraceful absence of leadership and strategy which shamed the Met.

And community leaders weighed in with their own criticism by making it known publicly that they warned local police about the risk of violence at a meeting hours before it began.

As a result of the mishandling of the riots, and the subsequent criticism levelled at the police, the Home Secretary met with senior police officers and executives from the major social networks to discuss the situation. It was said that social networks had played a key role in the rioters being able to organize and co-ordinate their activities in various locations at different times. The plan was to get the assistance of Twitter, Facebook and BlackBerry to work together to stop people plotting violence online.

But this was not expected to be easily done. For example the BBC reported that at least one social media executive had said the networks were keen to co-operate but that the idea of trying to block communications was what he termed ludicrous and actually had not been thought through. Nevertheless, a number of people who had been arrested had appeared in court in recent weeks for organising or attempting to organise disorder on social networks.

In the aftermath of the riots the Prime Minister announced the government might look at disconnecting some online and telecommunications services. But only if similar circumstances arose in the future. Then the Acting Commissioner, in place of a Commissioner yet to be chosen, also said that he considered requesting authorities to switch off Twitter during the riots. Yet he conceded that the legality of such a move was very questionable and that the service was a valuable intelligence asset. Things were not all that comfortable for the police or for the government.

"Right," Walden said. He and Maguire were heading towards Stoke Newington in the north of the city. They were on their way to where Dennis Quilter lived. The last time Quilter appeared on their radar he had merely been under surveillance. Now the plan was to pick him up, take him back to the Yard for more questioning and depending on what they learned either keep him in custody or after releasing him look further into the Rocky James case.

The suburb sits between Stamford Hill which is slightly further north and Highbury a little further away to the south. Like pretty well every district in the metropolitan area Stoke Newington has its good parts and its not so good parts. It is part of the borough of Hackney and nestles against the district of Dalston which it has to be said is not one of the most upmarket areas in London. In fact it is largely the poor who have gravitated to Dalston and this does little to enhance the status of its nearest neighbour. But Stoke Newington is surprisingly endowed with a lot of green open space. One of the landmarks is the West Reservoir which no longer serves the purpose for which it was built. The entrance to the facility is itself a bizarre example of architecture called the Castle Climbing Centre which was originally designed to look like a towering

Scottish castle. And to the south of these facilities is Clissold Park, an extensive park that has a menagerie, an aviary and Clissold Mansion itself, a grade II listed building from the late eighteenth century.

As pleasant as this might be, there are streets in Stoke Newington that do not attract buyers searching for mid level quality. There are properties that are home to many more people than there are beds and for which they were designed, and Dennis Quilter had settled in one such residence. While quite a lot of residents in the area were transient, in some cases dedicated squatters, Quilter was a longer term local. He had lived in a number of flats in the area over the years but the one he now occupied had been his home since he was released from prison.

“Déjà vu,” said Maguire who had been driving the Honda Civic. Once off the lengthy Green Lanes and then right into Stoke Newington Church Street with the park on their left, Maguire navigated down into the denser streets until they drew up outside an ordinary looking row of terrace flats. Near the entrance of the flat where Denis Quilter lived were six large black bin bags of rubbish. One had burst its sides and cardboard milk cartons and pizza boxes had spilled out onto the doorstep.

“Grubs,” said Maguire and kicked a milk carton to the side.

“Rats more likely,” Walden commented. “Thank god I live in an area where the council provides wheelie bins. These bags just invite dogs and urban foxes and cats and rats. Disgusting.”

Maguire rang the bell to the flat with no name assigned to it but which he knew was where Quilter lived. It was well before noon and too early for even Quilter to head to the local Red Lion. He pressed the button again. Then a third time, stepping back and looking up to see if any of the windows on the second floor were open or if anyone would lean out to see who was below. As he was about to step forward again and press the buzzer once more, the door opened inwards and Quilter almost shouted: “What? What the fuck do you want?”

“Dennis Quilter,” said Maguire.

“Who the fuck wants to know?” replied Quilter who was dressed in a vest and undershorts. He leaned further out and glanced past Maguire and Walden to the car parked at the kerb. “Shit, what do you want now?”

“If you wouldn’t mind, we’d like you to come with us. We have a few questions we would like to ask you,” and with that he stepped forward, forcing Quilter to step back. Walden followed and closed the door behind him.

“Now just a fucking minute,” Quilter blurted. “This....”

“No,” said Maguire. “Get up the stairs there, get some clothes on and come with us. No ifs and buts, just do it. Now.”

Quilter continued his stream of expletives but did as he was told and climbed the stairs to the second floor. When he reached his open door he stopped and turned and said: “Stay away from the bedroom. That’s private.”

But no sooner had he said it than the door to what was obviously the bedroom opened and a woman stood squarely in the door frame. Without a stitch of clothing on and with a cigarette clutched in one hand she just stood there without saying a word. Then she took a drag on the cigarette, mumbled “fuck me” and turned and disappeared into the room.

“Stay here,” said Quilter and followed her into the room.

“Leave the door open,” called Walden. “And stay away from the windows.”

Various mumbled phrases could be heard in the room, but Maguire and Walden did not know exactly what was being said. Whatever it was it was not long before Quilter emerged wearing jeans and T shirt.

“Let’s make this quick,” he said and headed for the entrance. “I’ve got business I have to attend to.”

“We can see that,” Walden said. “Your business doesn’t look like she is going anywhere right now though.”

They drove back to police headquarters in silence. Quilter had apparently exhausted the number of expletives he knew and limited himself to slumping in the back seat and occasionally stamping on the floor. Maguire and Walden remained deep in thought.

Once back in the interview room Maguire and Walden took turns at firing questions at Quilter, many of which they already had the answers to but some which they wanted clarification on. What became clear early into the interrogation was that Quilter was only too eager to answer each and every question put to him. In fact he on more than one occasion pre-empted the question by giving information voluntarily. As an experience criminal he had considerable experience in dealing with the police. What also pretty early on began to take shape in the opinions of both detectives was that Quilter was looking less and less likely to be the serial killer they sought.

Certainly some of the information they wanted remained unknown, but the details of Quilter's whereabouts at certain times, give or take the odd day, his explanations for other gaps that needed filling, and just his manner were too open to be seriously questioned. To be sure, Quilter was a seasoned criminal and some serious criminals were very adept at covering their tracks, handling police interrogations, looking like butter would not melt in their mouths, and generally leaving the police if not empty handed certainly grasping in the dark for pertinent incriminating information. But Quilter there, then, had gone a long way to convincing Maguire and Walden he was not their man.

So with no alternative they cut him loose. But not without a final shot.

"How am I getting back," asked Quilter. "Are you going to drive me?"

"You must be joking," Walden said. "Take the bus or something."

"I've got no money," said Quilter. "I left so quick with you fuckers I just grabbed my pants and a shirt."

"Then walk. Or call your business partner and get her to come and get you."

"Bastards," said Quilter. Maguire and Walden escorted him to the front of the building and watched as he wandered off in the direction of the St James' Park underground station opposite.

"What's the bet he jumps the barrier?" said Maguire.

"If he tries to he'll find himself back in custody." Walden laughed. "It's almost worth following and seeing what happens."

"Yeah, but we don't have the time," said Maguire. "Let's go over the Rocky James case. My head's on the block there."

"Both of us," said Walden. They walked back inside and rode the lift to their office on the third floor where the Rocky James files had been delivered and sat at their shared desk facing each other.

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Rocky James.

He had a crime sheet he would be proud of.

The information included in a criminal record varies between countries and even between jurisdictions within a country, though in Britain they are standardised. In most cases the record lists all non-expunged criminal offenses and may also include traffic offenses. In some countries the record is limited to actual convictions where the individual has pleaded guilty or been found guilty by a court. In others it also includes arrests, charges dismissed, charges pending and even charges where the individual has been acquitted. The latter policy is often argued to be a human rights violation since it works contrary to the presumption of innocence by exposing people to discrimination on the basis of unproven allegations. And to the vexation of many in Britain this argument is a right too far.

In the United Kingdom, criminal records are maintained by the Criminal Records Bureau (England and Wales), Disclosure Scotland (Scotland) and Access Northern Ireland (Northern Ireland), all of which have partial access to the Police National Computer (PNC). These records are not publicly accessible and cannot be viewed without the subject's consent. Information made available depends on the level of disclosure. Low-level disclosures give only unspent convictions while enhanced disclosures ideally include all convictions, cautions, reprimands and final warnings.

An enhanced criminal record certificate may contain relevant information that need not relate solely to criminal matters. An enhanced disclosure may include such additional information supplied at the Chief Police Officer's discretion. Enhanced disclosures are often used to screen applicants for positions such as police officer and social worker which involve contact with vulnerable groups.

In the case of Rocky James his was an enhanced criminal record. But certainly it had never been used, and would never be used, in a screening process for any job anywhere. His record was used specifically by the police in the pursuit of a perpetrator of a crime. Generally one involving assault, and primarily assaults on women.

An hour into the examination and both officers were eyesore. Maguire braced himself in his chair and demanded: "Caffeine. We need caffeine." Two mugs of strong black coffee later they were back at the files. There were many pages and they were read and reread carefully.

"Dave," said Walden. "When was that East European woman found?"

Maguire checked his files and gave Walden the date.

"I think we have a problem with that. Or rather we might not have a problem if you know what I mean."

"Why?" Maguire asked.

"Because Rocky James was in Scotland that entire week."

"What? How do you know?"

"Two reasons actually," said Walden. "I know James has a long record for physical abuse but I decided also to do a quick check with Traffic to see if his reputation had cropped up there too, for road rage or just plain threats levelled at other drivers. His reputation does indeed extend far and wide it seems. On the Tuesday that week he was done for speeding outside Glasgow. Or rather he was the passenger in a car that was and his name was recorded when he couldn't help giving a bit of lip. And on the Friday his name was again taken outside a pub, in Glasgow again, where he and a couple of friends were caught crawling for ladies of the night. Pure chance really, but Rocky James could not have done the Russian. And therefore he can't be responsible for the others either."

"Ukrainian," said Maguire. "Grazyna Litavincuk. She was Ukrainian."

"Whatever," said Walden. "It doesn't matter. James did not do her and therefore he didn't do the others."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The suggestion by the government following the riots that tore streets and communities to pieces to shut down social media were dropped. Instead officials said they would concentrate on building closer co-operation with the intention of cracking down on the networks being used for criminal behaviour. But of course that would pose new problems. The more criminals apprehended, the more crowded the jails would become. And crime in the capital was at a record level.

Already four women had been murdered. The extent of their injuries was still unreported by the media and the public, while growing increasingly uneasy nonetheless, was yet to learn the full extent of the crimes.

Recent statistics showed that in England and Wales there were nearly nine hundred thousand violence against the person crimes. This was equivalent to sixteen per thousand people. Over the same period there were also around fifty thousand sexual offences during the same period which equated to about one per thousand. The statistics that could be applied to the type of crime the present serial killer was committing would be but a handful.

Maguire and Walden and the rest of the Met team working the case knew they were hunting a very special kind of killer. He was a killer who killed to a plan. He was also a killer who killed like no other. He was a torturer, someone who mutilated his victims while they were still alive. And he did so in a way never seen before by Maguire or Walden or anyone else on the team.

I did not have full knowledge of the women's deaths. Like every other journalist I only knew that there was a serial killer out there who had so far murdered four women and probably had no intention of ending his death spree unless he was caught. I had of course tried to speak with some of the officers working the case only to be met with the briefest of outlines. Where and when. They did not tell me the how or why, and I was not sure they knew. But if they did they were not about to tell me.

I had even tried contacting Detective Maguire but got nowhere with the trained receptionists in New Scotland Yard. I thought because I knew him, by name and face only it had to be said, and perhaps because I had actually met and talked to his wife, he might be receptive to at least take my call. But that was a forlorn hope.

At the same time I was being pressed by my employers both in the UK and abroad to keep the story warm and to provide more intimate details of the murders. To be both that one step ahead of the competition as well as providing detailed, some might say morbid, information to titillate readers. So, putting pen to paper metaphorically, I began a draft article that I thought would hit all the right notes.

The police have absolutely no idea who the serial killer is who has so far murdered four women, dumping their bodies in various parts of the country.

And if those I talk to are to be believed the female population up and down the country will have to live in fear for some considerable time to come.

This was a draft I reminded myself. It was an article that was intended specifically and unabashedly to sensationalise the already tense situation and to try to draw out something from the police that they had so far, presuming they had some additional relevant information, kept from the public. It was a start.

To put things in perspective here is the background:

Victim One was Kay Roberts. She was twenty eight years old and was a London resident from Earlsfield in the south of the capital. She was not murdered in a backstreet or on one of the housing estates in the area that could benefit by modernisation. Around the middle of January she had been at a friend's house in north London, in leafy Finchley. Some time after leaving her friend's Kay Roberts on her way home was taken. Her body was found in Mill Hill.

Victim Two was Maxine Hughes. She was aged thirty two and was the mother of an eight-year-old son. She was not a resident of London. Her home was in Hove,

Brighton. But her body was found in London. She had travelled to the city for the day back in May. Her body was found just outside Milton Keynes.

Victim Three. Virginia Hughes, twenty-two, whose body was found in Berkley Square. The very heart of London. The month was July. Although she had the same name as the previous victim, police say they were not related.

Victim Four was a Ukrainian mini-cab driver. Grazyna Litanincuk was the oldest victim at thirty-seven. Her body was found well outside the capital in Gerrards Cross. The date was November the second.

These four victims were all killed over a ten month period.

To recap, their bodies were found scattered in different locations: Mill Hill, Milton Keynes, Central London, Gerrards Cross.

They were not all London residents, though Maxine Hughes was it appears in London when she was murdered.

As far as the police apparently know the four victims did not know one another.

In other words, they were random killings.

We do not know all the details of their deaths, but this writer understands it was brutal in each case.

The police have one suspect in custody. The rules of subjudice prevent him being identified but it is understood he has already been charged with one unrelated murder and may soon be charged with these other four.

At least that is what we in the media are being led to believe.

This writer believes this to be a smoke screen of sorts.

That the leaks are in fact unfounded, or at least far from being certain.

That in fact the police are far from being convinced the man in custody is the serial killer.

That the real killer is still out there.

That women up and down the country perhaps, but certainly in London, should be extremely careful of how they travel, especially at night.

That there is still a dangerous mass murderer on the loose.

We should all recall what Home Office Minister Adrian Thomason said publicly on television.

There is a monster out there.

I had no doubt that if my editors accepted my copy and took the chance of publishing it there would be a response from the authorities. The police hierarchy would be on the phone first demanding at least a follow up story, one that appeared on the early news pages as hard news, playing the sensationalism down. Even if my comments were accurate playing them out under the floodlights of the popular press would not be welcome. It never was.

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Having forwarded the column to my London and overseas papers I decided what I had earned was a drink. The night was young as they say and there were many places to choose from.

I didn't fancy my local pub, or any pub for that matter. The thought of propping up a bar that was likely to be crowded with people I didn't know or who I did know and felt compelled to join in conversation that was focused on football or people I was not particularly interested in was unappealing. I wanted a drinking hole with atmosphere, most probably where I knew no-one else, and where if I did find myself in a conversation it would be on a level a little above the rankings in the premier league.

I reckoned I knew just the place. And it was in an area that if it didn't work out there were plenty of other haunts in the vicinity.

Boisdale bills itself as a lively Scottish restaurant with whisky and cigar bars, live jazz and blues and soul music, and an atmosphere that is unique. There are branches in

Belgravia in Central London, Bishopsgate close to the City of London, and Canary Wharf by the river. The ancestry of its name dates back to a small village on the island of South Uist in the Outer Hebrides. There is also Lockboisdale on the island which became a major herring port in the nineteenth century. The island is one of the last surviving strongholds of the Gaelic language in Scotland and the crofting industries of peat cutting and seaweed gathering are still an important part of everyday life. Boisdale restaurant are a far cry from that. It actually promotes itself as being “in a modern world – the very finest from ages past”.

My favourite of the three in the chain was the one in Belgravia. With its blood red frontage it offers everything that I look for in an establishment that places equal emphasis on drink as it does food. It has the eclectic Macdonald bar that is decorated in the style of a gentleman’s club where the music is played. The Back Bar is in the style of a traditional pub bar. Next to it is the Courtyard Garden which is perfect for alfresco dining complete with scented blooms. Upstairs there are the Auld Restaurant and the Jacobite Room both of which are hung with oil paintings and which are ideal for private dinner parties. But the venue I enjoy the most, on occasions when I want something very different, is the Cigar Terrace.

Trademark Boisdale tartan clads the bar which is decked out with sofas and cushions and rugs. Being November with the temperatures fluctuating during the day from under five centigrade to just over ten the outdoor heaters were turned on. Cigar smoke drifted around the ceiling.

Although the terrace can accommodate around three dozen people there were only six when I arrived. Two I didn’t know. Two I did. Detective Maguire and his alluring wife sat against the wall, directly below one of the heaters. Joan Maguire had a cashmere blanket across her knees, one that their host claimed was brought especially from Scotland. I nodded in their direction. Joan Maguire smiled back. Her husband did not.

I chose a small table at the other end of the terrace, my back to them, against the railing where I could look out over the rooftops of the buildings a block and more away. There were a few trees at the back of the building abutting onto the restaurant and I could feel the cool wind rustling its way through the branches. I knew it would be fresh sitting out but I had had enough of the indoors sitting at my computer and welcomed the change. Besides, I had a large glass of Symposium Rouge, one of the Vin de Pays de l’Aude from France. The light purple red with its fruity tang that was supposed to suggest peaches with a hint of pepper and mint would warm the blood. It was just one of the wine choices on the menu that ran to more than two dozen pages. Had I opted for a whisky I would have had to select from no fewer than thirty-nine. The same menu offered blended whisky, Irish blended whiskey, Irish malt whiskey, Welsh malt whiskey, Japanese malt whiskey, American whiskey, de luxe blended whisky and grain whisky. I noted the different spelling of the spirit that distinguished the true Scottish variety from the Hiberno or Irish type. But spirits were not my drink and I wanted the double glass of wine to sit and cogitate.

I had been doing this for around fifteen minutes when I sensed someone standing behind me and just to the side. I looked up. It was Maguire. Again I nodded to him.

“My wife wants to know if you would like to join us,” he said, with a slight emphasis on my wife and with a brief pause before the wants.

I turned my head to look past him to where Joan Maguire was sitting. She was watching us with a smile. Then she tilted her head to one side and raised her eyebrows.

“You sure?” I said.

“I asked didn’t I?” said Maguire. “You coming or not?”

When we were seated at the table Joan Maguire raised her glass of what I assumed was whisky and said cheerily: “Nice to see you again Zack.” She smiled across the table at her husband before adding: “Do you come here often?”

“Do you mean what’s a nice guy like me doing in a place like this?” I replied and immediately realised how foolish the attempt at humour sounded.

Neither Joan nor Maguire made a comment so I merely said: “It’s different from the run of the mill pub. I like the atmosphere. And I don’t get caught up in mundane talk with people I would rather not waste my time with.”

Joan Maguire smiled again, this time at me. “So I suppose we should be pleased you chose to join us. Thank you.”

Maguire himself gave a snort and took a large mouthful of his whisky.

What’s the harm I thought. I might as well try to enjoy the encounter despite the obvious distance between myself and Maguire. His wife was trying to be polite, and after all we had got on reasonably well the last time we met at the head wetting of the new child of our mutual friend. The whole reason for getting out of my flat was to relax and wind down.

“Sorry, thanks,” I said. “I appreciate your asking me to join you. Is this a regular haunt of yours?”

“Not really,” she answered. “I had a client visit in Eaton Square and it seemed like a good idea to meet up for a drink. We both like Boisdales, so here we are.”

I was reminded of how I noticed when we first met how her green eyes shone. “How’s the legal world these days? I suppose with the slump in the property market the conveyancing side is a bit slower than normal.”

“It is.” Joan Maguire replied. “But there is always enough to keep one reasonably busy. The property market moves not only in cycles but also according to location. There is still growth and activity in the mid to high range. That’s where my interests are. It’s in the less desirable sectors that the economic slump is most felt.”

“Location, location, location,” I said.

“Absolutely.”

The conversation paused. I took another healthy swig of my wine and she very daintily sipped her whisky. Maguire, who was nursing his drink close to his chest and had seemed interested in anything away from the table while his wife and I exchanged pleasantries, gently placed his tumbler on the glass topped table.

“I’m going to get myself a cigar I think,” he said and stood. “Joan?”

“Why not,” she said. “A small one. Perhaps a Montecristo. A Joyitas.”

Maguire made to leave when Joan touched his arm and looked at me. “Zack, would you like a cigar? I don’t know if you smoke even. Do you?”

I was surprised. Very surprised. “Sometimes,” I said. “And you smoke, cigars I mean?”

“Sometimes,” she said. “It depends on the occasion.”

I glanced up at Maguire who had not moved. “Why not,” I said. “Let me pay you please.”

“Forget it,” Maguire said, and headed indoors without enquiring what brand, strength, length or any other quality might be to my liking.

Joan took another small sip of whisky watching me over the top of her glass. “My husband, David, is a principled man. And a very good police officer. I do want you to know that.”

I shrugged. “I have no reason to doubt that. What makes you think I might have a different view of him?”

“The police are not liked very much today, as you know. It’s been a hard time for them. It’s hard when everyone is being tarred with the same brush.” She stopped and briefly looked into the distance. “I guess it’s not all that dissimilar with journalists these days. You have more in common than you might think perhaps.”

“Just when it comes to bad news?” I said.

“I don’t know,” she replied. “But I hope not.”

Maguire returned with three cigars and two more whiskies and another glass of red which he settled in the middle of the table. He handed me one cigar and lit another

and then passed it to his wife. Then he lit his own, blew the smoke towards the ceiling and turned to me. "What are you up to these days?"

I picked up the box of matches that were in the centre of the table and lit my cigar that I noted had the wrap denoting it as an El Rey Del Mundo. I had never heard of the brand but when I drew in the smoke and then let it out I was pleasantly surprised. It was very mellow.

"This is very nice," I said. "Thank you again."

"Are you still following the murders Zack?" asked Joan.

"I am. It's a big story. And readers of my column are demanding I write more about them," I replied. "That's what I keep telling myself anyway."

She laughed.

"Actually the reason I'm here tonight is that I just finished my latest column and decided to treat myself."

"Oh," Joan said. "And what did you write?"

Now that was a killer question. Do I avoid answering and appear to be hiding something or being simply rude? Do I offer some inane general comment and again appear to be discourteous? Or do I reveal exactly what I had written about the serial murders? And in doing so invite a reaction I was unsure I wanted.

For the second time in less than an hour I thought, what's the harm, they'll read it for themselves tomorrow.

"I pose the question whether the police really have arrested the man responsible for killing those four women." I kept my eyes on Joan Maguire and avoided looking at Maguire. "Something tells me they might not have. And that means the real killer is still out there."

"Really," said Joan Maguire. "And why would you, a journalist and not a policeman, have your doubts?"

"Gut feeling. No facts or anything like that. But it just doesn't feel right. Why would this guy James carry out four murders, brutal but not wild knockabout murders we are led to believe, and try to conceal the bodies, and then in broad daylight as it were murder his wife in a rage which is more his modus operandi?"

"Modus operandi? You're beginning to sound like a policeman. And you've written this for your next column?"

"Yes. It hopefully will come out in tomorrow's paper here."

"You know if you have done that you're bloody stupid." Maguire came to life. "You'll probably start a panic. Every woman in the city will now be scared out of their wits and be afraid to go anywhere on their own. Bloody reporters. God save me from them."

"Who's going to save the next young woman who gets killed?" I retorted. "Are you absolutely sure you have the right man? Can you guarantee that? That there will be no more killings?"

"That's not the point," Maguire said. "It's pure sensationalism what you're doing. If you're claiming that the serial killer is still out there and that he will probably strike again, something that your millions of readers will read, what do you call it? Responsible journalism? I don't think so."

I was not going to back down too easily. "You haven't answered my question," I said. "Do you think the man in police custody is the serial killer?"

Maguire shook his head, drew on his cigar, swallowed a mouthful of whisky emptying his glass and said: "I think you should be careful which hornets' nests you interfere with."

A silence settled over the table. Maguire had finished his drink and was looking at his wife and I thought his expression suggested it was time they left.

I was therefore taken by surprise when she said: "I think the two of you should stay in touch. Maybe you could both benefit."

Maguire's look turned to a frown.

Joan Maguire continued: “Zack, you will know that David cannot give you information that is classified. You have to accept that.” She turned to her husband. “If you had a powerful newspaper that you could use, and I mean use and not abuse, that would presumably be potentially very useful.”

There are times as a journalist when something happens, or when someone says something, that you question its seriousness. Even the absurdity of it. Then almost at once your brain tells you to wait, think again, reconsider, look at it from a different perspective. And that is what happened here.

I looked at Maguire who did not take his eyes from his wife. The frown remained and he stared hard into her eyes. She did not waver but continued to return his gaze. And then she smiled very slightly and once again, just like she had when she looked across the terrace at me when Maguire was inviting me to join them for a drink, she tilted her head and raised her eyebrows.

Maguire turned and looked at me for a long time. I could feel him trying to look inside me, taking me apart, analysing before making a decision. Then he said: “What could you offer me that would help us solve these crimes with certainty?”

I was stunned. It was the last thing I expected him to say. I was also at a loss as to what precisely I could suggest. Overly used platitudes of a national newspaper having the power to sway public opinion or launch campaigns to try to change laws that are considered obsolete or draconian did not apply in this case. This was about catching a serial killer who I had suggested may well be still on the loose and who the police, at least indirectly, were suggesting was in custody.

In this instance I decided that honesty was the best policy. “I don’t know,” I said simply.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Pressure on the police was not letting up.

Not just on the question of whether the police had the serial murderer in custody or if he was still out there waiting or planning to pounce again and brutally kill another woman. There had been four deaths already and if there was another one there would be all hell to pay.

Maguire knew this along with every other detective and police officer in London. No doubt colleagues far up north as well. Every other force in the country would be thanking their lucky stars the problem was confined to the capital. At least for now. But morale in police stations everywhere was not high.

The economic crisis was taking its toll. Cuts in budgets were having a marked affect on local services throughout the country. And there were indications that the reduction in government grants for policing budgets would remain for at least another three to four years. If police were finding it tough to apprehend the one serial killer now their ability to deal in future with a series of serious crimes or mass unrest on the streets of major cities would be powerfully questioned.

Of course the government tried to reassure everyone that the changes brought in would be manageable while at the same time stating they had no intention of doing a U-turn on the programme of cuts to try to reduce the overall budget deficit. But even these statements were hindered by former senior policemen and women arguing that such claims were not backed up by common sense and in-house police intelligence. Indeed, the Police Federation went so far as to state that if recent street unrest happened in a year's time forces would not be able to deploy resources in the way they should. The government retaliated by maintaining that the aim was to cut unnecessary bureaucracy and not the number of front line police; the visible policing presence would not be reduced.

Maguire and fellow officers were not totally convinced. They accepted an argument that the most obvious adverse affect would be seen in neighbourhood and community policing. He thought it went further though. He was convinced that both morale and services would suffer.

What would go a long way to improving morale, if the government was not going to change its mind on the funding question, would be a high profile police success. Such as apprehending the serial killer and putting him behind bars for the rest of his life. Assuming of course it was a man and not a women. Either way, an arrest would go down very well.

Of course the word was already out there that Rocky James was probably going to be charged with the four murders. It was not an official statement but that was the impression given to the media and passed on by them.

Maguire disagreed. He now knew James was innocent of the murders. Guilty as hell of the murder of his wife. But he was not the serial killer. What he also knew was that when it was revealed that James was not the man the police were hunting, the public outcry would be loud. And the force would again start to look in on itself. And morale would take another hit.

Something had to be done. Quickly.

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“I think it might be a good idea to meet up,” I said. “What do you say?”

I had thought about our meeting the night before and had come to the conclusion that perhaps there was something we could do for each other that would be mutually helpful. Just what it was I was still uncertain but I hoped that what I had conjured up in my own mind might sway Maguire to offer something that I would find beneficial not just in the short term but on an ongoing basis. There is nothing a reporter wants

more than an inside source. OK, I called myself a journalist who wrote a column in a British national newspaper as well as for a couple of overseas titles. But what I was in fact was an everyday reporter who chased stories.

My column had been accepted and it ran that afternoon. And as expected not everyone was pleased. Even my editor had cautioned that I should not try to go too far with my hypothesis. And the police had let their views be known through a spokesman warning that if the paper was not careful it could find itself accused of hindering investigations into a most serious crime. Threats of possible further action were intimated.

Needless to say my overseas publishers had no qualms. Not only did the column run but there were side bar articles published that said a new Jack the Ripper was on the loose and every woman in the country was living in fear for their lives. The fact that Jack the Ripper killed in London only and not in any other city seemed not to occur to my foreign editors. I knew of course that even the name was suspect. It was generally accepted that the letter that had been written more than an hundred and twenty years earlier and signed by that name was probably penned ironically by a journalist to heighten interest in the story. Twelve decades on why let a fact spoil a story was the saying.

“In my ideal world,” replied Maguire, “all journalists would have to be licensed, just like minicabs. They are both potentially dangerous and should not be allowed onto the streets without protection for the public governing their activities.”

“Ok,” I said. “Given you are not about to get that written into law in our life times in this democratic country what about us getting together to see if there is a way we could help each other? Your wife seemed to think it might be worthwhile and she is obviously a clever woman. At least about most things in her life.”

I heard Maguire sniff on the other end of the line. “You’re a prick you know Tighe. If I had any sense at all I would tell you right now to piss off and don’t come near my wife or me ever again.”

“But you’re not going to,” I said, hoping now that Joan Maguire was right, and that perhaps there was something her husband and I could do together that would be useful. I still had no idea what that collaboration might be but the prospect was becoming more appealing. I decided to take a punt. “Is there a pub near to your offices, or maybe not close even, where we could have a pint and toss some ideas around?”

“Toss some ideas around.” Maguire laughed. “I’m beginning to think if you had an original idea about anything it would be a miracle.” There was a silence. I had done my bit and I reckoned there was no point in labouring things any further. So I just stayed mute and waited for the expected final insult to end the telephone conversation. “Waxy O’Connors. Near Chinatown. Being a high flying columnist you must know all the pubs. And you have a history linking you to Chinatown or something don’t you?”

“I know it,” I said. “When?”

“Let’s get this over with,” said Maguire. “Today. Two hours from now.”

“Done,” I said. He beat me to ending the call.

I certainly did know Waxy’s. And its Little Sister Waxy’s across the street in the heart of the West End and on the very edge of Soho’s Chinatown. I had been there many times and always enjoyed the atmosphere not to mention the décor of the place that was unlike any other pub I knew of. It is made up of a labyrinth, and that is the most appropriate description, of four unique bars extending over no fewer than six levels which are linked together by a maze of staircases and passages. That it harks from an Irish ancestry only adds to my reason for liking it.

The original Waxy O’Connor was born in Smithfield, Dublin City in 1788 exactly a hundred years before Jack the Ripper carried out his serial prostitute murders. Waxy was not his real name but the name he came by as a candle maker. And being a true

Irishman he was a good drinker of beer and whisky. Candle making apparently was hard and extremely hot work in his day and therefore sapped a man of energy and fluids. According to the pub's promotional material, the tale has it that Waxy was heard to comment "such heat does parch a man - a parched man is a barren man - and beer is the only cureah, us lads could put away gallons in a day!" It is further claimed that the 'Waxy O'Connor's tree' was planted two hundred and fifty years ago in Ireland but died in 1994. A local woodworker who played around the Beech tree as a boy hewed the pieces that were then shipped to England and 'planted' in Waxy O'Connor's the following year. So, says the pub literature, now a tree, which has lived for a quarter of a millennium in Ireland, begins a new lease of 'life' in the heart of London.

I knew these stories and it only added to the appeal of the pub which also explains why it has gained a worldwide reputation for warm hospitality as well as the impressive range of beers, spirits and coffees.

I was quite happy to linger in the lower bar over a pint of Caffrey's. Maguire was running late which did not surprise me. I had convinced myself I would be surprised if he did turn up. I was mulling over the Caffrey's and didn't hear or see Maguire come down the steps from outside. I am really a lager man and seldom drink ale. But Caffrey's Irish Ale, right now, right here, was the only drink to order. And with a texture as smooth as stout but with the taste of ale I was deep in thought when Maguire walked up the bar, faced me and said simply: "Well?"

"Well, what will you have?" I stammered.

He kept looking at me, through me it seemed. "One of those," he said. I ordered another Caffrey's.

"Want to sit upstairs?" I asked.

"Here's fine," he said.

The first five minutes of conversation was strained to say the least. We fenced with each other. I tried to probe to try to get somewhere where I might be able to suggest a working relationship. He remained distant, pretty well monosyllabic and decidedly unforthcoming with ideas or suggestions. At the end of that time I was about to give up and kiss the idea of an inside police source goodbye.

"How widely read is your column?" Maguire suddenly enquired.

"It's gone up a lot since I started," I said. Actually I was not lying as readership had increased quite a bit in the last year, even if I was not in the least bit responsible for the rise.

"Let's not waste time," said Maguire. "Is your column read or not?"

"Yes it is," I said. "We get a lot of feedback, some of it surprisingly quite complimentary."

He said nothing.

"Why do you ask?"

He thought carefully before he answered. "If you wrote something it would have an influence on whatever you were writing about. Is that what you are saying?"

"Yes. I suppose it would. Does. Depends on the subject."

"Can you write anything you want to? Or are you given topics to write about?"

"I'm free to write on topics of my own choice."

It was the truth. I could write a commentary piece on just about anything I liked. Provided it didn't breach any of the guidelines set by the papers and my editors. Immediately after the riots I felt a column, expressing some of the feelings I had even before the shameful goings on, might hit a soft point with certain of our readers. So I sat down and wrote a personal missive.

"It was late at night when I was verging on being very drunk that my life changed for ever."

That was the opening line of a novel that I contemplated writing back in the early 70s.

I had left my native country a few years before and spent around six months working on newspapers across Asia.

From there I set off to travel overland to the UK which took me around nine months.

It was after that – and perhaps another six months in London before returning home for a year and then back to Asia – that I decided to write the novel which began with those lines.

And it was those lines that really did have meaning. Had I not gone out with friends for a drink after work which developed into quite a few I would not have rashly decided to resign my job the next day and head overseas for adventure. A rash, spur of the moment decision that really did change my life for ever and one that I could never regret.

So I set about writing “Shattered promises, brilliant dreams.” I got about fifty pages into it with much of the opening chapters relating to my life growing up at a time and in a place that was perfect for young people to learn, experience and mature.

But other things intervened and the typed pages were confined to a carton in the back of the wardrobe and with the passing of the years lost.

But it has reminded me these past few days about my years of growing up.

I was never really conscious of crimes being committed, at least not serious ones. My family taught me the difference between right and wrong. I valued friendships enormously. I respected my elders. If I could not afford something I saved up for it.

As I say, it is the last few days that I have been mulling over these things – a time when young people have been running amok in some of our cities here in Britain. I needn't go into great detail because I am sure that anyone with a television anywhere in the world will have witnessed the events.

I have heard that the reasons why these rioters behaved in the way they did (and some were black, some were white, some were from dysfunctional families, some were from poor neighbourhoods, some were educated, some were not, some were from well to do families, and so on). They include: Looked down on by the wealthy, Neglected by their parents, The spending cuts introduced by the government, These times of economic hardship, Poor control in schools, And so on and so on.

I don't profess to know all the reasons that led to these terrible events. But I am absolutely certain of one thing.

Every single one of those people, from whatever background, who attacked the police, set fire to buildings, assaulted people in the street, smashed into shops and stole property, and generally caused mayhem in communities where law abiding citizens will suffer for years to come – every one of those people knew without a doubt they were doing something very wrong.

For that reason alone, if for no others, they deserve whatever punishment is dealt out to them (and I do hope it is severe).

It will be the “consequence” of their behaviour.

Well deserved.

A word they will have to learn.

And perhaps it will remind them and many more that we all have responsibilities, not just rights. Our responsibilities take precedence over our rights much of the time.

So that's my gentle rant about the disturbing events in Britain in the past week or so.

It made me think back to a time when we knew and accepted our responsibilities. We also knew we had rights but we knew and accepted too that we had to earn those rights.

There will be much reporting and analysing in the media, on television, in film and in books no doubt about the riots.

It will be interesting to see what emerges.

It was of course self indulgent. It got a burden off my chest. But I doubted very much that the direction Maguire seemed to be heading would involve my getting all self pitying again.

He sipped his beer. "What made you write that latest stuff about us not having caught the serial killer? You must know its garbage."

"Is it?" I said. "I am not so sure. Is Rocky James the man who has murdered and mutilated those four women?"

He did not say anything for a while. Then: "If I wanted you to write something would you?"

"It depends on what it is."

"If it was controversial and risked getting you into trouble, would you write it?"

"As I just said, it depends what it is."

"Would you reveal where you got certain information?"

"No," I stated emphatically. "Not if the person who gave me that information required me not to reveal his identity. That's a certainty. Believe it or not some of us do have principles."

Maguire took another taste of his drink. "And as a man of principle I suppose you will say that off the record is definitely off the record. No matter what."

"Yes," I answered. "Absolutely." I went on: "This conversation we're having now is off the record as far as I'm concerned."

"If you fuck with me I promise you I will make your life so miserable you will wish you were dead." Maguire's eyes burned into mine. I believed one hundred per cent he meant exactly what he said, whatever it was he had in mind.

Then he told me.

*

"You are seriously in trouble." Martin Walden had his hands thrust into his pockets and was leaning forward at such an angle that spittle almost landed on Maguire's chin.

"And you have probably landed me in it as well. Are you honestly telling me that you have given the story to the press that James is not our man?"

"Just that columnist Tighe," said Maguire.

"Just Tighe! You must be mad."

"Listen," Maguire said. "You and I both know that Rocky James did not kill those women. We know that that is going to become known soon. What then? It has already been leaked, or at least not denied, that he is about to be charged with their murders."

"What's that got to do with giving the story now to Tighe?"

Maguire hesitated slightly. "It's not just that Rocky James is not the killer."

Walden stared back at his partner. "Dave, what have you done?"

CHAPTER TWENTY

Paula Gibbons no longer cared whether she lived or died.

She was not in agony, but her brain had to a large extent shut down.

When her toe was being crudely amputated of course it hurt tremendously and she cried long after she stopped screaming.

He had bandaged her foot carefully after cleaning it, gently stemming the blood flow and then almost with tenderness placing the absorbent padding on the raw flesh and wrapping it in a soft bandage. All the while she lay perfectly still, naked, manacled to the bed's four corners.

When she could see through her tears she could see that he was taking no interest in the rest of her body shamelessly displayed, spread in the most undignified pose she could imagine. His total concentration appeared to be on her foot that he had mutilated. Then he had collected all his items, with the severed toe lying in the bottom of the basket, and left.

About an hour later she heard him unlock the door. She kept her eyes closed but was aware of him entering, approaching her bed, placing something on the small table beside it. When she opened her eyes her sense of smell was confirmed as correct as he was standing quite still holding a bowl and spoon. She knew to refuse would be useless, so when he offered a spoonful of broth and held it close to her lips she opened her mouth and took it. Then another and another until it was finished and he turned and left the room, locking the door behind him. Paula lay on the bed and tried to flex her injured foot. There was a dull ache but no longer the searing pain. As she licked her lips she prayed.

Paula was not a religious person, but prayers now came very easily for her. When she first had met him in the pub she imagined nothing more than a single romantic evening. He was polite, considerate, interested in what she talked about. A nice man. A nice man whose company she could enjoy, perhaps even sleep with, though it was not her usual behaviour to do so so casually. But he impressed her with his manner and mannerisms. So she might, might go so far as to spend the night with him. No further commitments probably.

She prayed for the first time when she found herself naked on the bed. She remembered part of the previous night, the leaving the pub and driving away, being in a flat and, she thought, having a glass of wine. But nothing else.

Then she awoke. And that was when Paula prayed for the first time. She prayed that it was a dream and was not really happening. A bad dream that when she shook her head wildly would fracture and she would find herself in her own bed in her own apartment. But that did not happen and she realised without doubt what her serious position was.

Prayers after that came easily. She prayed someone would come and rescue her. She prayed he would not rape her. She prayed he would not hurt her. She prayed that the knife she saw was not real. She prayed that what she realised he was doing to her foot was not happening. She prayed the pain would stop. She prayed she could die. That whatever it was that was happening to her would end.

It did not end though. She was still held captive, lying naked and fastened to a bed. Her head throbbed. She had barely slept during the night. Now she was wide awake facing yet another day in fear of what might await her. All she had had to eat during her captivity so far was the single bowl of broth with its very few pieces of meat mixed with what she thought was green peas. It was thick and on any other occasion would have been nourishing. Now, she did not even think of food. It was the last thing on her mind.

*

Above in the kitchen he sat at the table staring into the basket filled with feathers which had pieces of paper bound to them with rubber bands.

One feather had already been removed and lay in a blood red bowl on the bench next to the stove behind him.

His eyes roamed over the remaining feathers counting them and then he meticulously arranged them in a circular configuration, the spaces between them exact.

It had to be right.

Everything had to be just right.

He did not want a single thing to be inexact.

If everything was perfect failure would not result.

Only success.

Leading to further successes.

Once more he counted the feathers, confirmed the papers were securely fastened, and that they were perfectly laid out.

The basket had been washed and dried the night before.

The white linen cloth beside it was new and folded neatly.

There was a new pair of latex gloves also.

He had not had to wear gloves the day before but this time he might, so he had to be prepared. They were not the colour he would have preferred but white was unavailable so black had to do.

He had had to use yellow gloves with the ones before and they had been failures. Hopefully black would be better.

Implements would be decided by the feathers.

Last time it was only the serrated knife that was needed.

And the pair of surgical secateurs for the small bone.

He rose from the table and walked over to the bench where the single feather lay in the bowl.

Next to it was the short white bone.

Mhhgg.

He crossed back to the table and sat.

He stared at the feathers.

Then he reached into the basket and withdrew one and placed it carefully on the white linen cloth.

He looked at it for a long time.

Picking it up he peeled the rubber band down so the folded paper dropped onto the cloth.

With precise movements he picked it up and unfolded it.

Mhhgg. Mhhgg.

*

Paula thought she heard a noise above. She was not certain but it sounded a little like furniture being moved.

Again she strained her wrists and arms which were firmly fastened to the corners of the bed on either side of her head. She tugged her legs and they too were securely tied. She had nearly forgotten, or ignored, the fact she was naked but now, feeling totally alone and helpless, she once more felt exposed, abused, shamed.

And once more she began to panic that her captor would rape her or hurt her in other sexual ways. Her heart pumped and blood coursed through her veins at a rate that brought a bright flush to her face. Red blotches that she suffered when highly agitated or angry appeared on her neck and her breathing quickened.

Her eyes began to fill again.

*

*He got up from the table and walked into the pantry to the side of the kitchen.
On a shelf at the back, behind tins and packets of food and cartons of milk, he found what he needed.
He took it to the sink and washed it thoroughly and then left it on the drying rack.
To his right, above the refrigerator, he opened a cupboard and removed a stainless steel bowl about thirty centimetres across and ten centimetres deep.
This he also washed and rested on the rack.
Finally, from under the sink he withdrew two sponges.
Mentally he checked everything.
He was almost ready.*

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The copy I had written was definitely risky.

I had checked with my editor when I got home from Waxy's and explained broadly what I intended to say. He questioned me for some time and finally agreed if I didn't go too far he would run it in the next day's edition. There was a host of other hot news about so the next day's publication was going to be seriously heavy. Nevertheless, he relented and said he would find me space further inside the paper than normally.

I could not argue because the front and early pages of the paper would undoubtedly be filled with the latest news allied to the ongoing battle for the liberation of Libya. Gaddafi's rule was certainly finished even if he himself had not been found. But that was not the main story. The stop the presses front page headlines would blast the previous British government and both the internal and external security branches MI5 and MI6. Secret documents found in the rubble of the shattered buildings in Tripoli, including the abandoned British Embassy, clearly showed that the previous government and the security agencies had been for years helping to prop up the Gaddafi dictatorship. The information contained in the documents was a shameful catalogue of deception towards the public. When reading in the clear light of day the general public would not only feel let down, they would feel dirty, ashamed, horrified. Then there was the war itself that for weeks had been said to be nearing its conclusion. The end was still some way off, and battles in the capital itself as well as various key towns raged on. The number of deaths civilian and non-civilian continued to mount.

In the aftermath of the recent riots in London and elsewhere strong critical comments continued. The latest outspoken views came from the Justice Secretary who levelled the blame squarely on what he termed was the broken penal system. Most of those involved in the havoc were not ordinary citizens who had suddenly felt compelled to break their normal habits but hardened criminals who had failed to learn from previous punishments that the courts had dealt. That, he said, was the legacy of a broken penal system.

The economic troubles that some might have thought were easing took a turn for the worse and the bears swarmed over the markets once more.

There were also more arrests in the newspaper phone hacking scandal.

So there was a bonanza of news for the media. A series of major headaches for the government. And a relegation to the bowels of the paper for my column. But I did have some space. So there I was burning the midnight oil literally.

What I had agreed with Detective Maguire just hours before was going to be extremely awkward to put into words that would form my column. I needed to be very cautious indeed. The serial killer story that had been high profile with all the other media outlets had in the last couple of days been moved inside. With no new developments there was little to keep it on the front pages or in the lead with the radio and television stations. What I was going to do was light the fire again, controversially, and put it and the police back in the limelight. There was a lot at stake.

Opening line.

The "monster" serial killer who has butchered four women so far is still at large.

Second line.

The police know this to be a fact.

Third line.

And they fear the murderer will strike again.

So far so good. On the money. Risky? A lot at stake? Absolutely.

I read the lines again. Jesus, I thought, this is really going to scare an awful lot of people, including my editor, and put the cat among the pigeons in authority, not least the police themselves.

From this point on there was no turning back.

Kay Roberts.

Maxine Hughes.

Ginnie Hughes.

Grazyna Litavincuk.

Remember these women's names. They will go down in the annals of criminal history in Britain.

They are all the victims of this country's most vicious serial killer on record.

Others have murdered more. But this monster – and it was a government minister no less who used this description – is different.

This writer has learned just how horrific the injuries were that these four women suffered. They are too sickening to describe in minute detail in this column but each victim was made to suffer agony over a period, perhaps days.

This serial killer does not fit the mould of the “normal” serial killer.

The generally accepted psychological profile of a serial killer is first that there is no relationship between the victim and the killer. They are strangers, and in the present case it appears there was no relationship between the four women so nothing specific ties them to the murderer either.

Serial killers are mostly white males in their twenties or thirties. Most operate in specific locations or areas. Virtually all have dysfunctional backgrounds involving sexual or physical abuse. Drugs and alcohol sometimes play a part as well.

What is surprisingly the case for a large majority of serial killers is that they are intelligent with a higher than average IQ. But it remains a mystery whether their actions are due to psychological or environmental influences.

The serial killer now at large on the streets of London and perhaps even in other locations fits some of these profiles.

He is probably a Caucasian in his twenties or thirties.

He is undoubtedly clever.

He is a random killer, random in the sense of who his victims are.

But there is one aspect that sets him apart.

His brutality.

And even this brutality appears to be random in nature.

This is because each of his victims had parts of their body missing.

Two had multiple body parts missing such as fingers, toes and ears. One had a toe and one breast cut off. A lung had been cut from the fourth.

Compassion was clearly not on the mind of the killer as he was mutilating those four women. Yet, oddly there were clear indications that he had at some point attempted to treat the injuries he had caused.

Police are baffled by this.

Baffled they may be, but certain they are now that the serial killer is still at large.

Yet personal traits the experts believe they do know are:

He is, despite the injuries he inflicts, a weak personality.

He as a youngster wet the bed, and most probably still does as an adult.

He might have a high intelligence quotient, but essentially he is an ignorant person.

Above all, he is a coward who experienced psychologists unanimously believe does not even have the courage to show his face to his victims.

He hides his own shame.

Rumours that a man now in custody charged with another murder is to be charged with the murder of these four women also are false. He has nothing to do with them.

And the police have no other suspects.

The so-called “monster” is at large still.

The reason or reasons for the killings are a mystery.

His profile suggests, strongly suggests, that he will kill again.

And again.

And again.

Until he is caught.

I thought I could add a few more paragraphs but elected instead to end it on that note. I had written what I had intended. I was confident Detective Maguire would read the column and not disagree. I was also certain that others in authority would scream bloody murder.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Everything was arranged.

He was ready.

Tying his apron strings and straightening the apron itself he placed all the items except one on a tray.

The remaining one he stuffed into the large open pocket at the front of his apron.

As he descended the stairs he went over in his mind what he was going to do.

He knew it would be very difficult and was extremely risky.

If anything at all went wrong it could be catastrophic.

He unlocked the door and entered.

He placed the tray with all but the item in the pocket of his apron on the table inside and to his right.

Then he turned and closed the door.

*

Paula watched through eyes that were swollen and sore from lack of sleep.

From the back her captor looked to be slightly hunched. It was not something she had noticed about him before. But then, small things like the man's shoulders or exactly how tall he was she had not registered. They were all incidental.

For Paula the man was nothing but fear. Fear and pain. What he looked like or how he carried himself was of no consequence. The only reason she had noticed his shoulder slouch was because it was the first time she had actually seen him from behind. Every other time he had been in the room with her, and earlier before her agony began, he had never turned his back. She recalled she had thought him average to nice looking and something in back of her memory also told her that she had thought he was considerate and attentive.

Now there was only hate. And dread.

She feared what he had in store for her this time.

*

He carried the small table with the tray on top to the end of the bed.

Again he cast his eyes across everything.

The basket.

The remaining feathers.

Those unused were always to remain in the basket until needed.

The white linen cloth.

The stainless steel bowl.

The sponges.

He refused to look into her eyes or at her nakedness.

His attention was focused elsewhere.

Moving to the left side at the end of the bed, her left, his right, he reached down and ran his right hand the length of her leg from the knee to the ankle, across the instep and down over her toes.

He reached across with his left hand and drew the small table closer.

Pausing, he never shifted his gaze.

Then he reached into the apron pocket and withdrew the hacksaw.

*

Paula started to scream.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Maguire and Walden were renewing their acquaintance with Gordon's wine bar in Villiers Street off the Strand. While there was a buzz around them with the late night crowd ensconced in the crypt-like cellar and bustling in the open bar the two detectives sat silent.

The bar is loved by old and young alike who appreciate the unique atmosphere in which time seems to have halted at the entrance. The old wooden walls are covered in historical newspaper cuttings and memorabilia faded with age. The present owners have maintained the original décor and unlike modern drinking establishments they have also kept music out. On sale is wine and a small menu of traditional and well priced grub. The only other alcohol on offer are sherries, madeiras and ports that are served from the barrel.

For those patrons interested in history, the building in which the bar is situated was home to Samuel Pepys in the 1680s and then around a hundred and forty years later by Minier & Fair, a firm of seedsmen who used it as a warehouse. Rudyard Kipling lived in the building in the decade before the turn of the century as a tenant and famously wrote "The light that failed" in the parlour above the bar

What really appealed to Maguire and Walden was that anonymity was guaranteed at Gordon's despite its popularity. But it was more recent history that both detectives were musing about in silence.

Walden raised his glass of Argentinean Malbec Trivento and looked directly at Maguire. He swallowed much of what was left in the glass and said: "You know the Super is livid."

Maguire said nothing.

"Sooner or later he's going to find out, I don't know how but somehow, that you fed that information to Tighe," Walden went on. "And then all hell will break loose. And some of the flying shit will land on me too."

Maguire still said nothing.

"You hear what I'm saying? This could get us both in really deep shit."

"Ford knows it's true," said Maguire and took a small sip of his own red wine. "The longer everyone tries to pretend otherwise, that James or someone else in lockup is responsible, the worse it will get."

"I don't see how it can get worse for us."

"What do you think will happen when another woman is whipped off the street, tortured and mutilated and then dumped somewhere? What then?"

Maguire did not wait for Walden to reply. "I'll tell you what'll happen. The press will have a field day. The politicians will have a field day. Everyone will have a fucking field day. And who'll be caught right in the middle? Who will be blamed for everything? Us. The coppers who let everyone, especially the next victim, think that the streets were safe to walk again.

"And how will this help?" asked Walden. "You telling that journalist now?"

"If nothing else," said Maguire, "it will let every woman know that it's still dangerous out there and that they should take every precaution." He took another sip and added: "And it might draw this bastard out of the shadows a little. So we can have something, anything, to use to catch him."

"What do you mean?" said Walden.

Maguire cupped his glass in his hands and leaned forward across the table. Walden did likewise.

"This guy is very smart. He's killed four and may even have done more. There is no doubt. You know and I know that he won't stop until he's caught. And as I say, he is clever. We've found nothing that links him to any of the women. Not a thing."

"So?"

“So we try to draw him out. If we can’t find him maybe we make him do something that will give us a clue as to who he is. Or why he’s doing this. Or something.”

“How? How can this reporter help?”

Maguire kept his voice low. “He is going to try to entice the guy into doing something, making a mistake.” He stopped briefly. “You read his stuff. The facts are there but so are the other bits.”

“What bits?” said Walden.

“The bits about the killer’s mind. His vulnerabilities. His weaknesses. Tighe is going to try to mess with this guy’s head so that he gets pissed off and makes a mistake.”

“Christ,” said Walden. “That’s crazy. And crazy dangerous. You realise you are a party, an integral party, to activities that put this reporter in serious danger. Especially if this plan works. You could even get him killed for Christ’s sake.”

*

The junior Minister from the Home Office was appearing before the House of Commons Home Affairs Select Committee

Adrian Thomason was on guard. He was not going to fall into the same trap he did with the television host the last time he was faced with questioning about the state of law and order in the country, and particularly if asked about the murders of the four women. The Home Secretary himself had made that perfectly clear. In short, no more blunders.

Thomason was well aware that there were members of the Committee who would love to see him fall on his face again. One or two of them would be quite prepared to risk public apprehension about safety on the streets if it meant he once again blurted out things he should not. Public safety was one thing, party politics often was quite another.

Select Committees work in both the House of Commons and the higher House of Lords the responsibility being to check and report on a number of areas ranging from the work of government departments to economic affairs. Committees in the House of Lords specifically concentrate on the four main areas of Europe, science, economics, and the British constitution. There is a Commons Select Committee for each government department examining three aspects: Spending, policies and administration. They have a minimum of eleven members who decide the line of inquiry and then gather written and oral evidence. Findings are reported to the House of Commons, printed, and published on the parliament website.

Some Select Committees have a role that crosses departmental boundaries such as the Public Accounts or Environmental Audit Committees. Depending on the issue under consideration they can look at any or all of the government departments. Other Commons committees are involved in a range of on-going investigations, like administration of the House itself or allegations about the conduct of individual Members of Parliament. Select Committees operate largely by an investigative process, while Legislative Committees operate mainly by debate.

The Home Affairs Committee takes evidence on policing large-scale disorder from the Home Secretary but in this case Adrian Thomason had been called to attend because the Home Secretary himself was with the Prime Minister dealing with yet another problem.

The Committee had already discussed matters concerning the operations of the UK Border Agency and, in a much lengthier session, they explored the causes of and response to the recent rioting.

Questioning with regard to the border agency provided an opportunity to question the Acting Chief Executive on progress in dealing with the reductions in funding arising from the much disliked comprehensive spending review, or cutbacks in short. Specific subjects included recent criticisms of the Agency made by both its own independent

chief inspector and the National Audit Office, the possible appearance of a backlog in dealing with new asylum cases, continuing problems with the e-borders programme, and more generally on the work of the Agency.

As for probing the causes of the rioting, the principal focus had been on London and the Metropolitan Police, but additional attention was scheduled to be placed on other towns and cities in subsequent evidence sessions. This particular session also enabled the Committee to discuss arrangements for loaning officers between forces and police tactics more generally as well as considering the role of the Association of Chief Police Officers in tackling the disorder.

There is also normally a sixty day period before the government has to respond to Committee hearings. In this case Adrian Thomason had been called early. The matters under discussion were too serious to delay.

So far the inquisition had gone satisfactorily. Factual answers given to factual questions. He had not slipped up and it appeared that the Committee members were concentrating on the street disturbances themselves, the role of the police in the various hotspots, plans for future occasions should there be similar ones in the future, and the forced reduction in police numbers that would result from the government's spending cuts. The files before him on the rectangular table facing the horseshoe arrangement of the Committee members contained all the necessary information. Thomason was beginning to think he was on the top of his game.

"Minister," said the Chairman, "you have been most helpful with the information you have given us here today. I think I can say that it has been illuminating and we will have much to digest before submitting our report to Parliament." He paused and Thomason leaned back in his chair and cast his eyes around the membership, smiling.

"I wonder," continued the Chairman, "if you could also enlighten us with any new information regarding the police hunt for the person responsible for the murder of four women in the past nine, or is it now, ten months. Have there been any new developments?"

Thomason had been warned that this subject would be raised. It had been such a high-profile case that there was little chance of the Committee not wanting to learn more if there was more to learn. And to be seen by the public at large to be concerned. Even though much of the media had recently moved the stories from the front page to the inside pages there was still concern in the community.

Thomason leaned forward and rested his elbows on the table. "I am sure you will appreciate Chairman that as it is an ongoing case I am not able to go into detail about the police investigation. There is still much more the police have to do. But I can tell you that a person has been arrested and is in police custody being questioned about the murders to which you refer." He straightened his back and put his hands on his lap.

"Thank you," said the Committee Chairman. "We do appreciate the limits placed on you given the police investigation." He glanced to his left and then to his right as if to see if any other members wanted to raise any questions and then said: "Well, if there..."

"Mr Chairman, I have a question for the Minister if I may."

Sir Kenneth Bell had been a Member of Parliament for the past twenty-three years. His constituency was in the Midlands and while he certainly had the experience and knew his way around the House he was known as someone who paid more attention to his constituents and their local complaints than to major national or international issues that faced the government. When he did speak in the House, which was not often, he was listened to with great courtesy and the matters he raised were acted upon. He was not a politician to be ignored.

When he was attending Home Affairs Select Committee hearings Sir Kenneth generally could be seen with his head bent quietly listening to the exchanges. That's how he had appeared so far in this hearing.

Looking straight at Adrian Thomason he asked: "Minister, you say there is a man in custody who is probably responsible for these murders."

Thomason smiled and broke in: "With due respect I didn't exactly say that this person was a probably responsible. I think I said the police had arrested a man and he was being questioned."

"Quite right," said Sir Kenneth. "Indeed. But you intimated that this man might possibly be charged with these crimes."

"Not as such sir, no. I am afraid I can't go into detail about...."

"I know that Minister. I know that. I am just trying to be clear about this. The man in police custody is thought to be perhaps in some way involved in these murders. Is that right sir?"

Thomason coughed slightly. He straightened his back once more clasped his hands together in his lap. "Sir Kenneth," he said addressing the Member of Parliament by name because he knew them all from previous sessions he had attended and before coming today he made sure to refresh his recollection of each. "Sir Kenneth you put me on the spot somewhat. I can only repeat that I cannot say anything further as the investigation is still continuing. In which direction the police enquiries will go is something I am not able to comment on. I do hope you will understand."

The Committee Chairman looked at Sir Kenneth Bell, then at Adrian Thomason, and finally at other Committee members on either side of him. "Minister," he said, "of course we understand your position and I am sure that Sir Kenneth understands better than most of us around this table, having been around much longer than some of us have been in this House."

Sir Kenneth kept his eyes on Thomason. There was a little shuffling from the public and press seats behind him as people readied themselves to leave.

"That is true Mr Chairman," he said without looking at the Chairman. "But I just wanted to ask the Minister if he has read the column in the newspaper today which alleges that the police know the man they are holding in custody for murder has absolutely nothing to do with the four other murders. In other words, does he agree, or does he know, or have information, that the person in police custody is not the serial killer?"

Now the room was silent.

Adrian Thomason thought very carefully, and very quickly, before replying. "Mr Chairman, I am afraid I am not permitted to comment on the veracity or otherwise of individual press articles. I have told you all I am at liberty to report. The police investigations are still continuing."

"So," said Sir Kenneth Bell. "It would not be inaccurate to say that for all we know, for all anyone knows, the murderer, or monster I think you once unfortunately called him, or her, may still be out there. That he or she may still be stalking our streets?"

Junior Minister Adrian Thomason said nothing. He said nothing aloud but a professional lip reader might just have detected the beginning of his articulating his thoughts which began with the four letter epithet "Fuck!"

*

There was a lot of blood.

So much blood.

He had not anticipated there would be so much.

He thought there would be mostly bone with little flesh and therefore the blood flow would be limited.

In fact he had trouble stemming it.

No sooner had he begun with the hacksaw than he realised his preparations were going to be sorely tested.

But he could not stop.

*The feathers had decided.
He must continue.
He quickly ran upstairs and gathered towels and sheets.
On the way back down he grabbed a sweat shirt hanging in the pantry.
At first he packed them around the wound and squeezed tightly.
That had been satisfactory on one occasion in the past when he had also been surprised by the amount of bleeding.
But this time it was worse.
He panicked.
He was unsure what he must do.
All his meticulous preparation was at risk.
But he could not allow it to fail.
So he decided on the only course of action he could think of.
He continued cutting and allowed the blood to soak and spread into the towels and sheets he packed under her legs.
Finally the bone gave and a final effort severed the foot.
It was done.
Now he could think of how to bandage the stump and stop the bleeding.*

*

Paula fainted too long after the amputation had begun. Once it started, and knowing there was nothing she could do to stop it, she wished and prayed that the pain and shock would enable her to black out. Then she would wake when it was all over. But it was not soon enough and despite her screaming and pleading and begging and crying the dreadful noise and the pain became relentless. Finally though she mercifully sank into darkness. When she woke she immediately felt the numbness in her left leg. She tried to raise her head to examine her injuries but could do so only sufficiently to see that the lower part of her leg was swathed in bandages and that the end of the mattress was soaked in blood. Horrified she slumped back. She did not know the exact extent of the wound but when she tried to cautiously wriggle the toes on her left leg and felt no sensation at all the realisation began to dawn on her that perhaps her foot had indeed been cut off. It had not been a nightmare. It was then that Paula again screamed in anguish for a long time.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

“Is that Mr Tighe? Zachary Tighe?”

The voice was unfamiliar. Something about it rang faint bells but I could not place it. To be honest I was surprised when the reception put the call through to me. I am seldom in the offices of the paper. I write my copy at home and e-mail it in. But today I had come into the office to discuss some minor concerns I had with the accounts department and then went into the editorial department and perched in front of a monitor at a free work station to browse the web in search of a particular American author I was addicted to. I had read all of his twenty-two previous novels, each of which was set in Louisiana, a place I had never been to but because of his emotive writing I felt I knew it well, and I saw that his latest novel was out in hardback so I was anxious to find the paperback version. At the same time I intended to check out the Kindle e-reader which I kept seeing on the underground. Why keep adding books to the shelves in the flat when I could simply download them onto the e-reader? Made perfect sense in terms of taking reading matter on holidays as well.

“That’s right. Zack Tighe. Who is this please?”

“Tony Lawrence,” came the reply. Sharp but with no further explanation. I sensed I was supposed to know straight off who Tony Lawrence was and therefore to respond with some familiar retort.

“And you are?” I asked.

“Tony Lawrence,” he repeated. Then after a brief pause he added: “MP. Member of Parliament. Tony Lawrence? Maybe you have seen me in the House during PM’s questions?”

“Yes?” I was still mystified why a member of parliament should be calling me. And the name did ring a bell but so faint that I could not think why.

“I have been following your column on the murders. The serial killings.”

“Right. Do you have some information that I might find useful?”

Lawrence’s tone had changed from one of hesitation, probably because I did not recognise his importance immediately, to one with a degree of seriousness. Almost stern. “I think we should meet Mr Tighe. I believe it would be beneficial to both of us. Mutually beneficial.”

I was still not sure where this could be leading. “I am not very clear about what you are suggesting Mr Lawrence. Forgive me, but what sort of help could I give you? And why? And what sort of help do you think you can give me?”

“Perhaps the details we could discuss when we meet up,” answered Lawrence. “But I can say right now that I think you are spot on when you say the killer is still out there and not in police custody.”

I did not say anything.

He continued: “And if that is true, why is the government, or the police, trying to cover things up?”

“If they are intentionally covering things up.”

“As you say, if. But I think they might be and I think that in doing so they are playing an extremely dangerous game. I want to find out why.”

Normally when someone passed me information, or offered to pass me information, I jumped at the opportunity. More often than not the information they had to give was of very little use, sometimes of no use whatever. On a few occasions it had led to good stories that helped lift the lid on matters that might otherwise have remained in the dark. But I had never had a Deep Throat sort of informant that put my by-line on the front pages of the world media. So I was more than a little sceptical about what Mr Tony Lawrence MP might have to give. Members of Parliament usually were far more interested in receiving than giving. And so far he had not intimated he had anything to give to me.

“If we do decide to meet up,” I said, “would I be correct in thinking that you had something for me that I could use in my column? On the record or off?”

“Let me just say at this juncture Mr Tighe that I think a discussion between the two of us might very well lead to something that could be of benefit not just to the two of us but to the wider community.”

Lawrence let the words hang there. Once again there was the serious texture in his voice. A hint. Not a guarantee. Just a hint. Nothing more.

“That would be fine then,” I said. “I’ll be pretty clear in the next half hour or so.”

“Give me two hours,” said Lawrence. “I will have my work cleared by then. Would you be able to come to my office in Portcullis House? I am afraid that while I can clear my desk for a while I can’t be away from it for too long.”

“I can do that,” I replied. “Two hours from now. I will wait for you downstairs in the lobby.”

“Not in the lobby. Before you go through security. Ask for me there and I will have to come down and get you. Then we can go into the lobby for a coffee.”

Of course I was aware of the security procedure. I had been to Portcullis House a number of times and was always struck by the contrast between the Palace of Westminster where the offices of all members of parliament used to be and the new office headquarters across the road on the corner of Bridge Street leading to Westminster Bridge itself.

While the Palace of Westminster, known by the general public as the Houses of Parliament where the Commons and the Lords are located, could be dated back to the eleventh century when it was the primary residence of kings, Portcullis House was opened in 2001 after almost a decade of complicated construction. What was the old palace was destroyed by fire in 1834 and the existing Palace of Westminster is its replacement.

It is one of the centres of political life in the United Kingdom with Whitehall where the organs of current governments are situated being the other, including No 10 which is the residence of the Prime Minister. Of course mention Westminster or the Houses of Parliament anywhere in the world and the comment will immediately be Big Ben. Pretty well everyone thinks the clock tower is Big Ben whereas actually it is the main bell that gives it its name. Whatever, Big Ben and the Palace of Westminster is one of the most popular tourist attractions in the country. Americans especially are impressed by its age.

Portcullis House on the other hand draws very few sightseers. The old buildings on the site were demolished and at the same time London Underground was building an extension to the Jubilee line that included a new interchange station at Westminster station which occupied the same area. Various other underground railway considerations were also taken into consideration so it was not until a year or so before the end of the century that the building above ground began to rise. The building is named after the chained portcullis used to symbolise the Houses of Parliament on letterheads and official documents, and today it accommodates about a third of members of parliament.

As you enter Portcullis House through circular revolving doors you are faced with a glass and steel lattice work of architecture that allows maximum light to flood from above into the spacious vestibule where mature trees help to bring the feeling of outdoors inside. But before visitors can enter that area they have to go through a security check. Once you have been scanned and your bags checked, and you have advised the guards why you are there and who you plan to meet, you are told to move to the side and wait. And wait.

Half an hour after I had completed this process I watched as various people walked down the free standing staircase from the floor above into the lobby, some moving off towards the coffee tables on one side while others disappeared in other directions. Still others stood gossiping. One of those who descended walked out into the security

area where I was sitting on a wide bench and looked around. His eyes settled on me and he strode forward unhesitatingly.

“Zachary,” said Tony Lawrence and extended his hand. “Nice of you to come. Let’s go outside around the corner. There’s a nice little place in Whitehall.”

I was slightly disappointed. I had hoped we would meet in his office or in the coffee lounge where I could try to identify more senior members of parliament or officials. Maybe the Prime Minister himself would saunter in. I had been inside Portcullis House on a few occasions and always got a bit of a kick out of being there and seeing familiar important faces. Now I was being escorted out and around the corner to a public coffee shop.

As soon as we were seated and had ordered two cappuccinos Lawrence began by asking how long I had been a journalist.

I told him it had been quite a while.

“You’ve worked around the world, haven’t you?” he asked.

I told him I had but did not elaborate because I was sure he had done his homework and knew precisely what my journalistic background was.

“So you elected to return home and settle down then,” he said.

“Come back yes, but settle down, we will have to wait and see.” I had no intention at this stage of our relationship, if we were going to have one, of unburdening myself with personal information. “So far so good though.”

The coffees came and Lawrence took a sip of his. I added sugar to mine and stirred the froth and nutmeg into a creamy surface.

“I like your column,” he said. “Very interesting. Brave. What you have written about the murders is brave.”

I said nothing.

“You are not afraid to go out on a limb are you?” Lawrence said. “I mean you are not reluctant to write what you think even if it goes against the authorities. In this case the police.”

I shrugged but still decided not to say anything.

Lawrence looked straight at me for a few seconds and then placed both hands on the table. “OK,” he said. “I appreciate your position. Let’s get down to why I asked to meet with you. Enough of the small talk.”

“That’s good,” I responded. “I don’t want to be rude but I don’t want to waste your time or my time. Is there anything I can do to help you, or do you think you might have something that would be useful to me?”

“I think we could help each other. I have a position that carries with it some influence, and you likewise are in a position to influence things as well.”

“I can see that. In a general sense for sure. But how would that apply to the subject you mentioned? The murders and the serial killer.”

“I think you’re correct,” said Lawrence, “that the police have not arrested the person or persons responsible for these terrible murders. I think he or they are still at large and therefore women are still at risk.”

“Why do you think that?” I asked.

Lawrence smiled and sipped his coffee. “Zachary, I have my contacts as you will know. Surely you would have expected me to make enquiries.” He paused. “You obviously have yours and you would not have gone out on such a limb with your opinions unless you came to the same conclusion that I have.”

Clearly he was right but I was unsure why or how he wanted to use me. I was certain that he did want to use me. I just was a little unclear still how. So if he wanted to keep the small talk to a minimum I was happy to go along.

“Points taken,” I said. “So to cut to the chase as it were you reckon you can offer me something of interest and in return you want to use me for your own purposes. Can you explain to me what your purposes are?”

For the first time he smiled. “The chase. Right.” He sipped his coffee again. “There are a number of actions I could take. To support you if you like.” Another sip of his cappuccino. “Obviously I could talk to people. In the House and outside. I could try to get picked during PMQs, though that is not always the easiest thing to do as you will appreciate. And then there is an Early Day Motion.”

Getting the Speaker of the House to select you at Prime Minister’s Questions I knew was difficult. It was entirely in the hands of the Speaker and unless agreement had been reached in advance the chances of being called on were slim. EDMs were also unlikely to succeed. EDMs are formal motions submitted for debate in the House of Commons but very few are actually debated. Their main purpose is to allow MPs to draw attention to an event or cause that might otherwise not attract the interest it is thought to deserve. MPs register their support by signing individual motions. A few signatures would lead nowhere. Hundreds were required and that was unusual.

The traffic outside on Whitehall was busy as always. Buses and tour coaches and taxis and private cars stood stationary at traffic lights at the entrance to Parliament Square and with the door to the coffee shop wide open there was a steady drumming of engines, loud enough to notice but not loud enough to drown out conversation.

“Look,” I said, “I recall your raising the issue in the House, in fact I referred to you in one of my columns, but I still fail to see what I can do for you or what you can realistically do for me.” It was the realistically that I wanted him to pick up on.

Lawrence leaned back in his chair and breathed out heavily. “I have no intention of misleading you,” he said. “I am not certain that I can achieve what I would like to achieve. What I can tell you is this. The police have not arrested the person responsible for these horrible deaths. They know that the person they have in custody is not the right person. That means there is indeed a monster out there. It does mean that the likelihood of more murders cannot be ignored. And finally it means that if I can do anything, anything at all, to help guide the authorities into coming clean, to pressure the police to step up their actions, to apprehend the person responsible for the brutal murder of those women, then I will do it.”

He looked me straight in the eye and bent forward over the table and practically whispered: “Zachary, any useful information that I unearth I am prepared to share with you.” There was a pause, and he went on: “I don’t believe you have been writing your column on this issue just to scaremonger. I think you might have a source inside the police who has told you the facts. And I think that if we put our heads together we can achieve something useful, something that might prevent more deaths.”

I was not sure if what he said was accurate. Sharing information might make for good column copy but would it lead to the arrest of the serial killer? I doubted it. This was in no way similar to the MPs expenses scandal or the phone hacking where media exposure resulted in halting the abuses. This was entirely different. There was no public or media probing, no parliamentary enquiry or no way of calling witnesses or informants to ascertain relevant information. This was pure and simply a case of a series of terrible murders. No-one knew who the killer was. No-one knew why he was doing what he was doing. No-one knew whether he planned more murders. No-one even knew if there was more than one killer. And certainly no-one was in possession of key information that pointed to the killer’s whereabouts. At the moment he was free to do whatever he liked, wherever he chose, and whenever he decided. They were the only known facts.

Lawrence glanced at his watch. “I have to go,” he said. “You know where you can reach me and I know where I can contact you. Let’s just say for now that we think about this and maybe get in touch again when either of us has something useful to share. OK?”

Without waiting for a reply he pushed his chair back, stood, held out his hand so I could shake it, and turned and walked out of the coffee shop.

I sat quietly for a few minutes going over the entire but relatively short conversation in my mind. I did not know what I was going to do. Nor did I know if my meeting with Tony Lawrence MP would turn out to be beneficial. I picked up my cup of coffee. It was cold. I had not taken a single sip.

*

When he got back to his office Lawrence closed the door and used his BlackBerry to make a call.

“Hello,” he said when the call was answered. “I just had an interesting meeting with Zachary Tighe, that columnist who has been writing about the serial murders. I think I might be able to use him to raise the temperature a bit. Do you have any objection to that? Would it compromise you in any way?”

There was a silence for a time and then the voice on the other end of the line answered: “Not right now, no. But I don’t have to tell you to be careful. There are some real bastards in the press as you will know.”

“I know,” said Lawrence. “This Tighe seems to be pretty straight. Let’s see what use we can make. The sooner something meaningful can be done the better. I’ll keep you in the loop of course.”

When he ended that call Lawrence called Sir Kenneth Bell who had been prickly at the Home Affairs Select Committee hearing. He did not divulge anything about the meeting he had just concluded around the corner, but suggested they meet to discuss the murder case to see whether the committee should meet again. Sir Kenneth was happy to comply.

An Early Day Motion was the next item on his agenda. When he told Tighe he had an important meeting to attend he was not telling the truth. In reality he wanted to get the ball rolling in Parliament. What he needed to arrange pretty quickly were four or five co-sponsors of an EDM. But that was not his first task. The first job was to construct the EDM itself. He grabbed a few sheets of paper from a drawer in his desk and shuffled them in front of him. Placing them squarely on the desk he pondered for a moment and then began to write in precise long hand.

“That this House notes...” EDMs invariably began with these words. Lawrence continued writing. *“That this House notes with concern the recent deaths of four women in the most dreadful fashion; that while the police have not publically made any announcement of the fact that a person is being held in custody it is unclear whether that person will be charged with these offences; that if such person is not to be charged what action are the police adopting with a view to apprehending the person or persons who are responsible; that there are views being expressed among the general public including the media that unless this case is speedily brought to a successful conclusion panic will spread throughout the community which will hinder further police actions; and therefore calls on the Government to take all responsible actions to assist the police in the apprehension of the person or persons responsible for these violent acts of criminality.”*

The title for his EDM he thought might read: “THE URGENT NEED FOR ACTION TO APPREHEND SERIAL KILLER” If he was able to table the motion today it could make the session after next. That would put it in the bracket of numbers around thirteen hundred and fifteen.

Lawrence then began giving thought to who his immediate co-sponsors might be, ideally members from all major parties. Sir Kenneth Bell would probably be one and that would lead to another three or four falling into line without too much trouble. It was the need for a few hundred more supporters that was more problematic and which would take some time.

But time, he was not sure they had.

*

Detective Martin Walden was far from happy.

He was sitting with Maguire in Waxy's pub in Chinatown where Maguire had suggested they go for a drink to end another busy but generally fruitless day. Information that might lead to the arrest of the serial killer had dried up. Nothing new was coming in and the investigation had largely ground to a halt. Of course every available police officer was on the case and doing all they could but without any new information their enquiries were leading nowhere. A brick wall was very much in sight. But it was not the stalled investigation that had upset Walden.

"Dave, I reckon you've made a wrong move this time," he told his friend and partner. "The limb you are out on is fragile to say the least. You've gone too far this bloody time."

Maguire said nothing.

"And," added Walden, "you've taken me with you. You realise that don't you? You have put both of us in the shit. You have put both of us on the line. In fact, you may well have jeopardised the whole case."

Still Maguire remained silent.

"For chrissakes Dave, say something. Tell me why you've done this and what you hope to gain. Explain it to me. Convince me this was the right thing to do."

Maguire sipped his Caffreys and then carefully placed his glass on the bar, habitually turning it in circles to dissipate the wet ring it left on the wood. "Let's just for the moment go over what we have," he said. "We have four dead women. There is no doubt they have all been killed by the same individual. There is nothing to suggest why they have been killed. There is nothing that links them. There is no commonality in the locations. We have received no information, not a jot, from the public that might be helpful in tracking down the individual responsible for the murders. There is every reason to believe that there will be more killings. There is every reason to believe that the individual responsible is pretty intelligent at leaving no clues. Not one. All we know for certain is that there is someone out there who chooses women for no common reason, kills them brutally, drops their bodies in various locations around London and the surrounding area, leaving no clues. And then disappears. Totally."

He paused. "Meanwhile, we have a task force of experienced detectives working round the clock to get absolutely nowhere. We have not a single answer to all the questions we keep asking ourselves."

Maguire paused again, and then went on: "Along the way we take in for questioning a number of individuals who have records of violence against women. One of them we charge with a very serious crime and for some reason let it be thought, even if we don't come out and actually say it, that he might well be the serial killer. We know he is not the killer. And this means that we are going to have to go public very soon with the news that this madman is still out there and that women everywhere could be his next target."

"OK. So..." Walden said.

"Hold on," interrupted Maguire. "Just a second. While all this is happening, or not happening, the public is anxious. The media senses a great story that will scare the pants off everyone. One that they can keep running for as long as the individual responsible remains at large."

Again he paused. "And then there are the politicians. Goddamn politicians. Already they're jittery. Already they are just waiting to pounce and crucify the Force for not apprehending this, what was it, monster, that some minister claimed was praying on women up and down the country."

Now Walden said nothing.

Maguire continued: "The point of all this is that there is a time bomb out there. We already have a massively dangerous case. But we have not a single thing to go on. And we know, we must all know, that unless we achieve some real success very, very soon that bomb is going to blow up in our faces and a lot of people are going to seriously hurt. Just think if one more woman turns up under bushes somewhere, or in a gutter somewhere in the metropolitan area, what might happen. Could we actually see more riots in the streets?"

Almost in unison they picked up their glasses and downed large mouthfuls of the Irish ale. It was Walden who spoke.

"Jesus Dave, are you moonlighting for one of the red tops? All you've omitted is the disaster headline. Seriously though, you are right with everything you've said. I can't fault anything. Spot on with everything. But my questions still is, why go to a reporter and personally assist him to further dramatise the already bad situation? That's what I don't get. Why?"

"Because something has to be done to try to draw out this maniac," said Maguire. "I am trying to use Tighe to write up the story, and keep writing it up, in such a way that on the one hand explains the magnitude of the problem we face and on the other hopefully to make the murderer make a mistake. Even a very small one, but something that might give us a lead."

"You mean like make him angry at what he reads and then react rashly?"

"Maybe."

"Isn't that a little too much like the movies? It doesn't really happen in real life Dave. You know that."

"Well, it might. Maybe if we push it harder, maybe it will make him make a mistake. At least we can try. I don't see there is much of a downside to this."

Walden shook his head slowly. "I hope you're right. For both our sakes I hope you're right. I don't go along with you all the way, but for now I will because there is nothing else I can do. So what's the next move? What do you and this Tighe plan?"

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about," replied Maguire. "I am not sure."

*

He was lucky last time.

Very lucky.

She could easily have bled out and he would then have had to start all over again.

Hopefully this time the feathers would be more generous.

*

Paula was not in severe pain. The agony had developed into a very dull ache. A throbbing that aggravated the headache that was splitting her head. She lay perfectly still in the hope that if she did not move the ache would go away and she would be able to think more clearly. As it was she had difficulty with her thought processes. Almost as soon as she began thinking of something her brain took her somewhere else and she lost focus.

She knew what had been done to her. She knew when he began sawing that he was cutting off her foot. But at the time her brain refused to allow her to believe it. Instead it simply registered that something very, very bad and very, very painful was happening. And when it was over, she still could not fully accept it.

Paula had been conscious throughout. She at numerous times during the sawing prayed that she would black out and drift into painless darkness, a coma that would never end, one that would allow her to die and escape the horror. But she did not. She experienced the pain. She heard the noise the saw made as it moved back and forth

through the thin flesh. She heard and felt the shuddering harsh hacking through bone. She experienced fully the disbelief of what was happening to her. And now she lay perfectly still hoping, praying, waiting for the aching and the throbbing to end. Waiting and hoping that her ordeal in its entirety would come to an end. She did not care how. Just that it would end. Soon. Please god, soon.

*

He was ready.

Everything was in its place.

Once more he faced a dilemma.

The feathers had been unkind to him again.

He carried the basket and the bowl and their contents downstairs carefully making sure he did not trip on his apron.

Yet again he would have to be mindful not to get any blood on his clothes.

The plastic apron was easy to clean. It would not be the same with his clothes he knew.

He opened the door to the basement and walked in, gently kicking the door with his heel to close it behind him.

Placing the basket and the bowl on the small side table, he picked it up and moved to the side of the bed where Paula lay without making a sound.

Her huge eyes followed him and he saw fear in them.

Without delay he spread a towel on the bed next to her, removed the hacksaw and took her left hand in his hands.

She tried to pull away but her bindings around her forearm and upper arm, and his right grip, were sufficient to hold her in place.

As he pressed the blade against her wrist she at first moaned and then began screaming as she had never screamed before.

*

Brockley is a district in southeast London at the heart of the borough of Lewisham. The name Brockley is derived from either 'Broca's woodland clearing', or a wood where badgers are seen. That might well have been the original reason for its name but there is no wood or forest now and badgers are invisible. There are many grand houses in Brockley which used to be occupied by the owners and managers of factories in neighbouring industrial areas including Deptford and Bermondsey. History tells us that at 63 Breakspears Road lived Edwin Watts who was owner of ER Watts and Son, a mathematical instrument making company in Camberwell Road. Charles Booth's Map of London Poverty dating from 1900 describes the residents of Wickham Road and Breakspears Road as well-to-do or wealthy. Indeed, it is said that the actress Lillie Langtry was one notable resident during this period.

The terraced streets west of Brockley Road were more mixed, comfortable and poor. The artist/poet David Jones, whose father was a printer, grew up in Howson Road. And the writer Henry Williamson, the son of a bank clerk, was born in nearby Braxfield Road. Much of north Brockley was designated a conservation area in the mid seventies and at the same time the Brockley Society was formed with the aim of preserving and protecting the character of the area.

Brockley is today one of the best preserved and most coherent Victorian suburbs in inner London and contains examples of almost every style of mid to late nineteenth century domestic architecture from vast Gothic Revival piles to modest workmen's cottages. This range of nineteenth century architectural styles makes Brockley unusual.

Barry Flanagan lived in the top three floors of a four story house in Rokeby Road about three blocks from the local over-ground railway station. Retired and being rather frail having in recent years suffered from angina and hernia Flanagan spent a good deal of his day watching daytime television. His favourite programmes included the mystery Diagnosis Murder, the mindless Real Deal and of all things the timeless Australian soap Neighbours.

Had he been watching the low-budget auction programme or the Aussie soap once he had finished his lunch of pasta with bacon on a TV tray in front of the large leather sofa he probably would not have reacted to the noise he thought he heard. But there it was again. The house was a large old structure but noise did travel between the floors and as Rokeby Road was not an arterial tract it was generally a quiet area. So any unusual noise from neighbours or within the building itself travelled fairly easily. Mind you if he had tuned into Diagnosis Murder it would not have registered because it sounded a little like a scream. He was not sure but it was so out of character with the television show he was watching that he noticed it.

There it was again. This time he muted the television and craned his ear to one side. It definitely sounded like a scream or someone shouting with concern. He got up off the sofa and moved to the hallway and listened again standing stock still. Again, there it was. He was sure it was someone in distress even if he could not pinpoint where it came from.

Barry Flanagan walked back into his sitting room, picked up the cordless telephone and walked back into the hallway as he dialed.

*

Why was he so unlucky?

Why did not the feathers point to a little toe, or a nipple, or an ear or something equally less major?

Why an entire hand?

Having said that he had to be grateful it had not this time been an internal organ.

They were deadly.

Literally.

The flow of blood once more had been extreme.

Once more he had had to soak it up and tie a towel around the sanitised stump.

Once more he had to do all the remedial work while listening to the screams followed by the deep guttural moaning.

It unsettled him greatly.

Having done all he thought he could to stem the flow and prevent a bleeding out he quickly gathered up his utensils and the basket and the bowl and turned to leave the room.

It was then he noticed the door to the basement was ajar.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The group of officers seated in front of him were a mixture of grave attention or apparently distracted conversation. But no-one was distracted. Even those talking among themselves were discussing the case. There was serious concern in the minds of everyone present.

Superintendent Ford rapped his knuckles on the table. The chattering stopped. Everyone in the room faced him expectantly.

“Right,” he called. “Right. Let’s have it then.”

He had everyone’s undivided attention.

“I have only a few salient points to make,” he said. “They are few but they are absolutely crucial. Make no mistake. We are at a crossroads with this case. A crossroads.”

He shuffled a few pages of paper on the desk and then looked up again and scanned his audience.

“One. I stand to be corrected but I believe we have no new information or evidence that might lead to our man. Two. No matter how much groundwork we have all undertaken we are no further forward than we were the last time around. Three. The press is all over this. Four. The government is making waves. Five. Politicians from all parties are beginning to gang up getting ready to bite the heads off each and every one of us. Six. There is a suggestion that someone from inside this building, if not this team, might be fraternising to some extent with the media, passing on information that is to say the least unhelpful. Seven. Having said that, today we will be issuing a press release to the effect that Rocky James is not to be charged with these additional murders.”

At this juncture he stopped. There was murmuring in the room but nothing more than a slight disruption to the equilibrium. Clearly he had everyone’s attention.

“So,” he continued. “That dead end alley is coming into view. Even if it is not in view already. If we do not get somewhere or something significant soon we can expect serious flak. And that is not to even contemplate the dreadful scenario of more deaths. There is no priority here except the apprehension of the person, or persons, responsible for the crimes. Do we understand? Does everyone in this room understand what I am saying? That right now this is the most serious priority in our lives?”

There was no need for a loud uniform crescendo of agreement. Every single officer in the room knew precisely what Superintendent Ford was spelling out. Lack of positive action would result in heaps of vitriol being poured on the police. But far more importantly the danger of yet another body being discovered was to be avoided, prevented, no matter what. In other words, the culprit had to be identified, apprehended, taken into custody, removed from the streets, and locked away for all eternity. At least, all his or her eternity.

“I want this individual caught,” said Superintendent Ford. “And I want him caught before he kills again.”

Then just before he dismissed his charges to the streets, to their informants, to wherever they considered their next moves should be directed, he called out: “The press is all over this. They are all over us. Stay away from them. I don’t want to hear of a single officer saying a single word to a single reporter. Right?”

The assembly filed out of the room without answering.

Within hours of the police assembly breaking up online media outlets began announcing that Rocky James was not being charged as the serial killer. He faced a single murder but it was not connected to the four attributed to the so-called monster. That killer was still loose on the streets.

*

The memory of the street riots was still fresh in most people's minds, heightened by recent exposure on television of the Pride of Britain Awards.

What was described as one of the most powerful moments of the emotion-charged evening was the appearance of a grieving father on stage just weeks after losing his son. Millions of viewers watched him receive a standing ovation as he was recognised for a universally praised dignified plea for peace he made while standing in the street soon after his son, and two of his friends, were mown down by hooligans in a car in the midst of the riots.

The three friends were run over and killed as they tried to protect homes and businesses in their community from violent looters. The father found his son lying in a pool of blood, and tried in vain to save his life performing CPR until paramedics arrived. But it was what he did next that won the admiration of the entire nation.

With police braced for an explosion of violence and revenge attacks he made a powerful speech outside his home calling for peace within the shattered community. It was accepted by everyone across the board that this alone went a long way to stemming the street violence and bringing to an end the looting and arson that had shamed the country.

The awards ceremony widely broadcast on television was the first public appearance the father had made since burying the 21-year-old and he reduced the audience to tears with a heartfelt speech as he collected his special recognition award. Afterwards in a moving interview with a tabloid newspaper the father told how the grief had been so raw that he was not sure he could receive the honour for which he had been nominated. But he was persuaded to take part by the love and support of his wife and encouragement from the family of the two other young men who died alongside his boy.

It was hoped that sanity had returned to the streets of the capital and that community response to similar upheavals would be sensibly controlled.

*

Police Constables Ross Smithson and Nicholas Clarke drew up in their patrol car outside the large brick house in Rokeby Road.

"Nice area," remarked Clarke as they walked up to the front door and pressed the bell. "Cost a pretty penny to buy around here I bet."

When there was no response Smithson pressed the bell a second time. "Bloody big houses in this street. Must be three or maybe even four flats in this one."

They saw a shape through the diamond shaped frosted glass window in the door and then it opened inwards. Standing in the opening was a small frail looking man with thin wispy white hair, dressed in a grey tracksuit that had clearly seen better days.

"Oh hello," said Barry Flanagan. "Come in. come in." He almost pulled Smithson in followed by Clarke and loudly closed the door behind them.

"Sorry for making you wait," said Flanagan. "I was upstairs. I don't find it that easy to rush downstairs. A bit of a chore for me actually. I only go up to sleep really. But I was sorting some papers in my desk in the bedroom when I heard the bell."

They were standing in a hallway that led to a kitchen in the rear of the building where a stove and sink could be seen facing out onto the back garden. To the left was a doorway and to the right another doorway.

"Come in here," said Flanagan and led the way into a large sitting room on the left.

The room, like Flanagan's tracksuit, had seen better days. It was mostly neat and tidy but it looked tired, as though it had been lived in and cosmetically untouched for years which was the case. In the corner was a high free standing frame of shelves with books and ornaments and various odds and ends placed in a disorderly fashion. There was a chest of draws next to it. Along one wall was an old sandy coloured sofa with cushions with frayed edges and in the remaining open space two chairs that completed

the seating arrangements. Along the other wall facing the sofa was a television set on a stand. A large oak coffee table was in the middle of the room, standing on a dark brown and yellow and rust coloured rug.

“Sit, sit,” Flanagan instructed. “Would you like a cup of tea? Or something else?”

“Nothing thanks,” answered Clarke. “You are Barry Flanagan?”

“Yes, yes. Oh yes, I called the police.”

Clarke sat in one of the single chairs to the right of Flanagan who sat perched on the edge of the sofa. Smithson took the other chair.

“Mr Flanagan,” began Clarke, “you reported that you heard screams coming from somewhere nearby. Is that correct?”

“Yes, yes,” said Flanagan. “I was in here watching Neighbours when I heard it. At first I thought it was the TV but of course it wasn’t because Ned and Libby were having a quiet head to head at the time so the noise must have come from somewhere else.

“Who are Ned and Libby?” asked Smithson.

“Ned and Libby are two of my favourite characters. They’re really nice.”

“Ah,” said Clarke. “So they’re from the television programme and not someone who lives here.”

“No, no, no,” laughed Flanagan. “I live here by myself. They’re in Neighbours. It’s one of my favourite shows. I wish I could visit Australia but of course I am not quite up to such a long journey. That’s why I spend most of my time down here and not upstairs.”

“Right,” said Clarke. “Now this scream you heard. Tell us about that. Where did it come from?”

Flanagan’s expression changed as he thought hard. “Well,” he said, “I was in here when I heard it so it must have come from somewhere pretty close. Maybe outside in the street, or next door. I’m not really sure.”

“But you are certain it was a scream. By a woman?”

“I think so. I mean, I was concentrating on Ned and Libby you understand when I first heard it. But then when I heard it again I knew it was something out of the ordinary, if you know what I mean. This is a quiet neighbourhood.”

Smithson got up from his chair and looked out through the windows at the front of the house. “Did you look through this window into the street Mr Flanagan?”

“No,” Flanagan replied. “I turned my head to listen and then again when I heard it a third time. That’s when I went into the hall and called you. Not you, but 999.”

Clarke was making a few notes. “Mr Flanagan, you live alone in this house do you? Nobody else lives here?”

“Just me,” Flanagan answered. “Just me and Mr Bartholemew.”

“Bartholemew?” enquired Clarke. “Who is Mr Bartholemew?”

“He has the flat in the other part of the house. The house is divided up into two. Rather odd actually. I have this side here and the upper floors, and he has the other side downstairs. More of a bedsit really.”

“So Mr Bartholemew lives by himself then?”

“Oh yes. Completely. He keeps very much to himself. I have never seen anyone come and go to be frank. He’s a very quiet tenant. Makes no trouble at all.”

“Could the sound, the scream, have come from his flat?” asked Smithson. He crossed the room from the window where he was standing and stood in the doorway to the hall. “Is his flat through that door on the other side there?”

“No,” said Flanagan. “Well, not any more. It used to lead into the rooms there but a long time ago it was sealed and a separate independent entrance to the flat was built around the corner outside.”

Smithson walked into the hall and looked up and down and then came back into the sitting room. “So you don’t think it came from in there then?”

Flanagan said he was not sure, not absolutely sure, but doubted it because he never heard any noises coming from the flat next door. And anyway his neighbour never seemed to have company of any sort so he could not see that the scream, if that was what it was, came through the wall into the hall and then into the sitting room where he was watching television. And, Flanagan added, he never even heard the television or knew if Bartholemew even owned one.

“Well,” said Constable Clarke, “if it didn’t come from next door, and you didn’t notice anything unusual in the street outside, where might it have come from? Or are you even sure you heard a scream?”

Flanagan stood up a little shakily. “I was sure I heard something, something that sounded like a scream. I would not have dialled the police if I didn’t. I just can’t imagine now where it might have come from. I’m confused.”

“Alright,” said Clarke. “Sit down. Don’t fret. We often get this sort of call. From people who are convinced they have heard something when in fact when all is said and done it’s probably a couple of cats meowing and having a bit of a spat in the bushes.” He closed his notebook and put it in his breast pocket. “We’ll go next door and have a chat with this Mr Bartholemew and see if he can shed any light on it. Maybe he heard it and can pinpoint where it came from.”

Flanagan showed them to the door and while Constable Smithson returned to the police car Constable Clarke walked around the side of the house, motioning to his partner to remain where he was until he called him if needed. He disappeared from sight but after only a few minutes he emerged, walked to the car with a glance over his shoulder in the direction from which he had just come, opened the door to the passenger side and eased himself in.

“Well?” asked Smithson.

Clarke shook his head. “Nobody there. He’s not in. The flat’s in complete darkness as far as I could see. Radio it in and maybe we can make a run past again later.” He fastened his seat belt. “Nice houses around here though.”

“Odd sort of fellow that Flanagan I thought,” said Smithson. “Retired civil servant is my guess. Loves to repeat words. Come in come in. Sit sit. That sort of thing.”

As they drove away Barry Flanagan was already back in his sitting room with the television switched on. He had nothing specific to watch but he welcomed the sound of voices that helped ease his sense of loneliness.

*

My column was not an easy one to write. I had a very slippery path to tread.

On the one hand I had to be constructive and balanced. On the other there was a message I had to convey, not just to my paper’s regular readers but also to a specific target. I was struggling to find the words that would meet both objectives.

So I recalled the advice given to me by my first news editor when I was a novice cadet journalist on a provincial daily newspaper. The hardest thing to do often is to know how to start writing a story. His advice, very simply, was to write the first word. Type the he said. That will help. It might not be the best way to begin but if nothing else it made you think of what to say after that. You could always go back, he said, and revise the sentence later on. But to get the brain functioning, to get the journalistic juices flowing, to force yourself to think where you should be heading, that very first word can be the ignition that starts the engine. So that’s what I did. I hit the keyboard T-h-e.

The police have now admitted they never had the person responsible for the series of vicious murders that have been committed over past months in custody.

Indeed, reading between the lines of their public statements and relying further on what this columnist believes to be reliable information it is doubtful the police ever really thought they had the culprit in their grasp.

To the contrary, they knew then, and they now know, that the serial killer is still free.
I took a breath. I needed to think about where I was going with this.
The police, and it has to be said the entire administration, have a serious problem.
How public do they go with releasing information that they either have – and that is extremely sketchy at this time – or that they hope someone else will be able to provide?
Honesty and openness could very well lead to panic in the community.
It could be panic on a scale seldom before seen in the capital.
And there is an additional dimension to this case that goes further than solving a major crime and making the streets safe for women to walk down again.
There is the international view of London.
We have always lived in one of the most secure metropolitan cities in the world. Our reputation for safety has been the envy of most other capitals.
If this reputation was damaged at any time it would be a dreadful position.
To face such a problem in the run-up to the Olympics, with just months to go before millions of people from around the world make plans to come to London the reputation for security, as a city where people, especially women, can walk our streets confident of their safety, is paramount.
Yet what do we face?
Another deep breath. How strong could I be? Should I be? Here I recognised that if I was not careful I could be a catalyst for panic.
We have a situation where at least four women have been murdered and their bodies simply dumped.
We have a police force struggling to get to grips with the case to such an extent that they have absolutely no idea who is responsible, or why.
We have a “monster” loose on our streets.
These are problems of mammoth proportions, problems that face not just the police and the government as a whole, but every one of us.
Here I stopped again. It was hard hitting, perhaps too hard hitting. But I truly believed what I had written. And I was nearing the end of my six hundred word piece. However that was not the reason I stopped typing.
I had another problem too. Maybe it was not a problem yet but it was becoming one. I recognised it, knew if I did not do something to correct it, that it would overwhelm me to such an extent that my work and my life would be compromised and other people might get hurt. It was something I had never experienced before and so was unsure just how to deal with it, how to conquer it and eliminate the potential dangers it posed. I could not stop thinking about Joan Maguire.
She was not in my mind every minute of the day. More dangerously she popped in unexpectedly and lingered far longer than I should allow. It was like I was a teenager with a crush on a girl my own age. I kept seeing her face. Her hair blew in the wind. Her voice rang lightly in my ears. I was being stupid. I knew it. I knew there was no reason for my fantasising and that the fantasies that appeared in my head were clones of commercials on television advertising shampoos with alluring soundtracks. I was being utterly foolish but the images kept repeating themselves at inconvenient times.
Here I was in a serious liaison with her husband, the intention being to try to do something that would help bring an end to a string of terrible murders involving women across the city, while at the same time I was having thoughts about his wife who had no interest in me and whom I had met barely more than a handful of times, each of those occasions being nothing other than social and in the company of others. Including Maguire himself.
This was one such intrusive instance. Here I was in the middle of a column that I hoped would serve a useful purpose, maybe actually help prevent another person being hurt or even killed and Joan Maguire had appeared before my mind’s eye again.

Quickly I got up out of the chair and strode into the kitchen, pulling open the refrigerator door. A cold can of Fosters lager was standing on a shelf and I grabbed it eagerly, ripped open the metal tab and gulped half the contents in a single swallow. "Fuck," I said. Then louder: "Fuck, fuck, fuck." Downing the remainder of the beer without taking another breath I dropped the can in the waste bin and sat down again at the computer. I was determined not to lose concentration, not to be drawn down into a place where there was only peril, where dangerous demons lurked.

And so to the concluding summation.

The authorities should remember that protecting their own skin is something the community generally believes – often for the wrong reasons – to be their primary concern.

So proof to the contrary is essential.

The public should remember that the law enforcement bodies have a particularly difficult job to do at the best of times.

So understanding is needed.

When a major crime has been committed by someone who leaves no clues and who is undoubtedly unbalanced the police have a monumental task on their hands.

Such is the case they now face.

Having said that it must also be accepted that the person or persons responsible for this dreadful series of murders is clearly of unsound mind and a miserable failure in life. Psychologists and experienced profilers would have no hesitation in describing such people as psychopaths who probably consider themselves to be intelligent but who in fact are not clever but merely lucky, bed-wetters, failed lovers, insecure, and possibly physically disfigured and unattractive to the opposite sex.

In other words very sad individuals.

But not sad enough to merit sympathy.

Indeed not sad enough to warrant anything other than contempt.

This columnist hopes the police find this person soon and show him to be exactly all of those things.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Unfortunately memories are often short lived.

Once news broke that a serial killer was still on the loose and that by implication women up and down the country, but particularly in the metropolitan area, were vulnerable and at high risk communities began once more looking to their own safety. Street vigilante groups sprang up as though they had been waiting for a call to action, ready to start patrolling streets wearing shirts emblazoned with names such as Community Force 10 and threatening Kill and be Killed.

It was generally known that the murdered women had been mutilated. The full details of the injuries still had been kept from the public but that knives or other cutting implements had been used was known. And knives were in the news frequently.

Knife crime, serious youth violence and robberies in the capital had risen sharply over the preceding few months especially. Compared with the same period the previous year notifiable knife crime offences of all types rose by just under twenty per cent. In fact there had been over a five month period alone an increase of no fewer than nine hundred offences. At the same time robberies had gone up by around the same amount showing an increase of more than two thousand eight hundred offences. So it was of little surprise that the general public was concerned and that unease was growing. But further information from the Metropolitan Police aggravated the situation.

A report pointed out that knife crimes measured within a specific "violence portfolio" rose by more than fifteen per cent and that serious youth violence went up by more than ten per cent. It was therefore not surprising either that there was a view held by some that the murders might have been committed by a young person, or perhaps even a gang of youths who had decided for some unknown reason to prey on defenceless women. This view though was not supported by most people as gangland murders of this type were certainly not the norm. To the contrary, the police report indicated that the serious youth violence figure was very largely related to robbery and there was no evidence, in the public domain at any rate, that the women's deaths were the result of robberies gone wrong.

And that meant that the vigilante groups that emerged onto the streets believed they were there to prevent further killings by apprehending the maniac who was still out there. Their intent was to make sure that what failed to happen during the recent riots was not repeated and that community spirit, and community action, would help catch a serial killer. Neighbourhoods would be patrolled, suspicious characters would be stopped and questioned, and potentially dangerous persons would be manhandled and frog-marched to the correct authorities.

*

Garth Hillinder was walking down Kingsland Green just before one o'clock in the morning, heading for Dalston Junction Rail Station. It was cool and he tugged the hood of his windcheater over his head. Kingsland Green is an extension of Boleyn Road and there are few residential homes lining the street. He had only a few minutes to cross into Kingsland High Street and then into Dalston Lane where he would catch his train. At the T junction at the end of Kingsland Green he thought he saw two men standing to the side of the road, which in his mind was a little odd as the area was not one where people would stand around chatting. But he kept walking with his head down and occasionally glancing up to see if the men would be moving off. They did not.

Hillinder decided not to dawdle and began to run quickly in the lane to his left that would take him directly into the wider and lighter Kingsland High Street. What he did not know was that there were another three men, friends of the other two, who had at

the same time turned into the lane from the high street. Hillinder stopped dead in his tracks.

From behind him one of the men shouted something that Hillinder did not hear clearly but he certainly was of the opinion that it was a harsh shout and not merely an inquisitive calling. As he looked back over his shoulder, and began to move forward tentatively, one of the other men in front of him called out loudly “We’ve got him this way.” That Hillinder heard very clearly. And it was that that frightened him immensely.

There was another reason Hillinder immediately became frightened. The two men behind him were white. The three men blocking his way ahead were also white. And Garth Hillinder was a young black man. At just twenty-six years of age he was a computer programmer and he had just left a friend’s house not two hundred meters away. Under his arm was a laptop that belonged to his friend and which Hillinder was taking home to work on to sort out a glitch. When added together these things went very much against the young man’s situation. A young black man, hooded, with a laptop under his arm, late at night in an almost desolate and dark street.

There was an obvious conclusion to be drawn by the five vigilantes who were on patrol that night. One of the two men behind Hillinder and two of those in front of him raised baseball bats and called out to him: “Stop there you black bastard.”

Hillinder did just the opposite. He ran off the lane towards some buildings at the back of a bank that fronted the high street. However unfortunately he ran into a dead end and as soon as he realised his mistake and wheeled about to retrace his steps he came face to face with one of the vigilantes. Without pausing the man struck Hillinder on the shoulder a vicious roundhouse blow with the bat that knocked him sideways. He crashed into a wall and then collapsed to his knees, dropping the laptop and reaching out in front of him. The man brought the bat down hard on the left side of Hillinder’s head and he dropped heavily to the ground. The man stood poised with the bat above his head as the four other men came rushing in to the dead end alley. One of them shouted “Wait” and then pushed forward and bent down and grabbed Hillinder by his collar pulling him forward. Hillinder did not protest. Garth Hillinder was dead.

“Jesus Christ,” said the man and quickly let go of Hillinder. “You’ve killed the fucker. You smashed his fucking head in you moron.”

Clearly none of the men had any intention of standing around. Together they fled and it was not until just after ten o’clock the next morning that the body of Garth Hillinder was discovered by a bank employee when he emerged through the rear door of the bank to put some rubbish in a bin. The police were called and the story broke on the midday radio news. There was no mention of the vigilantes. Simply that a young black man had been found dead and that the police were investigating. Given the young man’s injuries there were suspicious circumstances and investigators were treating it as a suspected homicide case. As there was no obvious link in any way it was not connected to the serial killings. But it had immediately demonstrated the feelings on the street. There was a panic setting in. Streets were unsafe places to walk at night, for male or female. And there were people who were prepared to take the law into their own hands and mete out their own justice. There were vigilantes who were prepared to assume the roles of officers of the law, judge and jury, and in this case that of executioner.

*

It was a stupid thing to do, but I telephoned Joan Maguire.

“Hello,” she said simply when she answered.

“Hi,” I said. “It’s Zack.”

“Zack?”

“Zack,” I repeated lamely. “Hi Joan.”

“Well hello Zack. Are you looking for David?”

“Actually...” I began before she added: “He’s not home Zack. He’s at the office and probably won’t be home until pretty late. Or maybe not at all tonight. Dave and his team are very tied up with a few matters.”

“Right,” I said. “Of course. Not to worry then.”

“How are you Zack? What have you been up to? I mean, I read your column but apart from that what’s been happening? Anything come of it?”

I changed the BlackBerry to my other ear. “No. Not yet anyway. Maybe nothing will come of it. A shot in the dark really.”

“Poor choice of words on another occasion perhaps,” said Joan Maguire.

“Oh right. At least I didn’t say stab in the dark.”

Joan Maguire laughed lightly.

There was a lull and I screwed my eyes tightly shut. How stupid can a grown man be? I had not called Maguire’s home to speak with him. Inside I had hoped Joan would answer the call and I would be able to speak with her. To hear her. Such an immature thing to do. And foolish. Very foolish.

“Well Joan, maybe I’ll call Detective Maguire tomorrow. At the office.”

“Right,” she said. “Maybe you can do that. Call Detective Maguire at the office tomorrow.”

As we rang off I was sure I detected a smile from Joan. There are such things as audible smiles. And they are louder when you have been extremely silly. And I had just been extremely silly.

*

Early the next morning, over a light breakfast of toast and coffee, Joan Maguire told her husband about the call the previous night. He had returned home in the early hours of the morning, sleeping in the lounge so as not to wake her, and breakfast was the first opportunity they had had to talk.

“What did he want?” asked Maguire.

“To speak with you apparently,” she said. “Why else would he call here?”

“Maybe he has the hots for you and called to check if I was in. Then he would come around and ravish you before jumping out the window and fleeing home before I came in and discovered what was going on.”

“Sure,” she smiled. “Actually he did. I just thought I wouldn’t let on about that bit.”

Maguire got up and put his plate in the sink before returning to the table and put his arms around the shoulders of his wife. As he leant down to kiss her on the cheek he said: “I’ll be late tonight again. But if I do come home early and find Tighe here I will castrate him and feed him his balls. So be warned wench.”

“Duly warned,” she said.

*

My god, it was going horrible wrong.

Again.

The hand had been bad enough.

Now this.

Such care had been taken.

It was almost too much to bear.

How had the masters achieved their results?

The successes they had?

He was an amateur.

A rank amateur by comparison.

*Despite all his efforts, all the attention he had applied to every single aspect, every t crossed and every i dotted, in the end he had failed.
And was failing again.
He held his head in his hands and could barely look at his work.
But look he must.*

*

Paula lay silent on the bed.
She had been hallucinating since the previous day's horror.
Now her torso was almost completely covered in blood.
She was bleeding out at a rate that could not be stemmed.
She could not see it but the blood was burbling out in pumped gushes, running down the trough in her belly and over the sides onto the sheet and the mattress beneath her.
She could not see it because her eyes were closed.
She could not see what was happening because her life was ebbing away and she was already nearing a coma state.
Her left breast sat in the silver dish on the small table by the side of the bed. Her chest where it had been sliced away could not be seen for the pooled blood.
But none of that disturbed Paula.
Soon she would be dead.

*

PC Clarke pressed the doorbell and took a step back.
He looked up and then around towards the rear of the building. When he heard nobody come to the door he stepped forward and again pressed the bell.
And again he stepped back.
The last time he had been here he had been inside the other part of the building chatting with the retired civil servant Barry Flanagan, the man who had reported hearing a scream from somewhere nearby. But by the end of that meeting he was not at all convinced Flanagan had actually heard a scream as he had telephoned into the police.
Yet he had nonetheless decided to return to the address if he was in the area again and to speak with the man Bartholemew who occupied the flat to the right side of the building. And indeed he had been in the Brockley station area no more than an hour before.
As he was about to step up to the door once more and press the bell it suddenly opened. Before him stood a young man, probably in his late twenties or early thirties, of fair complexion with light brown wavy hair. He was wearing a pair of black jeans and a pink shirt with a maroon V necked sweater over it.
"Is your name Bartholemew?" asked Clarke.
"Yes," the man answered.
Clarke noted that he was good looking with unmarked forehead, almost perfect eyebrows, with a chiselled nose and chin above and below full lips. A woman's man.
"Sorry to bother you," said Clarke, "but I'd like to ask you a few questions if you don't mind."
"What about?" asked Bartholemew. "What is it?"
"Nothing serious. Just routine. Do you mind if we step inside please?"
"No," Bartholemew said and looked out towards the street before allowing PC Clarke to step past him and straight into what was obviously the lounge of the flat. There was nothing unusual about it. Rather it looked very ordinary with a coffee table in front of a sofa with a standing lamp to the side. The only other furniture in the room was a

large bookcase along the opposite wall that was filled with paperback novels and a few hardback travel books. There were three potted plants on shelves.

"Your name is Bartholemew isn't it?" asked PC Clarke once more.

"That's right," Bartholemew answered. "Alec Bartholemew. Can I help you with something?"

Clarke did not sit on the sofa but remained standing as his host did. "Your neighbour Mr Flanagan reported the night before last hearing someone scream. He thought it might, just might mind you, have come from in here."

"Someone scream? In here?"

Clarke kept silent.

"I doubt it," said Bartholemew. "I was here on my own and I certainly did not scream. I was reading quietly all night and went to bed around eleven as usual. And I didn't hear anyone scream outside either. Maybe Mr Flanagan imagined it." He paused but went on quickly: "I'm not saying he does imagine things. Just that he might have imagined the scream. If you know what I mean."

"Yes," said Clarke. "Well, you might be right."

He looked around the room. "How big is your flat? It must be pretty small given that Mr Flanagan lives in the rest of the building as far as I can see."

"A little bigger than a bedsit," replied Bartholemew. "I have the lounge here, a small kitchen in the back and to the side there my bedroom with an en suite shower. A res des with an en suite."

Clarke smiled. "A res des with an en suite. Much in demand. Even small ones."

"Even small ones," repeated Bartholemew.

"Right," said PC Clarke. "Well, I don't think I need to take up any more of your time. I'm sorry to have bothered you but you will appreciate I'm sure that we have to follow up on all reports of such nature. Got to let the public know we care eh?"

"Of course," Bartholemew said. "No trouble. If I hear any screaming in future I'll certainly call the police. But this is a quiet neighbourhood and I don't recall ever hearing anyone scream before."

Clarke stepped outside. On the doorstep he again looked up at the building, down the side towards the rear and out towards the street. "Not surprised," he said. "A nice neighbourhood. Not one for screams."

He did not extend his hand but thanked Bartholemew for his time and walked out to his parked police car, slid in behind the steering wheel and drove off.

Bartholemew went back inside his flat, closed the door firmly and sat on the sofa apparently deep in thought.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Tony Lawrence's efforts to garner support for his EDM had had mixed results. Of course he had no trouble getting the initial supporters to sign on but attracting the favourable attention of many more MPs was proving difficult. So far only fifteen from the three major parties had added their signatures, and that was in real terms meaningless. If he was to succeed in drawing the level of attention he sought to the matter of a serial killer being on the loose he would require serious multiples of that number.

As he put it to me when he called me a second time: "We are going to need a shed load of support to just get this off the ground."

"You presumably knew that when you started things," I said.

"Absolutely," said Lawrence. "EDMs are not really designed to work to the point of being debated in the House. They are used as a tactic to raise awareness. And if they do then the issue is talked about in the corridors and at meetings. More importantly the press gallery notices it and they start asking questions and that leads to more exposure which in turn sometimes leads to positive action being taken by those responsible for doing something about the matter."

"You mean the government."

"Normally, yes. But in this case the responsible people are the police."

"That's what I understood your intention was," I said. "But I'm still not clear on exactly what you hope the police will be able to do that they're not already doing."

"There is always more the police can do," said Lawrence. "Look, four women have been murdered. No-one has been arrested. Well, one person was arrested but the police knew all along that he was not the guilty man. And that's the sort of thing that I don't want to happen again. Everything has to be straight up and down. The police have to increase their efforts and not put out false or misleading information to the public, information that gives people a false sense of security. Because a false sense of security in situations such as this could be disastrous."

"OK," I said. "So I hope I made that pretty clear in my last column. But what more can I do? I can't keep writing that. My editors won't wear it and anyway it's just poor journalism to simply keep banging away at something without offering something new and pertinent to the argument."

"You're correct of course," Lawrence said. "I understand that completely."

"Well?"

There was a silence on the line for a while and then he said: "Look Zack, for now we just stay calm. I take your point. You are absolutely right. So I think it is now down to me to try to raise the heat from my side. I have to get more colleagues on side with this EDM. And I need to speak up at any opportunity in the House or in its precincts. If I can do that over the next few days we might then be in a position to work with more ammunition." He paused again. "Do you agree?"

"Sure," I replied. "I can't see what else we can do at this stage."

"Right," Lawrence said. "We'll leave it there. Let's just hope the police do make a genuine arrest and that this maniac is put behind bars as speedily as possible."

*

Detective David Maguire was of a different opinion.

When I spoke to him shortly after my discussion with Tony Lawrence he was dismissive of the MP's claims. Insinuations he called them.

"Politicians always know best," he went on. "And they always believe the police do not do their job well enough. As soon as there is a crime of any sort and the public express concern over it not being solved quickly enough, the politicians come out in force and blame the police for failing in their efforts. Not that they know of course

anything about what the police have actually been doing. Merely that the crime has not been solved and until it is they themselves might find themselves in the firing line. Buck-passing pricks, the lot of them.”

I had some sympathy for him. There was something to what he said. “So playing devil’s advocate then,” I prompted, “what are you guys doing to catch this serial killer? Are you any closer than you were yesterday or last week? Presumably what I’ve written has not brought in any further useful information. Or has it?”

I could hear Maguire sigh at the other end of the line. “To be frank with you, and this is definitely off the record, we are no closer than we were. We get some weird calls coming into the control room but not a jot of real information.”

“If that’s off the record, is there anything you can tell me that’s on the record, that I might use?” I was after all a reporter and if there was a story to be had then I wanted to have it.

“No. Definitely not. We are not having this conversation.”

“Fair enough. But will you keep me posted on any developments that might come up?”

“Maybe. But I won’t guarantee anything. I’m not the only one working on this you know and all of us who are working it are putting in very long hours and our efforts are being monitored very closely. Very closely, if you take my point.”

That did not surprise me. With such a high profile case I was sure that the highest echelons of the police would want to have detailed running information fed to them.

“By the way,” said Maguire. “You called my home. Why?”

It took me by surprise and I hesitated with my reply. “Oh I just thought there might be something we could discuss that I might use, that sort of thing.”

“Uh huh. That sort of thing.”

“Yes, just on the off chance there might be something.”

“Right,” Maguire said. “Well in future, do not call me at home. I have an office and a mobile and you know where it is and how you can reach me much of the time. So there is no need for you to telephone me at home.”

“Ok,” I replied. “I understand.”

“And I don’t want Joan to be bothered either.”

Again I answered: “Ok, I understand.”

That’s how the conversation finished. Maguire had not been able to offer me any information that was useful either as column material or as a story for the general pages of the paper.

But I did get one clear message from him and that was to stay away from his home and by intimation to stay away from his wife.

*

It was late and he had much to do.

His brain was swirling with thoughts, the vast majority of them negative.

His repeated failures were a cause for extreme worry.

They left him with a migraine that was exploding in his head and causing his heart rate to reach a level that would worry any doctor.

Whereas he was normally in full control of his emotions and actions he was now fumbling with indecision, deciding one moment on one course of action only to switch to another almost immediately.

He was unsure of himself.

He was beginning to worry more than he had for a long time.

And just the possibility of panic made him fear more failures.

And that was something he would not tolerate.

Further failures was something he was beginning to think he would be unable to bear.

This last one had died.

She had bled out despite every effort he had made to stem the flow of blood using towels, pillow slips, his favourite jogging strip.

On top of that he was certain shock had also contributed.

But whatever the reason the result was the same.

She had died.

Here he was now, late at night, once again having to decide what to do with the body that was stuffed in two large black plastic bags in the trunk of his car.

And then he would need another one.

There was no question of ceasing his attempt the achieve perfection.

He would, he must, keep going.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

It was a relatively quiet day for the metropolitan police. London had not been the scene of riots and there had been no major crimes that occupied the press. It was it had to be said a welcome respite. Seldom was there a day in one of the most dynamic capital cities in the world which could be described as incident-free. But this day, so far, there had not been an incident of such proportions that public concern was raised. At least not on the UK mainland.

In Northern Ireland there was a case that was grabbing the headlines, not of a murder but of plans to commit murder. It was a good twenty-four hours after the attempt that the BBC reported that a recently retired police officer had been targeted by pipe bombers who placed the device at the entrance to her house in County Down, a locality where dissident Republicans had attempted to kill many members of the security forces over the years. In the process it forced many local residents to vacate their homes.

The local Chief Superintendent said the deadly device was definitely an attempt to murder the police officer and that had it gone off anyone passing by would also have been killed or at least seriously injured. Instead, Army bomb disposal experts had examined the pipe bomb and carried out a controlled explosion. The incident was regarded by many as a throwback to the past, but one which would prove only to galvanise the determination of local citizens.

That was also the sentiment being expressed by David Maguire who was sharing a quick lunch break with his partner Martin Walden, perched on the concrete wall to the side of the entrance to New Scotland Yard in the middle of Victoria. They had temporarily escaped the confines of the building into the brisk fresh air outside and were munching on salad baps and downing mouthfuls of sweet liquid from Dr Pepper bottles.

“Police are the targets of hoodlums and crazies,” he said. “Even pipe bombers if they happen to live in Northern Ireland. But what really gets my goat is when bloody politicians who can’t control what happens in their own backyard start sticking their noses into ours and firing blame bullets. That really does piss me off.”

“Come on Dave,” said Walden. “That’s always been the case. What’s suddenly got into you now?”

“Oh I’m just pissed off that’s all. This case is beginning to get me down.”

“We’ve had cases just as bad in one way or another. I can recall one or two that kept us working longer hours than this.”

“I know.”

“I mean,” said Walden, “we have so little information to go on that we can’t work more hours. We have nothing to follow through on.”

Maguire leapt off the wall. “That’s what’s getting to me Mart. We are in the dark. Completely in the dark.”

He barely finished his sentence and Walden was about to offer a comment in response when the beeper on Maguire’s belt buzzed. He unclipped it and read the text.

“Well that puts an end to this,” he said.

*

An hour and a half later Maguire and Walden parked their car in Bodney Road just off Downs Park Road in Hackney. Downs Road and Downs Park Road are separated by the green fields of Hackney Downs. Hackney Downs is not quite a square but it almost is and it is largely bare except for the trees that stretch around the perimeter and which criss-cross from the four corners, making an oasis of trees in the centre. It was opened as a park in the mid eighties and is now a premier inner city space right in the heart of the borough. As such it is popular with youngsters. There is

a children's play area, basketball courts, a football pitch, tennis courts, an athletics track and a multi-use games area.

There is also a Mad About Meadows project in which the local council planted the new meadow on the Downs as part of a London-in-Bloom initiative that was in turn inspired by the Olympic Park wildflower meadows. For the horticulturists in the area there is a mix of rainbow annuals that grow quickly and within a year there are in a full showing of colourful flowers designed to attract important wildlife. As part of Hackney's biodiversity action plan it is designed to be part of an overall one hectare of new meadow developed over five years.

None of this interested Maguire or Walden. Their interest lay, literally, in a clump of trees twenty meters to the side of the tennis court and football pitch. A bitumen path ran through the clump but it was still rather dark and dense and shielded from the sunlight and their attention was firmly fixed on what appeared to have been wrapped in swathes of black plastic.

"This one is different," said Maguire.

"What do you mean?" asked the uniformed police constable who was standing nearby.

"She's fresh," Maguire answered without looking up. "Not like the others. This one was dumped here very recently. Maybe last night or even early this morning."

"Is it what I think it is?" asked the constable.

"You've not looked at it?" asked Walden who now stood and faced the constable.

"No sir. A couple of the youngsters over there found it and phoned it in. We were walking the area and were directed here. It was my colleague who radioed on."

"And where might he be then?"

"She's over there with the two boys. They are the ones who found it and she thought it best to ask a few questions right away."

"Good thinking," said Walden. "Stay here and I'll go and have a chat with her and the boys too."

"Yes sir," said the constable and tried to peer past Walden as he moved off to get a better look at the bundle on the ground.

*

The streets around St James's, the attractive part of central London which lies between Green Park and St James's Park and the tourist highlights of Piccadilly and Buckingham Palace, are lovely. It is renowned for its splendid buildings and opulent shops and hotels which line the pavements and it is just a short walk from the seat of government in Whitehall. St James's is the oldest royal park in the capital and was once a marshy water meadow. In the thirteenth century a leper hospital was founded, and it is from this hospital that the park took its name. Over the centuries it has of course been shaped and reshaped, first by Henry VIII, then by Elizabeth I, followed by James I and finally and most significantly by Charles II. Its twenty three hectares of groomed landscape and lake that is home to ducks, geese and pelicans draws tourists with their cameras from around the globe.

A stone's throw away from the park is the Blue Posts pub. As it too is located in the St James's area it too attracts tourists most of whom have been visiting Buckingham Palace at the weekends. During the week though it plays host to local business people from many walks of life.

The Blue Posts is only a hundred meters or so from the glamorous Ritz Hotel on Piccadilly and has been described as "a handsome old gent, more loyal butler than landed-gentry in a solid and dependable vein". Dark woods, patterned curtains and deep burgundy walls make it feel cosy and traditional. It is rather small for a London pub and so patrons often spill out onto the pavement. Sometimes the neighbourhood of St James's can be a bit presumptuous, but not The Blue Posts. It covers all the

basics simply and economically. For these reasons, as well as my having my base not that very far away, it was a pub that I dropped into from time to time usually on my way home from an assignment in the area. It was still mid evening and I reckoned I could manage two Fosters lagers before I should call it a night.

Rather than stand inside where it was pretty crowded I elected to take my beer outside onto the pavement. And because I decided to do that I also decided I would treat myself to a cigar. Not a cigar of quality that I had last enjoyed at Boisedales but instead a cheap and small Hamlet. As I was taking my first puff having borrowed a lighter from one of the other drinkers outside, and straight away wishing I had not gone down market with the cigar which was cheap rubbish compared with that at Boisedales, my mind turned to that unusual problem I realised I had and which I knew that if I did not do something about quickly I would find myself in a really awkward and potentially very risky situation. Joan Maguire.

Joan Maguire was an ache that refused to go away. As the wonderful free encyclopedia Wikipedia defines it, the ache was a chronic, painful sensation. Chronic because it was persistent and long lasting, and painful because it was definitely unpleasant. Joan Maguire was pleasant but the sensation she caused me was not. The remedy was not one that any medical concoction offered. The cure was within my control. I knew that and I also knew that my even thinking about the detective's wife was tantamount to juvenile stupidity of the most ridiculous kind. All I had to do was regain my senses, grow up, stop fantasising about the unobtainable and unreachable, and move forward as a sensible adult. That was all. Simple. So that was what I resolved to do and after my first pint I was absolutely confident I was on the way to achieving it. After my second pint my resolve had hardened so I decided a third would put the Joan Maguire fantasy out of my mind completely. And in fact it seemed to work so I reckoned it was time to leave the Blue Posts and head home.

As I was leaving I bumped into a couple leaving the bar. It was my fault. I had headed out the door into the street and then decided to use the toilet downstairs first. As I spun about I walked straight into the woman who was looking over her shoulder, smiling and waving to a group of other young women inside. She bore the appearance of a typical office employee, dressed in mainly black with a white blouse underneath and black knee-high boots. There was nothing special about her and she was not strikingly attractive. Indeed, the man she was with was more likely to draw admiring glances. He was tallish, trim, with dark hair and a well clipped moustache. A good looking man.

I apologised and descended down the stairs to the toilets. On the way I vowed once more to erase Joan Maguire from my fertile imagination.

When I arrived home about three quarters of an hour later I instinctively switched on the television and clicked the button for the Sky News. The eleven o'clock bulletin had started a few minutes before and the main newscaster Anna Botting filled half the screen while in the background I could see a field or a park where police and sundry other officials in white and yellow garb were milling around under trees that were bound together with black and yellow scene crime tape. I turned up the volume and listened to the unfolding early reports of a body being found in north London. Then I stood stock still as it was announced that the body of a woman had been found in a Hackney park, that it was a young woman, and that unconfirmed information suggested she had been mutilated.

Quickly I began surfing the terrestrial television channels and found they all had broken into their regular programmes with news just in that the body of a woman had been discovered stuffed in black plastic bags in the undergrowth in Hackney Downs. The Channel 4 newsreader informed viewers that sources had reported the woman had been violently killed and that while the police on the scene would say nothing the question had to be asked: Was the dead woman another of the serial killer's victims?

It was clear the evening's electronic media were having a field day with the breaking story.

*

At first he thought he had picked the wrong bar to prowl.

It was well away from where he lived and was one that he had never visited before. But he had searched the internet using definite criteria; it had to be far from his locality, it had to be in a nice area so that it attracted a respectable clientele, and it had to be small enough for him to work in but not large enough to simply be one of an unapproachable crowd, and there had to be an easy route from the bar to his vehicle. He drove to the area and as he had discovered while web searching he found a place to park some distance from the pub and yet not unduly distant. After all, if he was fortunate they would have to walk from the pub and he did not want that to be over such a distance that a lot of people would notice them. People had memories and he did not want to do anything that would aid too many people to remember them. Of course some of the people in the pub would recall him but there was no sense in adding more witnesses than was absolutely necessary. There were also a couple of side streets that would take them off the most popular street on their way from the pub to his car.

But it seemed fairly soon after his arrival and early on in his scanning the people in the pub that he might actually be lucky, that his luck might have changed for the better. It was about time.

The pub was pretty crowded with customers of both sexes and a wide range of ages. Mostly they were office workers though there were a few men who were dressed too casually to have come straight from their places of work. All of the women he noticed were smartly dressed and while some of them were clearly with partners there was a group of five who were standing together in the middle around the central shelves where they balanced their glasses. Sparkling Rose wine seemed to be the fashion of the day and there were already two empty bottles on the shelves.

As one of the women, a large blonde with a red streak across the front of her hairline, left the group and headed to the bar another of the group looked around the room and her eyes settled on his. He smiled slightly and then looked away. When he looked back she was looking at him and she smiled. In turn he raised an eyebrow and again looked away and studied the other people in the room. But as he was doing this he was registered details about the women.

She was aged probably in her mid-thirties. She was not slim but not fat, on the full side as someone who did not belong to a gym and who did not work out regularly. Her figure was full also. She had short black hair and an average face. Certainly not pretty but not plain either. Pleasant is how he would describe her. While her stature suggested she was not the athletic type he saw that she was tanned so he suspected she might have recently returned from a holiday, or that it was from a salon or courtesy of expensive cosmetics she applied. When he looked back again she was laughing with her friends, the large blonde filling the glasses from the fresh bottle of Rose she had purchased at the bar. For the next few minutes he glanced in the group's direction from time to time but each time he saw that the woman was enjoying happy conversation with her friends.

He had been drinking wine also, a dry white, and his glass was now empty. He left the plastic bag with the day's copy of the Times inside on the stool he had been using near the windows and approached the bar and catching the barman's attention ordered a refill. As he was handing over payment the person next to him said "hello". He turned and saw it was the woman with short black hair.

"Hello," he said.

She said nothing.

*"I think I saw you over there with your friends," said the man.
"You did," she replied. "I know you did." She paused. "And I saw you over there by yourself. You smiled at me."
"Did I?" he said.
"Yes you did," said the woman. Her voice was slurred but only slightly. "You certainly did."*

*

Jacqui Harrison was full of anticipation. The wine had done wonders for her optimism and as she looked again at the man by her side she was excited about her prospects. He was certainly good looking and he had been polite and not too pushy even though it was she who taken the first step and had made it pretty obvious she found him interesting and was prepared to see where things went.

When he had paid for his wine at the bar she had collected her glass and they had gone to the raised table where he had been sitting and the conversation had continued along fairly innocuous lines. They introduced themselves, she simply as Jacqui and he by his first name Brendon, and she went on to explain she was the personal assistant to the chief communications officer of a Caribbean island tourist authority which had its offices in Bennet Street about fifty meters from the Blue Posts. It was a job she enjoyed immensely with one of the perks being a trip to the island paradise every two years.

"Have you just come back from there?" he asked and gently touched her forearm with his finger to indicate the tan which he had already suspected had nothing to do with island sunshine.

"No," she answered and giggled. "This is courtesy of a lamp. But I plan to be going in a few months so I have been getting ready. No sense in arriving looking like the typical English albino. I don't spend much time on the beach but I want to look like I have."

He smiled. So far his senses had been correct.

"What do you do?" Jacqui Harrison asked as she took a sip of her Rose spilling a little that ran down the side of her chin without her noticing it. "Are you a lawyer or something?"

"No such thing," he replied. "I am a humble public relations consultant."

"What sort of clients do you have? Any travel or tourism companies?"

"Not one unfortunately. If I did I would be happy to take payment in travel in lieu of cash. Maybe you could convince your boss that he should hire me."

"It's all done in-house. We don't use outside PR. So what do you work on?"

"Mostly tech companies. But also some property clients. Pretty well anything that comes along really."

Jacqui remained silent for a short while and then asked: "What's the name of your company?"

"I'm a freelance," he answered. "I do bits and pieces for various agencies. No-one specifically."

Again she was quiet.

"Do you live around here?" she asked suddenly.

"Not far actually. Not around here. I can't afford that. But just across the river."

"Do you have a car?"

"Yes. It's parked in St James's Square."

Once more she said nothing. But she looked straight at him and smiled just a little so the corners of her mouth turned up which at the same time caused little rivulets to form under her eyes.

He mentally noted this and once more told himself he had been right about her age. She was definitely in her thirties.

“Would you like to see where I live?” he said. “We could have a drink and then I could drive you home.”

“You don’t know where I live,” she said.

“It doesn’t matter,” he countered. “If it’s in London I am sure we could find it together.”

Jacqui slid off her stool and straightened her skirt. “Let me just have a chat with my friends.”

And now here they were walking down King Street approaching the predominantly Georgian-designed St James’s Square which during its first two hundred years was one of the most fashionable residential addresses in London and which now was home to the headquarters of a number of well-known businesses and the exclusive East India Club. The square’s main feature is an equestrian statue of William III dating back to the early eighteenth century.

“The car’s just on the other side there, opposite Chatham House,” he said. “You can see the flag there,” and he pointed off to his left.

They crossed the road and began walking along the pavement separated from the square by high black iron railings.

Jacqui stopped as they were about to round the bend.

“I think I have changed my mind,” she said. “I’ve had a few wines and I think I should just go straight home.”

“That’s ok,” he said. “I’ll drive you.”

“No, I’ll get a cab I think.”

“Come on,” he said and moved towards her. “I’ll drive you. Come on, forget the taxi.”

She backed away a step. “No,” she said. “I’ll take a taxi.”

He took another step towards her and put his fingers around her arm. “Don’t be silly now, I’ll drive you home. Where do you live?”

Jacqui pulled away. “Let go of me,” she said loudly. “Let me go.”

Instead he reached for her with his other hand and grabbed her other arm tightly.

At that point she screamed: “No. Help. Let me go.”

Across the road two men in suits were coming down the steps of the East India Club. They heard the shout and looked across the road. Both of them stepped off the pavement as a taxi rounded the corner from King Street into the road that circled the square.

They waited for the taxi to pass and as soon as it had they quickened their pace. But by the time they arrived near the cars that were parked on their side of the square, Jacqui Harrison had moved to meet them.

“Are you alright?” one of the men asked and craned his neck to look past her. The other man put his hand on her shoulder.

“I’m ok, but I think he was going to attack me,” she said.

“Who?” said the man who had asked the first question. “Where is he?”

But when the three of them looked back through the gaps in the parked cars they could see no-one.

“Are you sure you’re alright?” asked the second man. Then he added: “I think we should call the police.”

“No,” said Jacqui, “I don’t think that’s necessary. I’m alright now.”

“That’s not the point,” said the man. “If he was going to attack you he’s dangerous and that means he could go on and attack another woman. Even tonight.” He pulled his mobile from his inside coat pocket and punched in the three repetitive emergency call digits.

*

Maguire and Walden were sure it was the serial killer who had struck again. Either the killer himself or a copycat killer.

But a copycat was unlikely because so far the full extent of the injuries to the other murdered women had not been made public, and this latest body had all the hallmarks of the same deranged murderer. She had been mutilated and parts of her body were missing.

And they thought they might have more luck this time in learning more about the murders as in this instance they had a fresh corpse and to be absolutely brutal about it fresh cadavers offered more than those that had lain undiscovered for some time or had decayed. The sooner the body was transferred to allow the forensic experts to examine it the better.

The police themselves do not handle forensics. That is the responsibility of the Forensic Science Service whose mission is stated on their website as being “to retain and reinforce our leading position as the principal provider of forensic science to the UK criminal justice system”. It claims to be the market leader in the supply of forensic services to police forces in England and Wales and to having a global reputation for “excellence in the development and deployment of new and advanced techniques”.

The FSS pioneered the development and implementation of DNA technologies and also paved the way for the establishment of the world’s first DNA database which was launched in the mid nineties. Since 2005 the FSS has been a fully Government-owned company which means that the change in its status from a trading fund enables it to respond more quickly to changes in the forensic science market and compete more effectively with other business in the field.

There was no reason for the metropolitan police to doubt this. The service had more than proved its worth over the years, and while it had been unable to produce valuable evidence following the detailed examination of the female victims so far there was always the hope that the killer would make one mistake that would lead to his identity and apprehension.

The service itself acknowledged that its drive for innovation continued to yield ground-breaking results. One was the introduction of the National Firearms Forensic Database. Another was Footwear Intelligence Technology (FIT), the UK’s first online footwear coding and detection management system.

Once the body was in their charge experienced forensic scientists would do a blood pattern analysis, they would examine closely body fluids, examine for drugs, search for fingerprints, test for fibres and carry out a whole range of other critical examinations.

All Maguire and Walden and the rest of the investigative squad could do was wait for the results.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

With the discovery of another woman's body Tony Lawrence's Early Day Motion took off.

While it had been customarily difficult to attract signatures at the beginning it now became a must sign document. Members of Parliament from both sides of the House showed an eagerness to add their names to the document. It would remain highly unlikely to ever be debated but there was no doubt that before too long it would be noticed and the media would raise the heat on the government and the police to solve the case and prevent more women being murdered.

Lawrence need not have worried about press exposure. The discovery of the fifth body was already making the headlines in the print and electronic media. Not only was the discovery being written up in as much detail as reporters could glean from the police some of the newspapers took it on themselves to offer advice to women readers. The red top tabloids especially started putting together lists of dos and don'ts. At the same time the police themselves stepped up their prevention activities as well. The Met's communications department started preparing warning flyers that would be distributed to pubs and clubs across the capital. Other cities were not to be included as the evidence so far pointed to London being the only city where women were at risk. It was a huge undertaking and would take days before distribution was completed. Hopefully in the meantime the killer would not strike again.

Maguire stressed this point when he contacted me. "I don't have to tell you this guy is a very nasty piece of work," he said. "The sooner we can get hold of him and take him off the street the better."

"That raises a point I wanted to pick up with you or someone at the Yard," I said. "Thousands of words have been written about these murders and there is no doubt the media has been painting the murderer as a maniac. But we have not been told the full extent of the injuries these women suffered."

"No," Maguire answered.

"Can you tell me?"

"No."

"Why not? I'm not interested for any sick reason. But if I knew what the women went through it might help me get a stronger message out in the paper."

"You really don't want to know," said Maguire.

"Listen," I proposed, "if the readers of my paper and also of the other papers, not to mention the radio and especially the television, were to be told what had been done to these women it might actually lead to other women taking more precautions. It might prevent another death."

Maguire did not say anything straight away. "How could I be sure if I did tell you that the media would not blast it all over the headlines in graphic detail? Don't forget there are probably, very probably, other sickos out there who'd be turned on just knowing what the injuries were."

"But if you told me first," I countered, "and I mentioned it in my column and at the same time included a call for restraint on the part of the media it might be a positive thing."

When Maguire did not answer immediately I went on: "I might also be able to convince my editor to make a request to all the other papers through the national media trade associations."

There are two national associations that represent the local and regional press and the national press. The Newspaper Publishers' Association is the trade association for British national newspapers. Its sole role is to represent, protect and promote the national newspaper industry. Founded in 1906 its members include Associated Newspapers, the Financial Times, Guardian newspapers, Independent newspapers, Trinity Mirror national titles, News International and the Telegraph Group.

On the other hand the Newspaper Society represents and promotes the interests of Britain's regional and local media. It was founded in 1836 and is believed to be the oldest publishers' association in the world. The sector is focused on providing local news and information across its twelve hundred daily and weekly, paid-for and free newspaper titles, and sixteen hundred websites. The NS is the voice of Britain's regional and local media. It exists to promote newspapers' interests in all political, legal and regulatory matters and to promote their strengths as news and marketing media.

"If we could bring them on board," I said, "it would give us, and you, a good deal of control over what actually was published. Not just on this occasion but in future."

I was mildly surprised when Maguire accepted my argument. With a condition. "Let me down on this Tighe and I really will have your balls on toast," he said.

I was certain he meant what he said and so when I sat down at the computer immediately after the telephone conversation I primed myself mentally to be cautious and in no way go overboard with the descriptions even though there was adequate material to whet the temptation. When I had completed the column I would discuss it with my editor and at the same time try to sell in his approaches to the NPA and the NS.

Please read this calmly and with respect.

I thought that was the best way to start the column. Hint at a warning and at the same time whet the appetite.

What you are about to read here, for the very first time, will appal you.

It will disgust you.

It will shock you.

It will make you want to scream and damn to hell a fellow human being.

But I ask you to please exercise great control and do not overreact.

Had I gone too far? I recalled my conversation with Maguire and how I had promised not to over dramatise the issue, not to do anything to raise the ire of readers to such a level that would be dangerous.

I reread the introductory words. They were not inflammatory but they did border on overreaction. Border? Maybe more than border. Yet I could in all honesty see no other way to convey the message I was trying to get across. So, best to continue with the train of thought and see how it all looked when I had finished.

As readers will now know the serial killer has raised the total of his victims from four to five. The fifth body was discovered in Hackney Downs yesterday morning.

Once again it was a single woman.

And once again she had been brutally murdered.

Unlike the other victims whose bodies had been dumped and remained undiscovered for varying periods of time Paula Gibbons, aged twenty three, had been slain very recently. Or more accurately some of her injuries were very recent.

That distinction needs to be made because this writer is going to reveal, for the first time, the nature of how this serial killer operates.

He is certainly not what you would expect, even when weighed on the same scales of some of the most terrible serial killers this country has known.

Once again, readers are advised to read these words with calm and with control.

All five women had been tortured.

All five women had various body parts missing.

It is believed that all five women had been part of some dreadful ritual that was carried out over time.

Paula Gibbons had clearly been tortured for some time before she died.

The police are not sure exactly what took place but they believe she, as with the other women, had different body parts cut off over varying lengths of time.

Body parts removed include fingers, toes, ears, noses, feet, hands and even breasts.

Preliminary examination suggests that Paula Gibbons' left breast had been sliced off only recently, perhaps no more than a day or two before her body was dumped.

A hand and a foot along with other parts of her body had also been hacked off.

I sat back in my chair and read what I had written. Once again I asked myself if the couple of hundred words I had penned would incite overreaction by readers. I hoped not but I could not hope to control the emotions of every single person who read my column. I could just hope that my readers were sensible. Lots of hope.

Finally, I would ask once more for readers to react calmly and sensibly to what I have written.

My intention has been to inform readers of what this serial killer does, how he inflicts pain on his victims before killing them.

It is not intended to cause panic or incite violence.

It is though hoped that by providing these details I am reminding women anywhere in the city, or indeed anywhere in the country, to exercise caution when not in the company of others. Especially at night.

Be sensible.

Be careful.

Be safe.

Now I planned to discuss what I had written with my editor and explain that I was doing this, if not with the blessing but with the confidential support, of Detective Maguire. In turn if my editor agreed to support me I would try to convince him to exert his influence with the NPA and the NS to get their members on side. Having broken the story of the extent of the injuries the murderer was inflicting on his victims it would then be up to the rest of the media to exercise control over themselves. That was not something that all sectors of the media were happy doing.

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Jacqui Harrison had had a narrow escape.

Less than twenty-four hours before she had actually been in the clutches of a man who police believed could well have been the serial killer. And she had lived to tell the tale. In fact she told it three times to police. Once to uniformed police who arrived on the scene in St James's Square. Once more at the police station in Horseferry Road. And a third time to two detectives who had driven to the station from New Scotland Yard.

Maguire and Walden sat across the table from Jacqui Harrison. All three had cups of steaming coffee in front of them and there was a plate of mixed biscuits in the centre. The detectives were doing their best to help the young woman relax and not to feel under too much pressure.

"So," said Maguire with a lightness in his tone, "not the best way to end a night out. But safe and sound in the end."

Jacqui sniffed. "You could say that again. He frightened me to death. I thought I was going to be raped."

"You're a very lucky lady," Walden said. "And you did exactly the right thing. By not going with him and then by shouting for help when he put his hands on you."

"I didn't actually shout for help," she said. "To be honest I was scared as I said and just shouted to him to let go of me. If it wasn't for those two guys across the road who heard me I don't know what would have happened."

"And they did the right thing by calling the police too," Maguire said. "Even though you were not harmed it was correct to call the police." He held up the plate of biscuits and offered them to Jacqui. "You don't know what he might have done. He could have gone looking for another young woman to molest. We just hope that he was frightened off."

Jacqui took a chocolate coated biscuit and took a nibble. “What happens now?” she asked. “I mean, it’s really getting late and I should be getting home.”

“Absolutely,” said Maguire. “We’ll drive you home. But just before we do could you please describe the man again.”

Jacqui took another bite of biscuit and a sip from her coffee. The man, she said, was aged probably around thirty, maybe a year or two older. He was not that tall, but not short, and he was lean. Not athletic, she said, but he took care with his appearance. His hair was dark and he had a moustache which she thought was not odd but different because men these days did not go in for moustaches. Overall, Jacqui said, the man was rather good looking.

“He was polite too,” she told the detectives. “He was really nice in the pub. Not pushy or in your face or anything like that. Just normal, or nicer than normal actually. So many men are so direct. They just want to get into your pants.”

She laughed. “Sorry,” she said, “but that is the truth. He just seemed different. Really nice.”

“That didn’t last though did it?” said Walden.

“No,” Jacqui replied. “He was really pleasant and talking really friendly when we were walking down from the pub. But as soon as I said I didn’t want to go home with him, or get into his car I mean, he got nasty. He just grabbed me. I was really frightened.”

“Well, you’re safe now,” comforted Maguire. “And what did you say his name was?”

“Brendon. I don’t know his last name, but he told me his first name was Brendon.”

“That’s ok,” said Maguire. He exchanged glances with Walden and then said: “Well, I think that’s all we can do for now. We’ll get someone to drive you home. We might want to get in touch with you again, and we have your details, so if anything turns up or we need to touch base with you again we’ll be in touch.”

They all stood. “In the meantime,” said Walden. “please be careful out there. I’m not saying don’t be friendly with any young men but no matter how nice they might seem you need to be very careful.” He smiled. “Attractive young ladies like yourself are always going to be targets so you need to be on guard at all times. Remember that.”

“I will,” Jacqui answered. “Believe me I’m going on a man diet now for a while.”

After she had left with a uniformed constable Maguire and Walden sat at the table again and munched on the remaining biscuits.

“What do you reckon?” asked Maguire.

“Impossible to say,” Walden replied. “Could have been a random attack.”

“Could have.”

“On the other hand it could be our man. But there’s nothing to suggest it was.”

“Or wasn’t.”

“Right,” said Walden.

“The only part of it all that intrigues me,” said Maguire, “was the guy’s manner leading up to the assault. All very friendly, overly so. And then when it came down to it his mood changes instantly and he becomes aggressive.”

“Mmmmm.”

Maguire went on: “Our guy is cutting up his victims. But he is doing it in different ways with the different women. It’s almost like he’s experimenting with something.”

“He’s a sick bastard,” said Walden.

“Absolutely,” Maguire agreed. “But he might be getting desperate. This latest victim was dumped in a more open space than most of the others. I’m just wondering if his modus operandi is to hang around pubs and clubs and sweet talk the women into going home with him and then holding them there and over time butchering them. And that’s the other thing: The injuries are carefully inflicted. They are not the result of frenzied attacks with a weapon. He’s cutting bits of his victims with care.”

“So,” said Walden, “You think he might be what, experimenting, by chopping up the women? What is he hoping to achieve then?”

“I have no idea. But if that is what he’s doing he isn’t going to stop now. And maybe Jacqui Harrison was targeted as his next victim.”

Walden drained his coffee cup. “If she was she was the luckiest woman in London tonight.”

*

All the way home he shook.

So much that he was sure that anyone following behind would notice his car veering from side to side in minute zig zags.

God how lucky he had been.

He had been certain that the woman would be compliant and that when he got her to his home he would be in total control.

But then she had got all virginal and backed off.

That was bad enough, but then he had lost it.

He had even tried to force it, had actually grabbed hold of her.

Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.

He was lucky to have got away.

As soon as she screamed he knew that was the end and he had walked as fast as he could round the corner of the square to where his car was angle parked.

Without haste he had started up and driven off sedately so that if anyone was watching he would not draw undue attention.

But then the drive home was nerve wracking.

He could not help looking in his rear view mirror to check if he was being followed, or worse, if a police vehicle with its siren blaring was chasing him.

Of course it wasn’t but his hands continued to shake right up to the time he parked his car two blocks away from his home and walked the remainder of the way.

Once inside with the door closed behind him he almost burst into tears.

He slumped down on his sofa in the sitting room, buried his face in his hands, and sat very still for a long time.

Finally he removed his hands from his face, straightened his back, stared at the wall opposite and controlled his breathing.

When he was ready and in full control again he would consider his next move.

It would have to be soon but he would make very sure that nothing would go wrong this time.

And he would also do everything he possibly could to make sure the feathers were in his favour.

*

Forensic scientists use chemical, physical and biological techniques in the collection, analysis and reporting of forensic evidence. A plethora of television crime shows suggest that skilled scientists who have learned these techniques over years can produce vital incriminating evidence in a matter of minutes or at least hours. In fact it takes much longer and often the detailed analysis leads nowhere.

Forensic investigation begins with the collection of evidence and then proceeds through analysis and ultimately the results in a variety of formats for use in the court hearings that hopefully follow.

It is the collection and packaging of evidence at a crime scene that is a vital process. A forensic scientist is not routinely present at a crime scene and it is the police officer who generally is the first person to begin the process. If the officer’s approach to the identification of evidence and also the appreciation of the processes involved is professional then the scientist’s work thereafter can be that much easier. If the

collection is haphazard or careless the chances of the evidence being of value diminishes.

The scientists use sophisticated equipment and techniques including spectrophotometers, chromatography, microscopy and photography. The investigation of crime scene samples frequently involves the use of biology and its applications including fingerprint analysis, DNA testing and the identification of hairs and fibres. They also have a keen understanding of DNA analysis and its use in profiling.

When the preliminary report from the FSS was delivered personally to Detective Senior Superintendent Alasdair Ford he had two surprises. The first was that it came through so quickly and the second was that it contained some very interesting information. The reason for the speed was twofold also. The FSS was well aware of the pressure on the police and the level of concern in the public domain over the murders. The other reason concerned what they had discovered.

“Right,” said Superintendent Ford when the contents of the report were explained to him. “Right. We’ll get right on this. Very helpful. Very helpful indeed.” Then he called his team together and briefed them.

DynamX is a high performance fabric made from sustainable resources. Those resources, he told his men, are woven into a yarn. This finished yarn is used to create the layer which offers key technical attributes which include that it is breathable, anti-microbial, offers thermal regulation and is durable. In other words it is great for use in materials worn by people who sweat a lot. Such as athletes.

When he stopped one of the detectives in the front row spoke up: “Are you saying that this stuff is made from stuff we could grow in our backyards?”

“You could say that, or something like that if you had a big enough yard” answered Ford.

“And we wear it as T shirts and such?”

“Right.”

There was a murmuring in the room and Ford continued: “The point is that this DynamX is pretty new. It is not used everywhere. It is not in the shirts that you and I buy from M&S.”

“Jermyn Street you mean,” came a call from the back.

“Point taken,” said Ford. “No, you won’t find these items in either Jermyn Street stores or in M&S. Only from specialist retailers. Sports equipment retailers in fact.”

“Well that narrows it down to a few tens of thousands probably,” said the officer at the front.

“Not necessarily,” Ford answered. “As I said this is pretty new stuff. It is for specialist sportspeople. Highly specialised. Very good at what they do. International level maybe.”

When the room stayed silent he concluded: “I’m getting some print outs of this DynamX and when I have them you’ll have them. That should be within the hour. Then we get out there and find out whatever we can. I don’t have to tell you what we want to know. You know that.” He paused. “This is the first potential lead we have in this case. Five woman have been brutally murdered and the person or persons responsible are still out there. We have to find him before he kills again. So let’s get out there and find out under what rock this creature is hiding.”

CHAPTER THIRTY

Hollywood films and television crime shows provide most of the information that the general public knows about serial killers. And given the nature of the medium and the audience it targets it should not be surprising that films and TV shows exaggerate and dramatise for entertainment purposes. The result can be a wealth of misinformation that when repeated often enough becomes accepted as fact and this can actually seriously hinder a police investigation.

According to the American Federal Bureau of Investigation's Behavioral Analysis Unit there are myths about serial kills that remain and which can lead to guilty parties escaping the law. The Metropolitan Police in the United Kingdom would support that contention and have some empathy with the FBI's aptly titled report Serial Murder – Multi-Disciplinary Perspectives for Investigators which attempts to dispel some of these myths.

Superintendent Ford had initiated a profile examination after Virginia Hughes, the third victim, had been discovered. Even then he feared that a serial killer might be responsible. More than one report was produced but it did not contain any hard information that Ford considered he could rely on. Not entirely anyway.

On the other hand, a psychologist also tasked with drawing up a possible profile was a man called Kyle Blanchard and rather than spelling out who the police should be looking for he listed a number of things that he believed should not confuse the investigations. In other words he explained that while he felt it could be misleading to try to describe the wanted person he believed it might be helpful if the investigators cleared their minds of the myths that abounded. So his report, covering no more than half a dozen pages, listed the myths he thought important along with what he believed based on solid research over many years was the reality.

As he read Professor Blanchard's report Ford could not help but realise that he himself had fallen prey to at least some of the myth believers' theories.

The first was that all serial killers were either mad or evil geniuses, fiction that was portrayed and portrayed again and again in movies around the world over the decades. Blanchard pointed out that far from being geniuses most of them had borderline to above average intelligence. Nor did they, he added, suffer from debilitating mental illnesses generally that would lead to their being found legally insane in a court of law.

A second popular belief was that they really wanted to get caught by the authorities whereas in reality evidence showed that as they progressed with their murders without getting caught they gained in confidence. Nevertheless such confidence can lead to errors when they have to dispose of bodies which is never an easy task.

Having said that, the psychologist pointed out that it is not always the case that a serial killer cannot stop killing. There are times when circumstances intervene, such as an increase in family activities for example, which will change a killer's life and he will in fact bring an end to his rampage. And here he wrote: "The vast majority of serial killers are not dysfunctional loners. They can often be living in plain sight. They can have all the appearances of normal people with jobs, families and nice homes."

There were two further myths that Professor Blanchard listed and which Ford recognised immediately.

Although some serial killers are motivated by sex that is not true of all. None of the five women found so far showed any signs of sexual interference. Indeed all had been carefully kept clean and medical examiners had very early on in each case determined that none of them had been interfered with.

And finally there was the last piece of misinformation: That all serial killers did not carry out their grizzly operations in a specific area but rather spread their murders over wide distances. This was definitely not the case with the one who Ford believed he faced now. He was of the view that this serious killer was operating in what he

believed was a comfort zone and that this definite geographic area could, for now at least, be confined to the capital city. Until something happened to dissuade him of this view he would concentrate his task force's efforts in London. If he was wrong he would be putting women up and down the country at huge risk. The penalty he would have to pay would cause him endless sleepless nights and a crisis for his soul.

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Legwork is the bane of all policemen and women anywhere in the world. Thankfully though there is available a service that in certain circumstances can save having to tread the pavements and backstreets and at the same time save time.

For Detective David Maguire anything that saved time and energy that could be usefully deployed in the performance of his job was to be applauded and exploited. He quickly put his theory into practice and discovered that an internet Google search on the term DynamX brought up a description of what it is. It also very quickly identified the company that had invented the fabric.

The trademark was held by a London-based technical sports outfitter. According to their blurb the company was one of the most popular kit suppliers favoured by British sports enthusiasts.

"People," Maguire called across the room the team was working out of. "I have something that can get us started."

He recited the details of what he had located and suggested the first step should be for someone to visit the Hammersmith offices of the company and try to get a list of all the people who had bought clothing containing the DynamX blend.

"And we should not omit the names of any famous athletes who either bought something or received it gratis," he added.

Maguire himself was unable to do the checking so it was Walden who volunteered and asked one of the other detectives to join him.

"Gotta go Martin," Maguire said, gathering his car keys off the desk and switching his terminal to stand by. "I'm already running a little behind time and Joan will be waiting. I should be home by around eight tonight so if anything happens in the meantime give me a call. Thanks for handling this."

"No sweat," said Walden. "Enjoy your afternoon in the sun while the rest of us do all the work."

"Right. And if you can bring this guy in at the same time feel free to do so in my absence."

"Go on," Walden. "Get going or Joan will take it out on me if you're late."

"I'll blame you anyway," Maguire replied and he left the incident room and made his way down to the car park. He had the afternoon off and he was looking forward to enjoying it with his wife. It had been a long time since they had spent free quality time together during the week.

They were not going to drive from their house in Wimbledon to their destination given the likely traffic delays on the roads that seemed to be constantly being dug up and resurfaced and because when they arrived it would not be convenient to park their car. So it was to be a tube ride, not something that either of them embarked on very often it had to be said.

To get from Wimbledon in the south which was the last stop on the District Line to Canary Wharf in the Docklands which was north of the river due to the Thames taking a U course would take them around an hour. They would have to change to the newer Jubilee Line at Westminster and that would deposit them at Canary Wharf without any further changes. It was not a short journey but it was not unpleasant. Getting on the underground at the last stop always guaranteed a seat and with the frequency of the more modern Jubilee Line it was not likely to be that crowded.

When they alighted and emerged into the labyrinth of skyscrapers where tens of thousands of people worked in banks, shops and a multitude of other businesses it was nearing the end of the traditional lunch hour. But in this community it appeared that the lunch hour was happily extended and the restaurants and pubs spilled outside with dark suited workers still drinking and eating. Another noticeable exception was the ratio between men and women with the male workers outnumbering the females at least four to one.

“This is the perfect place to come to see what a male-dominated world banking and finance really is,” remarked Joan.

Maguire agreed. It was quite clear that Canary Wharf with at least one hundred and fifty banks and financial institutions was a credible rival to The City. Another reason was the attractive working environment.

The City of London is the historic heart of the capital and its financial services sector and was the core of London around which the modern conurbation grew. It is only a tiny part of the city and is known as the Square Mile. It ranks ahead of New York as the centre of global finance and remains as the world’s most significant meeting point for businesses around the world. Interestingly it has a resident population of around ten thousand but more than three times that number actually work there. While the financial services sector is prime the legal profession forms a major component of the western side of the City, especially in the Temple and Chancery Lane areas where the Inns of Court are located.

As Joan Maguire had alluded, the other major financial district is the Docklands or more specifically Canary Wharf which is about two and a half miles to the east. Slightly over a third as many people work in Canary Wharf as do in The City but it is home to the world or European headquarters of many of the banks and other firms. The West India Docks where Canary Wharf is located once formed part of the busiest port in the world, but it was after the docks were closed in 1980 that the government adopted various policies to stimulate the redevelopment of the area. The London Docklands Development Corporation was set up the following year and then twelve months later it granted the Isle of Dogs Enterprise Zone status.

Canary Wharf itself takes its name from No. 32 berth of the West Wood Quay of the Import Dock. This was built back in the Thirties for a company called Fruit Lines Ltd, a subsidiary of Fred Olsen Lines for the Mediterranean and Canary "Island of Dogs" fruit trade. At their request, the quay and warehouse were given the name Canary Wharf.

“It might have changed radically since the days when it was a port,” said Maguire, “but there is another constant at work here.”

“What’s that?” she asked.

“The wind,” he answered. “There are some of the country’s tallest buildings around us here and they form a man-made canyon. And being on the water that’s why we have this stiff breeze.”

“You’re right,” said Joan. “What say we get a bite to eat in one of these establishments and get out of the wind for a while.”

They chose not to join other diners and drinkers in the aptly named Rogue Trader or The North Pole. Instead they decided on a traditional pub lunch in the traditionally named English pub The Slug and Lettuce.

Once settled Joan fluffed up her hair, straightened the collar on her blouse and said to Maguire on the other side of the table: “This is nice. Being out of the house but away from work. And of course spending time with my husband who has a mistress that ties him down pretty well every day these days.”

“Mistress?” asked Maguire. “How could I afford one?”

“The one you have is free.”

“Oh?”

“Your job.”

“You’ve got it wrong there. The job is not my mistress, it’s my slave driver. I’m definitely feeling a bit like a slave these days.”

“I understand,” said Joan. “It’s not only the hours but the stress. I know the case you are working on is stressful.”

Maguire could not disagree. It was beginning to get him down. There were a number of reasons why it was tougher for him than other serious crimes he had dealt with over the years. First and foremost it was the women. They had suffered terribly not only because of the wounds but because Maguire knew that they had had to endure unbearable pain over long periods. Whenever he thought of the women individually he could not help but imagine in his own mind what they might have had to put up with. It was hard to grasp. The other reason was that despite the many hours of investigation, not just by him but by the entire team, they appeared to be getting nowhere. Until now. At least now they had a shred of a lead.

“What is the latest?” asked Joan. “You mentioned that maybe you had something to go on?”

“It’s very little,” he replied. “It might lead nowhere.”

“But it could be helpful?”

“It could. But it’s really early days. Martin is, as we speak, interviewing staff at the company that invented this stuff, has the trademark, so maybe they can give him some information that could lead somewhere else useful. I just don’t know.”

“I know you don’t want to tell me everything about it but is this monster as horrible as I think he is? And do you think he might be very clever? I mean he doesn’t leave any traces does he?”

“No. He is clever, there’s no doubt about that. And he is certainly a monster. He’s the worst I have ever come across. Whenever I think of the victims I try to imagine what he must be feeling. He does these things. He sees what the women feel. But then he does it again and again.”

Maguire shook his head and added: “He’s a different being altogether. He must be some kind of creature without feelings. Also, we have no idea why he is doing this. It almost looks like he’s experimenting on his victims. A modern day Mengele.”

Joan reached across the table and touched his hand. “Well, this time he has left something behind. This material you mentioned to me. Maybe it can be traced to him. Maybe this is just the sort of lead you need.”

“I hope so,” Maguire replied. “I really do hope so because if not I’m sure there will be more killings. This creep is not going to stop.”

*

The company’s offices were not that striking from outside. Just another doorway at pavement level on a fairly nondescript street. Inside there were racks of sports kits hanging from hangers and scattered around the floor were various pieces of sports equipment, rowing machines, exercise machines and cartons of samples. At the side the large windows opened onto a park where joggers loped past during all hours of the day.

Walden gazed out on to park as he listened to the young man he had been interviewing.

“You have to realise that most of our customers are not walk ins,” he was saying. “We are a specialist outfitter so our clients very largely order online. Then if the item is in stock we aim to dispatch within one business day. On the other hand customised items take longer.”

Walden looked away from the park. “So you actually make up certain items on demand?”

“Yes,” said the young man. “As I say they’re customised. These can be outerwear or technical kit or just casual kit. They can take anything from four to six weeks to deliver in the UK.”

“Can you let me have a list of your customers for both stock items as well as customised gear?”

“Sure. At least I suppose so. I’ll have to check. How far back do you want to go?”

“We’re talking about this DynamX material,” said Walden. “That’s all I’m interested in.”

The man stood. “In that case we need only go back a couple of years. It’s a new fabric as you know.”

As the man walked out through a side door to where Walden guessed the main office was he again looked out through the large windows into the park. As well as joggers there were couples and singles sitting around on benches and on the grass eating and chatting. There was a bit of a chill in the air but the people did not seem to notice or at least it didn’t appear to bother them.

Walden tried to recall when the last time was that he sat in a park and just relaxed. He simply could not remember but he figured it must have been many years ago, when he was just starting out as a raw police constable. Since then he estimated he had probably seen more darkness than daylight and no doubt far more artificial light than sunlight. Maybe one day soon, after they had caught this maniac, he would take a day off and just sit in a park somewhere and watch other people for no other reason than idle curiosity and interest rather with a suspicious eye. That would be a real treat.

His musing was interrupted by the employee who handed him a print out. There were six pages with what Walden estimated were around three hundred names.

“I know you said this is very important,” said the man, “but it would be very awkward for us if our customers knew we happily handed out their details. I’m talking confidential here.”

“I understand entirely,” Walden replied. “Don’t worry, we won’t do anything that compromises your position. This information will be handled with the utmost sensitivity.” He flicked the pages over. “You’ve got some very well known and respected people on your books.”

“We have,” said the man. “We’re already well known in the sports kit field but we’re hoping to improve our position even more in the coming year.”

“Ok then. We’ll stay in touch and if I need anything more I’ll give you a call.”

“Alright. But please do treat this informative sensitively. Our reputation rests to a large degree on our relationship with our clients.”

Walden nodded and tucked the folded pages into pocket as he left the office. Before he got into his vehicle he again stood and watched the people in the park for a full two minutes.

*

It was nearing nine o’clock in the evening when Walden sat back in his chair and studied the results of five hours of analysis. On his screen were rows of text in paragraphs with the first words of each paragraph being a name, underlined and in bold type. At the table next to his a young ginger haired Detective Constable sat peering at his own screen.

Walden got out of his chair and paced across the room to the corner where there was a water cooler. He filled a mug with cool water and downed it. He then refilled the mug and walked back towards his desk. As he passed by the young detective’s desk he stooped and looked carefully at the monitor.

“Almost finished?” he asked.

“Just about,” said the detective whose name was printed on business cards scattered on one corner of his desk. He had ginger hair but his name was Sanjay Kumar that

was down to his father who was from India. For the colour of his hair he could thank his Scottish mother.

Sanjay Kumar was one of a growing number of ethnic minority police officers in the Met. It was now common to see Asian policemen and women walking the street in virtually any English city. This was especially so in London and cities such as Birmingham and Leeds and Bradford. Most were still men but female Asian officers had become more prominent in recent years. Britain's first female Asian police officer was a woman called Karpal Kaur Sandhu who was born in Zanzibar in East Africa who joined the force in 1971. She was a Sikh but her dream came to an unfortunate and early end when just two years later she was murdered by her husband who objected to her career. Now there are around three hundred Asian women police officers in London alone. There are many more Asian men in the Force though there are concerns from within and without that the number of Asian and Black police officers is still below what it should be.

A few minutes after Walden had resumed his seat at his desk Kumar tapped the send button on his keyboard and said: "It's on its way now." He then rolled his chair across the gap between the desks and peered expectantly at Walden's monitor.

"There," he pointed.

"Yes I can see that," Walden said and glanced sideways at the young detective. "What we'll do now is open yours up and then compare it with mine. We'll do yours first."

"Open them both in split screen," said Kumar.

"What? How do I do that?"

"Here," said the young man. "Let me."

In a minute both documents sat side by side on Walden's monitor. He leaned back in his chair and nodded his head up and down slightly a few times. "Alright," he murmured. "Clever. When we're finished here you can show me again how you did that. But go a bit slower."

"No problem," Kumar said. He was the junior officer and accepted his position. It was out of the question that he might offer the view that Walden and some of the other officers of his generation still had only a limited understanding of modern technology. Of course they had a thorough appreciation of its value. It was its intricate working that baffled them. "Sure. It's easy. Saves an awful lot of time."

Walden had fifty-seven names in his document. Kumar had fifty-eight. After a five minute examination Walden spotted the single name that was not repeated on both lists.

"This guy here was a medallist at the Commonwealth Games," he said. "I think we can rule him out."

"I don't know the name," said Kumar. "Are you sure we can delete him?"

"It was back in the Sixties. In Perth in Australia I think."

"So that would put him in his sixties at least then."

"Right. And I don't think our man is a pensioner."

Kumar nodded. "Of course. I just didn't recognise the name. It was before my time."

Walden smiled at the younger detective. "You see," he said, "Us dinosaurs can still remember some things that are useful."

Of the remaining names there were five that were also eliminated for one reason or another. That left fifty-two that were unknowns.

Walden rolled his shoulders to lessen the tension. Kumar pushed his chair a few feet away. It was after eleven.

"Tomorrow, you and I and maybe one of the others will start checking these fifty-two," said Walden. "It would save a lot of time to do it over the telephone but I don't want to do it that way. I want to look these people in the eye when I am talking to them."

"Good," replied Kumar, "I was thinking the same."

“Ok then. We’ll get going around nine in the morning. We’ll divide up the lists four ways. It will take some time first to try to check the whereabouts of many of these people so it will probably take us at least the day if not two.”

“Four ways? You said we’ll divide the list four ways? I thought you mentioned there would be three of us.”

“Three of us plus Maguire,” said Walden. “If we set out on this without him he would start killing us one by one too. No, Detective Maguire will be in on this also. That’s for sure.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

*The failed collection had been explained.
In fact it wasn't a failure at all.
It just didn't work out as planned that was all.
And he was definitely not to blame.
Naturally at first he berated himself for not being successful, or rather not as lucky as he had planned, but after much reflection and analysis he realised that it was the woman's fault and not his.
He had done everything right.
She was the one who changed the rules.
If she had kept to the rules all would have gone according to plan.
But the damned bitch had broken the rules and had as a result broken the carefully planned chain of events that he had put into motion, or intended to put into motion.
He was the one with the intellect and the ability.
He had proven that before.
She was just stupid.
She was insipid and lacked the conviction of her earlier actions.
That was why at the last moment she had weakened and broken the chain.
If she had had more self confidence and had not changed the rules it would have all gone according to his plan and he wouldn't have to search again.
But now he would have to go out again.
Time had been lost and he was getting edgy.
And annoyed.
He had to try again.
If he didn't the headaches he was beginning to get now could get worse.
He never experienced them before.
It was the fault of that fucking bitch.
She broke the rules and that meant he had to suffer these headaches.
Well, there was a sure way to make them go away.
He knew exactly what he had to do.*

*

There are six hundred and fifty Members of Parliament. For an Early Day Motion to get one hundred signatures is good. To get two hundred is seldom achieved. To get three hundred is very rare indeed.

Anthony Lawrence's EDM had already secured two hundred and sixty seven signatures from MPs across all the major parties as well as from the minority parties. It indicated clearly that there was wide support for it.

When Lawrence had first drawn up the motion there had been four deaths, a person was reportedly in police custody being questioned and public anxiety was rising. He had called on the authorities to take all responsible actions to assist the police to bring the case to a close.

Since then a fifth woman had been killed. The person who had been held in police custody at the time, Rocky James, had not been charged with murdering any of the women. With the discovery of the latest victim and the media description of the horrific injuries inflicted on the women the public was definitely more worried and were speaking out demanding further police action. Naturally the Home Secretary had offered whatever additional help the police needed but the murderer was still at large. So more and more MPs were adding their names to the EDM. And that meant the media were paying increasing attention to its passage through the House of Commons. There was still a very long way to go before the motion was ever likely to be debated, but that was not the point of an EDM. It was designed to highlight something that the

sponsor and his backers considered important enough to bring to the attention of other members of the House and with luck to the notice of the journalists in the Press Gallery. Lawrence had so far succeeded on all fronts.

In my role as a columnist and not a daily follower of the events on the floor I did not have direct access to the Press Gallery in the House of Commons but I did have contacts among the writers who did. So when I was told how the EDM was rapidly gaining support I called Lawrence.

“Yes,” he said. “It’s going very well indeed. Better than I anticipated.”

“Do you think it might actually end up being debated?” I asked.

“If it did I would be amazed to tell the truth.”

“Really?”

“No. I can’t recall when the last motion was debated. I think mine will continue to gather support for a time yet but eventually interest in it will be replaced by something more immediately important.”

“How long then?”

“Oh maybe another few weeks. But I can’t be certain.”

“What if there are more killings? What then?”

Lawrence sighed. “If any more women are found to have been brutally tortured and killed and then dumped then to be frank I think the success of my motion will be the least of our concerns.”

I didn’t say anything and Lawrence went on: “I’m going to get onto Sir Kenneth Bell now and see if he can get his Home Affairs Select Committee to try to move things along a bit.”

“How can the Select Committee do that,” I enquired. “What can they do?”

“Not a lot I grant you,” answered Lawrence. “But perhaps they could call the Commissioner of Police and get him to explain exactly what is being done and how he sees things progressing.”

“So that is just another tactic to raise awareness then?”

“Pretty much.”

I was not convinced it would lead to anything concrete and I suspected Lawrence held the same view. Again I said nothing.

“So that’s it,” Lawrence said. “We’ll see how things unfold over the next few days. And let’s just pray for all reasons that another dead woman doesn’t turn up.”

*

After I finished talking with Tony Lawrence I decided to give Detective David Maguire a call. I rang his mobile and listened to the ring tone repeated in my ear. When there was no answer and it began to go onto recorded voicemail I cancelled the call. I did not want to leave a message and decided to try again later. When I did try again later I heard some indistinct chatter in the background and then Maguire’s voice: “Yes. Hello?”

“Hello,” I said. “It’s Zack. Are you free? Can you talk?”

“I’ll call you back,” he said and the connection was severed.

It was a good hour before my BlackBerry rang as I was sitting in a coffee shop in Victoria.

“Hello, David?” I asked.

“Yes.” Maguire sounded curt. “Look I don’t have much time to chat so what can I do for you?”

He certainly did sound as if he did not really want to talk. So I went on quickly: “I just wanted to check in to see what was happening. If there had been any new developments.”

“What sort of developments do you expect?”

“I have no idea. Anything. Have you got any new information?”

Maguire did not say anything so I continued: "I was just talking with Tony Lawrence. He's that MP who started the Early Day Motion in the Commons. It has well over two hundred signatures already and he expects more. He's also going to try to get the Home Affairs Select Committee to call the Commissioner and question him."

"Shit," said Maguire. "Why do politicians stick their noses in business they don't understand. What does he hope to achieve for Christ's sake?"

It was my turn to keep quiet.

"Can you get him not to do that? Can you convince him not to get any committee to call the Commissioner?"

"I don't know," I said. "I could call him but what do I tell him when he asks why?"

Maguire breathed out heavily through his nose. "Listen," he said. "We have a problem with this. This is still off the record right?"

He didn't wait for me to answer. "There has been a development but I don't want any bloody politician doing anything that might interfere with what we're doing now. So can you get him to quieten down for a while?"

"As I said, I can call him," I replied. "But why?"

I heard Maguire again sniff. "Just tell him we're following a new lead and that if anything is done or said that gets in the way it could be extremely damaging. Ok?"

"What new lead? Can you tell me what it is?"

"Listen, if you can do this I might be able to give you something in return. Ok? But I want you to speak with this Lawrence as soon as you can. Can you do that?"

I had no choice. "Yes," I said. "I'll give him a call straight away. It was only a few hours ago that I was speaking to him. Hopefully he hasn't spoken to Sir Kenneth Bell yet."

"Good."

"Can I call you back and can you then give me something, tell me what's going on?"

"Give me about three hours. Then I'll call you."

"Ok," I said. "I'll wait to hear from you."

The line immediately went dead.

I punched in the number for the Parliament switchboard and hoped I could get through to Tony Lawrence before he had spoken to Sir Kenneth Bell.

*

Maguire read down the list of names and shook his head.

"I don't see one that I recognise," he said.

"We've sifted through them already," Walden told him. "That young fellow Kumar and I went through them. He's a bright lad that."

Maguire stretched his neck so he could see around his partner to where Kumar was sitting studying a file that was open on his computer.

"So there are fifty-two that we have to check out," he said. "How are we going to divide them up?"

Walden had originally intended Kumar, Maguire, himself and another detective would share them out equally. But on reflection he had decided instead to just limit the work to the three of them.

"I reckon if you and I take twenty each Kumar can look after the remaining dozen."

Maguire nodded. "Right. Let's get on with it then."

The allocation of the names was anything but scientific. Maguire took the top twenty, Walden the next twenty and Kumar the rest. They then went over to their respective desks and for the next hour and a half talked on the telephone to try to pin down as discreetly as possible where their targets were likely to be during the day.

Kumar was the first to leave the office, followed by Walden and five minutes later by Maguire.

*

Sanjay Kumar had been lucky and was able to speak with ten of the people on his list. Three had been female and he was quick to eliminate them as possible suspects after meeting with them. In all there were eight females that the detectives had to check out as Walden was quick to point out that assumptions should not be made that the killer could only be a man. There had been female murderers over the years, very few it had to be said, but making assumptions could sometimes lead to fatal mistakes.

It was getting dark and he estimated he would probably be able to complete his round within a few hours. Most of that time would be taken up with driving to the individual addresses which were in very different parts of the city. Perhaps, he thought, it would have been better to divide up the lists according to location, but that was with the benefit of hindsight. Speed had been the essence.

He knocked on the door of the flat. No answer. He knocked louder.

“Are you looking for him?”

Kumar backed away and look back towards the road where a white haired mad stood staring at him.

“Yes,” said Kumar. “Do you live here?”

“Upstairs,” said the man. “Well, next door actually. And upstairs.”

“Do you know if he’s in?” asked Kumar.

“I don’t think so. I saw him leave about half an hour ago. I haven’t seen him come back.”

“Do you know where he went or when he might be returning?”

“No. I just saw him walking out. What do you want with him?”

Kumar walked towards the man. “It’s not that important. I can come back later perhaps.” As he walked past the man he stopped and asked: “What do you know of him? A nice bloke I hear.”

“I don’t know him that well,” said the man. “He keeps very much to himself.”

“Ok then,” said Kumar. “Thanks for you help.”

“Bye,” said the man and walked to the door at the front of the building and let himself in. In the kitchen he began making himself a pot of tea and mumbled to himself: “A policeman I bet. Like London buses; you don’t come across one for ages and then three of them appear at once.”

*

Of the fifty-two names that Maguire, Walden and Kumar had to check, by ten o’clock they had eliminated thirty-nine. The remaining eleven would be dealt with the next morning which hopefully would not take too long. Five were abroad on holidays and had been out of the country for some weeks, one was now working in Dubai and only returned to London on visits once or twice a year, and one was working in Paris as a fashion designer and the information from an acquaintance was that he was decidedly not of the heterosexual type likely to get involved with brutalising females.

“We should be able to clear up the other four first thing in the morning,” said Walden.

“We’ll then have a clearer picture as to whether one of them is our man or whether we are back to square one.”

“Let’s hope we’re able to identify a possible,” said Maguire. “If none of these people are likely then we’ll be back to square one. And that is a place I am tired of being to be honest.”

The other two detectives shook their heads. They then left the office, agreeing to meet up again first thing in the morning.

After they had gone Maguire was deep in thought for a time and then retrieved a number from his mobile’s memory and depressed the dial button.

*

I thought I recognised the number on my BlackBerry screen but I was not absolutely certain. I just hoped my assumption was correct.

“Tighe,” I answered.

“Detective Maguire,” he said. I had yet to have a conversation with him when he introduced himself by his first name. It was always detective or he simply began speaking as though we were already in the middle of a conversation.

“Hello,” I said. “This is a bit late to be calling isn’t it? It’s near to eleven. You should be at home with your lovely wife.”

“I promised to call you back,” he said. “So I am.”

“Yes. So you are.”

A silence settled between us.

“Do you have something for me?” I asked. “Have there been any developments in the case?”

“Maybe,” said Maguire. “It’s not certain but maybe.”

“What sort of developments?”

“This has to be off the record. I need your word on that.”

“Naturally. As always. Off the record.”

Again there was a silence.

“There are two things that have happened. One I can’t tell you anything about at all. The other is tenuous to say the least.”

“Can’t you give me the good bit?” I asked.

“No,” Maguire answered. “Not yet anyway.”

“And the other one is, what did you call it, tenuous?”

“Jesus Tighe, be grateful that I called you, that I even agree to speak with you at all.”

“Sorry,” I said. “I didn’t mean anything. Just that it sounds like maybe it’s nothing at all.”

“Maybe it is nothing,” Maguire said.

“Tell me anyway. You never know.”

“Before I do,” said Maguire, “did you manage to speak with your MP friend?”

“I did,” I said. Fortunately I had managed to reach Tony Lawrence before he spoke with Sir Kenneth Bell and we agreed they would hold off on doing anything further for the time being. That time being for the next twenty-four hours anyway.

“Thanks,” said Maguire when I explained this to him.

“So?” I enquired.

Maguire was still hesitant but said: “The night before last a young woman was assaulted by a man in central London. Not sexually assaulted and not attacked as such. But definitely she was threatened.” He stopped there.

“Are you saying,” I interrupted, “that the man who attacked her was the killer? Is that what you think?”

“We don’t know,” Maguire answered. “But he was aggressive and the woman was left feeling very frightened.”

“So,” I said. “What’s so unusual about it? Surely you get reports like that almost daily.”

“True,” answered Maguire. “But there was something that, I don’t know, something that was different. He was a good looking guy, extremely polite and courteous right up to the point where she refused to get in his car with him. And then he grabbed her and was very threatening.”

“Did he hurt her?”

“No. But he terrified her. He was so insistent, as though he was desperate for her to go with him. Not just the disgruntled would-be lover. It sounded like something more desperate than that.”

What Maguire was telling me was interesting but I could not see that it had anything to do with the case that involved five women being murdered. I told him as much.

“Look, all I’m saying is that the man involved here was not your usual half drunk lothario who was pissed off because he couldn’t get his leg over. This guy would have probably lost it if it hadn’t been for the two other men who came to her rescue.”

I was still far from convinced. “And that’s all you have to make you think this guy might, just might, be the serial killer.”

“This killer,” said Maguire, and I could sense he was becoming rather impatient either with my doubting comments or doubts that he could not dismiss from his own mind. “He does not batter his victims. He causes no injuries other than those which involve him removing certain parts of the body. So I think he lures women and doesn’t snatch them off the road as it were.”

“And that fits the profile of the man who attacked this women the other night? That’s why you aren’t prepared to dismiss it as merely another assault on a woman?”

“Yes,” said Maguire. “That pretty much sums it up.”

“Well that isn’t much I have to say. And it’s nothing I can use either.”

There was nothing more we could say to each other, so we left it at that. The conversation ended on that empty note.

*

It was early, he knew.

But for once the time was not his concern.

It did not occur to him that the night was still young.

He was concentrated on one thing.

And one thing alone.

He needed a subject.

He had left home much earlier than he should have. It was only around five or six in the evening, but he was anxious, excited, what he might even perhaps describe as desperate.

First he had gone to Fish, a popular restaurant close to Borough Market. Its impressive chocolate brown and deep orange interior is noted for its wrap around of an open style kitchen. There diners watch the chefs at work. Being as it is situated in the heart of Borough Market, Fish claims to be the food produce mecca of London and is just a one-minute walk from London Bridge.

From there he moved on to the Garrison Public House not that far away in Bermondsey. It was a place he’d dropped into a couple of times before for a regular drink and to treat himself to a slap up meal. It was the kind of place that he’d like to think of as somewhere with a convivial atmosphere, plenty of drinks variety and good food. The pub even had its own cinema in the basement, available to book for private parties.

It was a place for him to prowl.

A destination.

A suitable hunting ground.

Yet after a few hours it proved a nightmare.

He had approached, and not approached but signalled, three women who had ignored him.

So he had sidled up to two others and directly propositioned them.

Both had spurned his advances.

One even called him a slime-ball after which he decided his best course of action was to leave.

But he had not gone far.

He had gone outside and stood in the shadows around the corner in Tanner Street. His car was actually parked just near the trees before the open grounds which abutted tennis courts.

That's where he stood.

Only about ten meters away.

In the darkness.

Not easily seen.

He stood there for nearly an hour.

Not quite motionless; he changed from his left to his right leg from time to time.

Clenching his buttocks.

Swivelling his head to break the knots in his neck.

Flexing his pectorals.

Then she appeared.

He could not make her out clearly in the darkness but her walk was interesting.

She had her head down and her hips swung from side to side as she rested a hand on a large bag slung from her shoulder. It was though she was in deep thought.

As she neared the shadows where he stood he could feel himself stirring.

Not in a sexual way.

But he was excited and growing more excited as she approached.

When she was no more than three meters from him he stepped from the darkness and before she could react he held her in a head lock with his forearm across her throat to prevent her from screaming.

By the time he had dragged her back off the street she had gone limp.

He hefted her into the back seat of his car, clamping the moist acrid smelling cloth over the lower part of her face for not even a minute.

He then slipped behind the wheel, put the car into gear and slowly edged away from the trees' shadows.

*

The girl awoke in complete darkness.

Her head throbbed and her eyes hurt. She was sweating and her pulse was racing. She felt sick and thought she would vomit and her brain was swimming in different directions at once. She felt tremors in her hands and it was then that she realised she could not bring her arms to her side. As she turned to see why her arms apparently were paralysed she discovered that her legs also had been immobilised.

The reality of her situation struck hard and she knew she was in trouble, very serious trouble. Her hands were tied to the corners on the bed she was lying on and when she lifted her head off the pillow she could see her ankles were bound to the end of the bed as well.

And she was completely naked. She had been undressed and she saw that her clothes were neatly folded and lying on the top of a chest of drawers in the far corner of the room. She immediately feared she had been raped but something inside told her that her body had not been violated. She was fully exposed but she could sense that she had not been sexually abused. She struggled against her bindings but they just got tighter.

The girl slumped back on the pillow. She did not cry but tried to concentrate on how she had come to be tied to a bed in a strange house and what was likely to happen to her next. She was reasonably sure she had not been raped but that did not mean that whoever had kidnapped her, stripped her and tied her to a bed was not at that very minute contemplating precisely that.

As if in answer to her thoughts the door to the room opened and a man stepped in and closed it behind him, turning the key in the lock. As he turned again to look at her she blurted out: "Who are you? Let me out of here you bastard."

The man stood looking at her without saying anything.

“You pervert,” the girl sneered. “You get your rocks off ogling naked women do you? Especially helpless naked women.”

Still the man said nothing but the girl thought she detected she had hit a sensitive note.

“Oh, so I’ve embarrassed you have I? What are you going to do with me?”

“I am not going to rape you,” said the man. “I am not a sexual predator.” He turned and walked towards the locked door.

“Oh that’s alright then. And just as well you shit because I am only seventeen.” The girl tugged at her wrist bindings again but then gave up. “If you’re not going to rape me then why take my clothes off and why keep me here?”

The man remained silent but walked over to the chest of drawers and from a drawer withdrew a towel. He unfolded it and brought it to the side of the bed and carefully spread it over the girl’s body.

The man stood still without looking directly at her. “I didn’t know you were so young. You wear a lot of makeup and the way you dressed it looked like you were older.”

“What difference does that make?” The girl’s headache would not go away and she sniffed. “Let me go. I won’t say anything to anybody. Please.”

The man looked down at her and she noted in the midst of her growing panic that he was good looking and probably not that old. Certainly a good ten years older than she was but not much more.

He stared at her as if running thoughts around in his mind, analysing something, putting things into place before he spoke. When he did his voice was firm but level: “I can’t let you go. It’s too late. I have things to do. Things I must do.”

With that he crossed the room and unlocked the door and after he closed it he could hear from the other side the girl’s faint voice inside shouting abuse at him. Had it been in another room in the house the sound would have penetrated every wall to the outside and to the neighbouring apartment. However, the room she was in had double walls and the door too was double thickness. The girl’s shouts would not be heard by anyone else. She was alone and as he told her he had things to do. He had to get ready.

Climbing the steps to the hallway and the kitchen above he told himself he would have to be very careful with this one. She was very young and that brought with it difficulties he had not experienced before. He was already changing the rules he so stridently adhered to in the past by speaking to her. He had never done that before. And he would not do it again.

The man sighed. The girl was so young. She was pretty and so young.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

A friend of many years standing had once explained what serendipity meant to him. It was something very close to his heart.

He had just gone through a separation that was intended to lead to a divorce in a year or so. There was no question of it being anything other than amicable. He and his wife had known each other, married pretty well the whole time, for more than a dozen years but they had drifted apart and having gone their separate ways in key areas of their life they decided the best thing to do was to end the marriage. They would remain friends but the marriage bed and everything that implied would come to an end. So he went his way and she went hers.

Hers was to immerse herself in her new job and to meet new friends and essentially to start a new life. It went very well. For him, it meant submerging himself in, to a large extent, self pity. He drank a lot. He was angrier more of the time. He was not as pleasant as he used to be much of the time.

He had a fling with a married colleague that lasted a month or so. It was exciting, though with the amount he was drinking it was not as exciting as it would otherwise have been. He was numb to the threats it imposed.

Then one night serendipity played its hand.

Along with two friends from his office, neither of whom he knew well but both of whom recognised a fellow drinker, he had been in the bar not two hundred meters from his work of employment in the evening. He had already consumed plenty of beer and was headed for a night of oblivion after which he would probably have gone home and lay in bed wondering what his former wife was doing and with whom she was doing it. But serendipity intervened, his friend explained.

An hour before closing time, by which time one of his colleagues had departed, his remaining friend noticed two women enter the bar, go to the counter and order two Baileys and then sit at a table not that far away.

His colleague suggested they strike up an acquaintance. He shook his head and said he was in no way interested. His friend ignored him and strode over to the table and introduced himself and in minutes he was also seated at the table trying to think how to make coherent conversation.

It was not until the next afternoon after he had been at work most of the morning and for a few hours after a very dry lunch that he found a piece of paper in his wallet with what appeared to be a telephone number written on it and a name. He had little recollection of how it might have ended up there but he called the number anyway.

Cutting to the chase, he had met one of the young ladies of the previous evening for dinner, strolled through St James's Park around midnight when it was at its most romantic, and within eighteen months they were married. Happily.

Serendipity his friend had explained some days later. If he had not separated from his wife due to no reason other than they had drifted apart, if he had not had a fling with the married woman, if he had been drinking too much, if he had not that night chosen to visit that pub with that friend who had approached the two women, he would not have ended up where he did. Happily married. Serendipity.

So when I bumped into Joan Maguire in Westminster underground station I was stunned. I had certainly not planned it. I was passing through on my way to the House of Commons to meet with Tony Lawrence MP. Joan I learned was on her way to offices along Embankment to discuss matters associated with the development of property in Knightsbridge. The chances of our running into one another there, or anywhere, were remote to say the least. Serendipity.

“Zack. Hello.”

I was deep in thought and trying to locate my underground ticket when I heard the words. But I knew immediately who it was, the familiarity of the voice unmistakable.

“Joan. Lovely to see you.” I looked into her eyes and touched her gently on the shoulder, tactile but nothing more.

She leant forward and kissed me lightly on both cheeks.

“We’ll have to stop meeting like this,” she said. “People will start to gossip.”

“Of all the tube stations, in all the towns, in all the world, you walk into mine.” My attempt at levity, poor though it was, at least put a smile on her face.

“I could start calling you Rick I suppose,” she said. “But somehow Rick Tighe doesn’t have the right ring to it.”

“And,” I said, “Casablanca this aint.”

She laughed. “You’re right there. Shall we get out of the way of these people, at least to the other side of the turnstiles?”

Once negotiated we stopped and faced each other and explained what we were doing at the same time in the same place.

“For once the trains were not delayed,” I said, “so I have a good half hour before I have to see Tony Lawrence.”

While I paused Joan kept looking at me and then glanced at her wristwatch.

“And that’s roughly the same time I have before I have to be at my meeting,” she said.

“Can I buy you a coffee? There’s a little café just around the corner in Whitehall. Nothing fancy, but if my memory serves me correctly the coffee does come in a china cup and not a cardboard one.”

“That would be nice Zack.”

Once seated and with the cup of steaming coffee cupped in her hands Joan said: “So what have you been up to Zack? We haven’t seen you since the night we ran into one another at Boisedale.”

“No,” I answered. “Well you and I haven’t seen each other but I have been in touch with your husband.”

“That’s right,” she said. “You’ve been working together sort of on this murder thing.”

“In a manner of speaking,” I said. “But I’m just following the story. He’s integral to it.”

“He certainly is.”

“How is it going?”

“Now Zack. We had this out once before I think. I’m just the wife and as the wife I certainly do not speak about my husband’s business.”

“Of course. I was just wondering. Sorry.”

“That’s alright.”

There was a silence and then she said: “I can tell you this, David is working every hour that God has given him. When they catch this person it will be largely down to his endeavours, his hard work, his giving it his all.”

“I can understand,” I said. “It’s a bad case alright. I just thought that, even though he probably wouldn’t want to, he might bring the work home as it were. You know, I guess when he’s working on such a case he must sometimes want to just speak to someone about it in a dispassionate way.”

Joan nodded, but said: “Yes, I’m sure he would want to do that. But not with me and not at home. They are completely separate lives. David has his work and he has his home life. The twain do not mix.”

I mumbled an understanding.

“Zack I don’t mean to sound rude but I never get involved in David’s work. Never.”

“I understand. I...”

“With this case especially. It is as you described it in your column a particularly bad one. A horribly upsetting one. Any murder is bad but when it involves women and when those women are so awfully killed it has an affect. It does something to you inside that changes you outside. I don’t talk about it with David but I can see very plainly the effect it’s having on him. And it’s not very pleasant to watch.”

“I’m sorry,” I repeated.

We sat in silence for a time and Joan studied her coffee.

Then I said: "Joan, if you would like to talk to someone yourself, I don't know, someone who could just listen..."

She said nothing and I continued: "Maybe, if you like, we could meet for a coffee, or have a meal together..."

She looked up and her expression was not hard but she was not smiling. "Zack," she said, "I can't have dinner with you. You must know that."

"What I meant was..."

"I think I know what you might have meant Zack. But I couldn't." She hesitated for just a few seconds. "Zack I love my husband very much. I hate the work he has to do sometimes and I hate the fact that it keeps him away from me for nights at a time. And I hate the way his work has an effect on him. An upsetting effect. But I've known that for a long time now and I accept it. I accept completely who he is and what he does even though there are many times I don't like either."

I could not hold her gaze and I found it easier to examine the remains in my own coffee cup.

"Zack, it has been lovely seeing you again. I really mean that. Now, I have to make my appointment or I'll have a very unhappy client. Can I offer to pay for...."

"Of course not," I answered sharply. "Absolutely not."

She pushed her chair back and stood. Holding out her hand she said: "Thanks for the coffee. It really was good seeing you again. Maybe we'll bump into each other again in another tube station or somewhere else."

"Probably," I said. "Of all the gin joints in all the towns in all the world maybe you'll walk into mine."

Her laugh was instant. "You never know. We never really know Zack. Goodbye."

"Bye," I said with a half wave of my hand.

Serendipity I thought.

Stuff it.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

“What’s the guy’s name?” Maguire asked Kumar.

The young detective checked his notebook again. “Bartholemew,” he said. “Alec Bartholemew. That’s Alec with a c by the way.”

“That rings a bell,” said Maguire. He looked at Walden. “Does it sound familiar to you?”

Walden nodded. “You remember that old fellow we went to see in Brockley? He thought he heard someone scream and called the emergency line. The odd one who kept saying things twice. Come in, come in. Sit, sit. I reckon he’s a retired civil servant.”

Maguire remembered. “And where does this Bartholemew live?”

Kumar read out the address and added: “But he wasn’t there when I called. I knocked and looked around but nobody was home. I planned to go back later today.”

The three detectives sat quietly for a few minutes before Kumar spoke up again: “There’s just him and one other. Everyone else checks out.”

“What about this other one?” asked Walden. “What do we know about him?”

His name was Dominic Westerley, said the detective, and he lived in Wimbledon.

“According to the information we have he is actually an Australian. Married to a German woman who is pretty senior in one of the major investment banks. Her father is retired now but used to be a big wheel in the European Commission. Lives in Brussels and this Westerley and his wife go there often. Long weekends and such. Westerley has bragged to some of the people we’ve spoken to that his in-laws are rich and live in this huge mansion with fruit groves or something.”

Walden snorted. “Ever known an Australian to have married a nobody whose parents were nobodies and who lived in a council house in the back of beyond?”

Maguire and Kumar laughed.

“Westerley himself is in IT,” said Kumar. “Again the people we’ve spoken to say he tells everyone how good he is. A bit of a big head by all accounts.”

“There you go again,” Walden said.

“Ok,” said Maguire. “So there are just the two left. Of course we might not be even on the right track with this special sports material stuff but let’s cover all bases before deciding the next move.”

He paused. “Kumar, you go see this Dominic guy. Martin and I will check out Bartholemew. We know the place. As Martin said, we’ve been there before.”

It was agreed that they, and other members of the team, would all meet back at the headquarters later that afternoon, go over everything they had all found out and report their findings and further thoughts to Superintendent Ford.

If they found nothing of interest then it would be back to square one.

And that meant the possibility, if not probability, that there would be more bodies.

*

The young girl lay still.

She was still shackled to the bed in the spartan room, held prisoner with apparently little or no chance of escape.

Her mind was clear but she was shivering. Not that it was cold. Rather her predicament on the one hand made her thinking crystal clear yet on the other meant she had difficulty controlling the nerves that controlled the sinews and muscles. Every few seconds she flinched and her body rippled and shook like that of a nervous mare.

She had not seen or heard the man since the first time they had come face to face and she had spoken to him. Then he had said he did not intend to rape her and in a way she believed him. If that was his intention, she figured, he would have already done

so. Instead he had actually appeared disturbed by her suggestion and had left the room and not returned.

She looked around the room again, taking in everything about it. Not that there was much to take in. Once again she confirmed what she had identified before. There was the bed of course that she was bound to, the small table to the side, and the chest of drawers next to the wall near to the door. There was no window and she could not make out any sounds coming from outside the room. The conclusion was obvious: The room was below ground level. A basement.

Again she looked at the walls. The room measured around six or seven meters square but she could see that the walls were concrete, not wood, and therefore the room was most probably near to soundproof. Raising her head she focused on the door and confirmed an earlier impression that it was very sturdy. And she had no doubt it was securely locked from the other side. As she had concluded before her chances of escape looked to be very slim.

The girl faced another problem also. A personal problem. Here she was bound naked to a bed, held captive by a man who said he did not want to rape her but who obviously had other unpleasant plans for her and she was just starting to menstruate. It was not quite the normal time of the month but because of everything that had happened to her she was early. She was embarrassed and she was angry. Her vulnerability would be magnified many times over. She was certain also that the vulnerability would not be short. Her cycle was the classic three to four days and the blood loss was also average. There was no escaping the fact that as she concentrated on lying still, but with her body shaking in irregular spasms, her period would soon begin.

*

He had difficulty controlling his thoughts.

Which was extremely unnatural for him.

He had always prided himself on being able to distance himself from reality, to shut out the extraneous, to override personal feelings.

Yet here he was now, his thoughts shooting off at tangents and always returning to the young girl in the room below.

She was so young, so very young.

Why had he not seen it?

Why had he not let her pass and found another one?

It was too late of course for that now, but he could not help himself.

There was a moment when he thought he might let her go.

Just stuff her in the car and then dump her somewhere a long way away.

Alive and untouched.

There was even a moment, a very fleeting moment, when he questioned whether he would be able to rely on the feathers.

What if they dictated he mutilate the girl more than he discovered he really wanted?

That was perhaps not the right word.

He didn't mutilate the women.

He operated on them.

But this girl was young and her skin was unblemished.

That much he had observed.

Couldn't help but notice.

She was young and fresh.

He was starting to worry too much.

Now as he prepared his utensils and the papers and the feathers his thoughts were on the girl below.

Well, he could not allow his feelings to interfere.

He would put his thoughts to the back of his mind and concentrate on what he had to do.

What he must do.

His actions would blank out his thoughts.

Now he was ready.

Once more he checked everything was in order.

He stood back from the kitchen counter, clasped his hands behind his back, stretched his head back as far as he could and breathed in deeply, holding his breath for more than a minute and then let it out slowly.

Then he relaxed, eyed his preparations, picked up the tray they were spread out on and walked towards the pantry in the corner.

*

Maguire and Walden stepped away from the door.

Walden walked towards the rear of the building.

Maguire turned and headed back to the front and looked upwards at the same time to check if it is possible to see anything that might be helpful from the upper levels of the building.

Then they both returned and Walden rapped hard on the door again.

“There’s nobody in,” Maguire said.

“I’ll give it one more try,” said Walden and gave the door a solid thump four times.

“Must be the only flat in London that does not have a door bell,” Maguire said.

They waited another minute and then reluctantly returned to their car parked directly outside.

“Do we know what this Bartholemew does for a living?” Maguire asked.

“Kumar didn’t say,” Walden answered. “I’m not sure he even knows or he would have told us.”

“I wonder why he’s never home?”

“He must come back sometimes. That old guy said he definitely lives here but keeps to himself.”

“Must work odd shifts then.”

“Maybe.”

As they drove off Maguire looked back over his shoulder at the building. “Let’s have another go tonight. Around eight.”

*

He had just been about to open the door in the pantry when he heard the knocking from outside.

He froze.

He could not open the door.

No matter who it was.

He had the tray with his implements on it.

And whoever it was outside there was no way he could let them in.

He stood motionless for what seemed ages.

There was another knocking on the door, louder this time.

He did not move.

Finally there was silence.

Still he remained where he was without moving for another two or three minutes.

When there was no further inconvenient knocking he opened the door to the pantry.

He stepped in, between the shelves on either side that were stacked with tins and packets of food and cartons of milk.

Carefully he pulled the door closed behind him and snapped on the overhead bare light bulb.

At the back of the panty there were four brass hooks. Each had a towel hanging from it.

He brushed aside the towel on the left revealing a small door latch.

He pulled it down and pushed inwards.

A door swung open revealing steps leading down into a well lit area.

As he stepped in he used the heel of his foot to close the door behind him.

He descended the steps and there was another door at the bottom.

He unlocked it and entered the room.

The girl was lying on the bed and he could see that she followed him closely with her eyes.

She tried to engage him in conversation but he did not respond.

He would not speak to her again.

It had been a mistake before.

A mistake he would not repeat.

He placed the tray on the small table near to the door and glanced at the girl again.

She continued to talk but he continued to ignore what she was saying.

He picked up the tray again and walked over to the bed and placed it on the side table that he moved to the foot of the bed.

The girl lifted her head off the pillow and looked at it and her eyes widened and her voice rose.

Still he blanked out what she was saying and concentrated on what he was doing.

This time he was not worried about what the feathers had already told him.

This time it was a minor selection.

He reached over and took hold of her right foot.

She tried to pull away but the bindings did not give and he kept a firm hold moving his grip to just the little toe.

He then picked up the scalpel off the tray and in a single deft movement severed the toe.

The girl's body shook and she shouted at him, abusing words that he heard but shut out.

From the tray he picked up a towel and wrapped it around their girl's foot.

She stopped shaking and her body went stiff.

And then he went pale.

What was that?

What was happening?

My god, she was bleeding.

Badly.

But he hadn't touched her there.

Where was the blood coming from?

Then he knew.

Blood was spreading onto the sheet between her legs.

Quickly he retraced his steps to the pantry and grabbed two of the towels that were hanging on the brass hooks along with some other materials.

Back in the room he lifted the girl's buttocks and spread a folded towel under her.

The other he placed between her legs and at the same time looked up.

He glanced at the girl who was staring at him with obvious hatred in her eyes.

This time he heard clearly what she hissed him.

"You bastard. You fucking bastard. You fucking sick bastard."

He could not look at her but his mind was already analysing the situation and devising his next move.

First he would clean and bandage her foot.

Then he would clean up after her, getting more absorbent towelling.

*He would have to dispose of the soiled materials including the sheet.
Later, when he was sure she was alright, he would have to go out.*

*

The Brockley Barge in Brockley Road was not far away and Maguire and Walden reckoned that somewhere in the world the sun was well over the yardarm.

“Just a round and then we can head back to check this Bartholemew is home,” said Maguire. “And I have to give Joan a call and tell her she has the pleasure of her own company again tonight.”

“She needs a man,” smiled Walden.

“She’s got a man already. It’s just that he’s not around as much as he should be.”

“You better watch out. Maybe there’s another man out there who knows this man isn’t at home as much as he should be.”

“Not a chance,” said Maguire. “There’s only the one man.”

They parked down the side of the pub from where they could see there were only about half a dozen other people inside.

The Brockley Barge recalls the barges which plied their trade on the Croydon Canal which itself opened in the early eighteen hundreds but which was replaced by rail transport within three decades. It is a three story white and black pub rounded at the front reminiscent of the traditional barge with the first desk being open with evergreen shrubs planted around the rim.

But the pub did not date back to the last century. It was opened at the beginning of the twenty first and boasted all the usual modern conveniences. There was an area for kids and it offered customers live subtitled television news throughout the day.

“Nice place,” remarked Walden. “Quiet too.” He pointed to the television news that was muted.

“Take a seat over there and I’ll get us a pint each,” said Maguire.

When he moved over to the table with the drinks Walden took a sip and said: “Kumar just called.”

“Oh, what did he want?” asked Maguire.

“That Westerley bloke he was checking up on.”

“Yes?”

“He’s not our man.”

“Why?”

Walden took a second sip from, his glass. “It turns out he has just this morning returned from three weeks with the in-laws in Brussels. He’s been out of the country for three weeks.”

“Is Kumar sure of that? That he was actually in Brussels all the time?”

“No question,” Walden answered.

Maguire waited. “Right. This is like drawing hen’s teeth. How does he know?”

“For two of those weeks Westerley has been in hospital with a leg that was broken in five place.”

“Five? Nobody has their leg broken in five places.”

“This mug did. Remember he’s a big mouth Australian. It was to have been a paragliding and abseiling holiday in the mountains.”

“Belgium doesn’t have mountains,” said Maguire. “It’s a flat country.”

“Not Belgium per se,” said Walden. “They were in the Ardennes. This bugger was showing off to his wife on day one when they were abseiling and he came down faster than he should have. Broke his left leg in five different places.”

“Well, that must have shut him up.”

“He spent two weeks in the Saint-Pierre University Hospital followed by a week recuperating at the home of his in-laws.”

Maguire sighed. “That leaves this Alec Bartholemew.”

“It does,” said Walden.

“And if it’s not him it means we have nothing.”

“It does that too.”

They drank in silence and watched the muted Sky News on the television mounted on the wall opposite where they sat.

Maguire emptied his glass and placed it squarely on the table in front of him. “Let’s not wait. Let’s go and check out this guy now.”

“And if he’s not there?” Walden queried.

“We’ll wait for him. He’s got to come home sooner or later.”

*

They were only about a hundred meters away when they saw who they guessed was Bartholemew walk out of the front gate to the building and cross the road to a white Nissan Qashqai.

Maguire was driving and he slowed and pulled in close the kerb allowing the Qashqui ahead to move away down the street.

“Tail him,” said Walden. “Let’s see where he spends all his time.”

The Qashqui stopped at the corner where the street ended in a T junction. There was a diamond shaped area of grass with a tall tree in the middle divider. It then accelerated quickly to the right and increased its speed.

The detectives followed, careful not to fail to stop at the same T junction and not to drive too fast in pursuit. They stayed a good hundred meters behind.

At the end of this street the Qashqui came to a stop again. But this time it did not make a turning and Maguire and Walden had no option but to slowly glide to a halt behind. Walden dropped his head as if he was reading something in his lap. Maguire gazed casually out of the window at the buildings to his right.

The Qashqui moved off, turning left into a fairly busy road with two lanes of traffic, mostly cars but also buses and the occasional lorry. The police followed.

The two cars continued down the road for half a mile until the Qashqui pulled in to the kerb where there was a gap in the parked vehicles. Maguire once again had no option. He drove past and only managed to find a space to stop a further fifty meters away.

“What’s he doing?” asked Walden.

“Hang on,” Maguire answered as he peered into the rear view mirror.

“He’s out of the car and going into a shop. I can’t see exactly what the shop is but it’s next to a shop where there are things outside on the pavement. Maybe they’re household items, like brooms and things. I’m not sure.”

For almost fifteen minutes Maguire and Walden sat in the car, Maguire watching in the rear view mirror for further sightings of the man who they suspected was Bartholemew.

When he emerged from the premises he had entered he got back in his car, started the engine and as soon as there was a clearing in the traffic he nosed away from the kerb and drove past the detectives. He was about four car lengths past as Maguire swung out and followed. They were surprised to find only minutes later that they had followed the Qashqui and its driver back to where they had started out.

Parked further down the street they watched as the driver alighted from his vehicle which he had parked in exactly the same place where he had begun, crossed the road and walked through the gate of the building where they knew Bartholemew lived.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

“Alec Bartholemew?” asked Maguire.

The man who answered the door nodded. “Yes.”

“My name is David Maguire and this is Martin Walden. We’re from the Metropolitan Police. We’d like to talk to you if you have the time.”

“Of course,” answered Bartholemew. “What’s it about?”

Maguire looked about him and then past him into the flat. “Is it alright if we come in out of the doorway?”

“I’m sorry,” Bartholemew said. “Yes, of course, come in.”

Once inside the lounge the detectives quickly took in the furnishings. They remained standing as did Bartholemew.

“Is this about that other matter?” Bartholemew said.

“What other matter would that be?” Maguire asked.

Bartholemew frowned. “There was another policeman here before enquiring something about someone who was heard screaming. Or something like that. I can’t remember exactly.”

Maguire and Walden continued to examine the room they were in. It was sparsely furnished and had the look of a space that was functional rather than lived in. Not a cold atmosphere but certainly cool.

“No,” Maguire said. “This is about something different. Routine actually. Mind if we sit?”

“I’m sorry again,” said Bartholemew and motioned for them to sit on the sofa. He still stood, slightly to one side.

“Are you an athlete?” Maguire enquired. “A runner perhaps? Something like that?”

“No. Why do you ask?”

“Are you a member of a sports club?”

“Yes. There’s an LA Fitness near where I work. I’ve been a member there for just under a year and a half I guess it is.”

“And where do you work?” Walden edged forward on the sofa and clasped his hands between his knees.

Bartholemew shifted his weight from his right leg to his left and back to his right. “In Limehouse. I’m with a firm of accountants.”

“A senior accountant I take it?”

“Fairly I suppose. I work in the field of financial and management reporting. I also did my training in the States so I’m also a Certified Management Accountant.”

Walden screwed his mouth and nodded slowly. “Well done.” Then he added: “I’m surprised you don’t have your own house.”

Bartholemew seemed to relax a little. “I’ll get there. But with prices as they are and the economy as it is I’m happy to rent for now. And Brockley is close to Limehouse. Just the one change on the train.”

“Your flat is pretty small isn’t it?” Maguire commented.

“It’s big enough for me,” Bartholemew answered. “I don’t spend a great deal of time here anyway and when I do I just read and sleep.”

“And go to the gym,” said Walden.

“Yes.”

Walden leaned back in the sofa and Maguire edged forward. “Do you have to wear special gear at LA Fitness?”

“Not really. Just normal work out clothes.”

“Nothing special?”

“No. Why?”

Maguire paused and looked squarely at Bartholemew. “Don’t you have a special shirt made of special material that you work out in?”

Bartholemew's brow furrowed again. "Well yes, but I thought you meant does the club require us to wear special gear. Why is that of interest?"

Maguire stood. "Can we see your shirt please?"

"Of course," Bartholemew said and turned and walked down the short passage.

Maguire followed him and watched as Bartholemew walked into the en suite bathroom off what was obviously his bedroom. He reached into a wicker basket and retrieved a red and black shirt with a flat yellow collar about two centimetres wide. He held it out to Maguire who took it and moved back down the corridor to the lounge and without sitting held it out in front of him so that Walden could get a good look.

"I'm sorry," said Bartholemew, "but what's this all about. Why do you want to examine my shirt?"

Neither Maguire or Walden answered immediately. Maguire turned the shirt this way and that and Walden took hold of the bottom and they both cast their eyes over it for a full minute.

It was Maguire who spoke. "Mr Bartholemew please do not take this the wrong way, but would you mind if we borrowed this shirt for a few days?"

"Why?" said Bartholemew. "I'm not understanding any of this. What is it that you think I've done? And why do you want to take my shirt away with you?"

"We can't say right now, but it would be helpful if you cooperated."

"Well, unless you tell me what it is that you think I've done I don't think I should give you my shirt," and Bartholemew reached and took the shirt from Maguire.

"That's a shame," said Maguire. "Are you certain you won't cooperate?"

"It's not a question of cooperating. If you won't tell me what you think I've done I don't see why I should do what you ask."

The detectives said nothing.

"So," said Bartholemew, "I think it might be best if you leave now. If you want me to help you any further you'll have to tell me what this is all about. I've got nothing to hide but cooperation is a two way street you know."

"Are you sure you want to do this Mr Bartholemew?" Maguire asked and raised his chin. "We'd appreciate it if you cooperated you know."

"I think it's best if you go," Bartholemew said. "I've been as helpful as I can and answered all your questions, but you won't even tell me what this is all about. And that's not cooperation in my book."

"Alright," said Maguire. "But we might have to come back."

"That's fine."

"Alright then. Thank you for your time."

"You're welcome."

As they left the door was shut firmly behind them.

"What now?" asked Walden.

Maguire did not answer. He stood without moving, thinking. Then he began to walk towards the pavement to where their car was parked.

"Excuse me."

The detectives turned and saw an elderly man standing in the doorway of the flat in the same building.

"Yes?" asked Walden.

"Are you the police?" asked the man.

"Why do you ask?" Walden replied.

"You've been talking to Mr Bartholemew I think," said the man. "If you're the police this is the second time you've done that."

Maguire and Walden walked towards the man. "And you are?" said Maguire.

"My name's Flanagan. Barry Flanagan. I live here. I spoke to a policeman before and he went and spoke to Mr Bartholemew."

"What about?"

“I thought I heard screaming and called the police. But nothing happened. Nothing was found.”

Maguire looked the man up and down. “So why does it interest you that we might have been speaking to Mr Bartholemew?”

Flanagan stretched his head forward and looked towards the corner of the building. Then he said: “I saw him earlier today take something and put it in the bin.”

“So?” said Walden. He examined Barry Flanagan carefully and followed his gaze as Flanagan again peered towards the corner of the building. “What’s so interesting about him dumping rubbish in his bin?”

“Well,” said Flanagan, “it wasn’t his bin. He walked past his own bin and crossed the road and put something in the bin up there. I just wonder why he didn’t put it in his own bin. Especially as the police had already spoken to him before. I thought it was suspicious.”

Walden asked where the bin in question was and Flanagan had to step away from his doorway and out to the pavement. “Up there. That one on the island at the end of the road. Under the big tree.”

“That’s a long way to walk to dump rubbish.”

“That’s what I thought. Do you think it’s suspicious too?”

“Is it a special bin? For special rubbish?”

“No, just a normal rubbish bin.”

Walden and Maguire exchanged a look.

“Alright,” said Maguire. “Thank you for your help. Leave this with us. If we need anything more from you we’ll let you know.”

“You’re going to check the bin aren’t you?” Flanagan asked.

“We’ll have a look and see if there’s anything of interest there,” said Maguire. “Thank you again.”

As the detectives walked up the street Barry Flanagan watched them for a while and then quickly went back inside his flat and closed the door.

“I thought all busybodies were old women of the Miss Marple kind,” Walden remarked as he and Maguire approached the rubbish bin next to the tree in the grassy traffic island.

“Apparently not,” said Maguire. “Let’s see if there is anything in here and then get back to the office. I think we need to talk to the Super about what we do about Bartholemew and his gym shirt. We can’t just leave it as it is.”

“Yes,” said Walden and reached into the bin. He rummaged around and then stood upright. “Hold on there. This looks interesting.”

Carefully he reached inside again and removed a large plastic bag that was tied at the top but which had been torn open at the bottom. A tip of rag protruded which was stained red.

He unwound the binding at the top of the plastic bag and held it open so they could both see inside.

“There’s a bunch of rags in here,” Maguire said. “They look like they are pretty badly stained with something. Tomato sauce or something. Let’s have a closer look.”

Slowly Walden emptied the bag and placed the stained rags on the grass.

“I don’t think that’s sauce,” he said. “I think it could be blood.”

Maguire looked back over his shoulder towards the block of flats they had just left.

“If this is the rubbish dumped by Bartholemew I think we need to take a very close look at them,” he said. “Put them back in the bag and let’s get it back to the office. I think the forensics people should examine them.”

As Walden replaced the rags in the bags and bound the top again Maguire remarked: “This is interesting. If it turns out to have anything to do with the murders I’ll come and shake that old busybody’s hand. And pay more attention to the Miss Marples, and Mr Marples, of this world in future. This could just be the break we need.”

“One more thing,” said Walden once they were back seated in their car. “On the way back let’s drop into that shop where Bartholemew went earlier and see what he was after.”

They retraced their earlier journey in the car and pulled into a space much closer to where Bartholemew had parked.

“I think he went into that pharmacy,” Walden said. “Either that or the hardware store next door.”

“No,” said Maguire. “It wasn’t the store. I could see the entrance clearly in the rear view mirror. He didn’t go in there.”

“Ok,” said Walden. “Wait here and I’ll go in and ask a few questions.”

Five minutes later he came out of the pharmacy and got back in the car and slammed the door closed.

“Well?” said Maguire. “Anything?”

“He was in there alright,” said Walden. “Guess what he wanted.”

“Toothpaste,” said Maguire. “Shaving cream. I don’t know. What did he want?”

“Aspirin and mouthwash,” said Walden.

Oh.”

“And sanitary napkins.”

“What?”

“Sanitary napkins. Bartholemew bought sanitary napkins.”

“What the hell would he want with sanitary napkins?”

“I don’t know,” said Walden. “But added to everything else this Bartholemew is beginning to look pretty interesting.”

*

Writing an irregular column for a newspaper, despite what some might think, is not the easiest of things to do.

Writing various irregular columns for different newspapers, in different parts of the world is even harder.

So writing a regular column is not something to be envied. It is hard work, very hard work. Scratching together thousands of words is the easy bit. Making them read well is not easy. And once you have managed that, to make the copy interesting as well as well written is damned difficult.

I had been writing about the multiple murders for some time and I had been doing it on a regular basis. I had to each time edit my copy for my London editor to make it acceptable to my overseas editors. Not just topping and tailing it differently for each individual market but to a large degree rewriting much of it.

And I had to admit that concentrating on the deaths of murdered women did little for my sense of humour. So I decided to write something that would suit all markets and require no separate editing, and be more light-hearted and have nothing to do with death, murders or anything criminal.

Sitting at my terminal I looked out the window at the city outside. Everything was familiar to me but I knew that for visitors there was much to be attracted by. So I thought, why not? Why not do a simple piece on the place where I live? Hopefully it would be interesting to readers abroad as well as my metropolitan neighbours. Maybe it would be the first of numerous columns of a travel nature. It might even lead me in a direction that could result in new clients in a totally different genre. Which would lead to a higher income. Which would.... I hit the keyboard.

London.

One of the most fascinating cities on the planet – if not the most fascinating.

In the past there have been those, locals and visitors, who felt the city had become drab, tired, the shine having been lost.

I don't recall that time. For me London has always had a lustre that topped any other city in the world where I have been.

Paris is magnifiques. Madrid and Milan is magnifico. Melbourne great.

But London has always stood, and still stands, apart.

So what is it that puts it heads and shoulders above the rest?

It is steeped in history yet is constantly evolving as its society becomes more and more multicultural which means there is something for everyone.

If there is the slightest doubt look at the music that echoes in all quarters of the city, the nightlife that abounds, the massive variety of cuisine, the multitude of museums and art galleries that form part of a magnificent culture, sport and what stands out most plainly, the shopping.

Nowhere else in the world in my view offers the shopper and the general sightseer as much.

Oxford Street. Regent Street. Knightsbridge. Kensington. Portobello Road. Piccadilly. Tottenham Court Road. The list is almost endless.

Yet there are other places that are just as interesting – but for completely different reasons. Some are well known, others perhaps not.

Take Covent Garden for instance.

It too is famous for its shops. But it is best known for its street performers, bars, restaurants, theatres and the Royal Opera House that is just off the north piazza. It was built in the early eighteen hundreds. A fire destroyed that building just under half a century later but it was replaced within a year by the present Opera House. Now it is a world treasure.

Covent Garden is an Italian-style piazza surrounded by Theatreland, in the heart of London's West End, and the whole area is recognised as the capital's premier entertainment and leisure destination, a very different place when it served as England's largest fruit and vegetable market covering the entire square and many of the surrounding buildings.

But that is something that today's tourists who flock there from the four corners of the world probably have not the faintest knowledge. For them it is the street entertainment that is its attraction.

Writing of markets it would not be right to leave out Borough Market, London's most renowned food market and a source of exceptional British and international produce.

In recent years Borough Market has been a haven for anybody who cares about the quality and provenance of the food they eat.

But it is even more than that. It is the people as well as the place that make it so wonderful.

There are stallholders who hail from around the globe. However a large number of them are locally grown who are themselves producers.

So as the internet website dedicated to Borough Market proclaims "the market has become a vast repository of culinary knowledge and understanding. It's a place to explore, to ask questions, to discover new flavours and to savour a unique atmosphere."

They are just two of the attractions in the wonderful city of London that for some might be considered off the beaten track on the one hand and a must on the other.

This writer will in the weeks and months to come find other sights and smells that help to make this the greatest of cities.

At this point in my column I felt I was duty bound not to ignore the series of columns I had been putting in front of my readers recently.

So I hammered out the following paragraphs.

In recent weeks and months London has been the home of death.

A series of grizzly murders have been committed and so far the police have been unable to apprehend the person responsible.

But that should not put off the visitor, or even the local, from soaking up all that is good about this great city.

London is full of life.

Or as someone once said, it is life itself.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

It was not tomato sauce, nor any other sauce that stained the rags found in the rubbish bin by Maguire and Walden. It was menstrual blood and as it turned out it was crucial evidence.

The identification of the menstrual blood was the result of speedy forensic examination of the bloodstains.

In the forensic report which once again landed on Superintendent Ford's desk far more quickly than anyone anticipated, it was spelt out in great detail just how important the find was.

The report explained that menstrual fluid tends to be brightest red during the heaviest flow, but as it slows down it takes longer to exit the vagina and consequently the blood component loses its oxygenated red hue and becomes darker red, then brown and at times practically black. In highly technical language matrix metalloproteinase-11 is a kind of protease which degrades the extracellular matrix.

The report added that arterial and venous blood, proteolytic enzymes, remnants of endometrial glands, stromal cells, leukocytes and red blood cells are present in menstrual fluid.

The detection of epithelial cells in dried bloodstains by what the experts explained as "reverse transcriptase-polymerase chain reaction" is based on cell- and tissue-specific gene expression. It further pointed out that experts use what are called "mRNA markers" suitable for the identification of menstrual blood and that these are then evaluated.

The result is that the identification of body fluids can be of crucial importance in forensic casework and the detection of cell- and tissue-specific mRNAs is a suitable technique to identify menstrual blood and semen.

"You don't have to understand all this technical information," Superintendent Ford told the group of detectives seated before him. "It's sufficient to know that we now know the identity of the female who this blood came from."

Her name, he said, was Florence Hurd. She was aged seventeen, worked as a junior secretary in a camera shop in Tottenham Court Road, and lived at home with her parents in Camden.

"As we speak officers are now checking her work place as well as where she lives," he said. "I hope that she is in fact at either location. If not...." he left the sentence unfinished.

Walden spoke up: "It's significant that these stained rags were found dumped in a rubbish bin on the other side of the river. A long way away from where this girl lived and worked."

"Right," said Ford. "That's why we are treating this as important." He leafed through a few pages he had on the desk in front of him and then went on. "This person Bartholemew is said to live alone. He is said to be a bit of a loner. Or at least his neighbour considers him in that way. Though we should not forget that this Flanagan too is a little unusual."

"Mister Marple," said Walden. The others in the room laughed lightly.

"That maybe so," said Ford, "but the fact remains that if this Bartholemew does live alone, that there is no female living with him, and if he did in fact drop these blood stained items in a rubbish bin up the road from where he lives, then we need to take a closer look at him."

"It will take time to get a search warrant," commented Maguire. "But I think we need to act fast on this. Anything we can do to expedite one?"

"Already in hand," answered Ford. "I agree. We need to act on this one. I hope to get the go ahead within the hour."

There was a low murmur around the room as the detectives exchanged personal thoughts. The general feeling was that at last there appeared there might be some light at the end of the tunnel.

It had been a long dark tunnel and everyone was glad that even if the outcome of this latest discovery did not result in the arrest of the murderer it at least gave hope and brought to light a potentially positive change. So far there had been not a single piece of evidence that pointed to the culprit. And that meant they all feared more deaths were inevitable.

Obtaining a search warrant looks easy on television. In fact there is much more to it than the CSI folks would have us believe.

First, police can only enter a premises without a warrant if a serious or dangerous incident has taken place such as dealing with a breach of the peace or to prevent one, enforcing an arrest warrant, to recapture a person who has escaped from police custody or to arrest someone in connection with certain offences, or to save a life or prevent serious damage to property. In the instance of preventing injury to life the police have to have reasonable grounds for believing that the person in danger is actually on the premises.

The information relating to Bartholemew had been insufficient to justify a warrant being issued as things stood. But the forensic report on the menstrual blood and the information that Bartholemew apparently had been seen to dump the stained rags in a rubbish bin some distance from where he lived, could be sufficient to enable the granting of a search warrant.

There were additional conditions as well. The law states that police should enter property at a "reasonable hour unless this would frustrate their search". And if the occupant of the premises is present the police must ask for permission to search the property, again "unless it would frustrate the search to do this".

Finally, when police do carry out a search they must identify themselves clearly and explain why they want to search the premises as well as explain the rights of the occupant.

Forced entry can only be gained if the occupant refuses entry or if he is absent or the premises is in fact unoccupied, or if the police have reasonable grounds for thinking that if they don't make a forced entry it would hinder the search or put someone else in danger. Once they are inside the police are empowered to seize goods if they are evidence in relation to an offence or there is a risk of their being lost, stolen or destroyed.

"I believe we have sufficient grounds," Ford said. He glanced at his wristwatch. "Stay close. I'll chase it up again." He gathered his papers together and left the room. The detectives stretched, yawned and generally made small talk. Very few of them discussed the case.

*

"Some things move at snail pace," said Maguire. "Thank god not all."

"This was handled pretty smartly," said Walden. "I reckon Ford called in a few favours."

"Whatever he did, it worked."

Maguire and Walden had been the two detectives in the team who had been involved in every one of the murders. There was one other officer who had been involved as well but the others had all been added over time. So they were the two delegated to carry out the search of the flat in Brockley.

"Do you think he'll be there?" asked Walden. "It's only half four."

Maguire sniffed. "There's a chance he won't be. That other guy reckons he's only home in the evenings mostly."

"We haven't got enough for a forced entry so we better hope he's there."

“Right. I’m getting fed up with not being able to put an end to this. It’s gone on far too long and too many people have suffered. This is the best lead we’ve got and I just hope it leads to the right place.”

They drove on in silence, each with their own thoughts, each correctly suspecting that the other was going over all the events and suspicions since the first body had been found. They both clearly remembered Kay Roberts. She was the twenty-eight-year-old school teacher from Earlsfield. On her way home from a party in Finchley on the day after Christmas Day she met her fate. Her body was found in Mill Hill miles away from the friend’s house and nowhere near where she lived. The other bodies of the women were also strewn around the city, the furthest away being in Gerrard’s Cross.

As they approached their destination Walden pointed and said: “There. That’s him. He’s just leaving the place.”

Ahead of them they saw Bartholemew walk out through the front gate of the property and head down the pavement.

Maguire steered up along side him and leaned out the window. “Mr Bartholemew?” he called.

Bartholemew stopped and without approaching the open window of the car replied: “Yes. Can I help you?” Then he stood up straight. “You’re the police officer who was here before.”

Maguire nodded and said only that they wanted to speak with him again.

Bartholemew frowned. “I’m just on my way out to meet a friend. Is it important?”

“Yes it is,” said Maguire, still in the car with the motor idling. “It won’t take long. You’ll still be able to see your friend.”

Bartholemew reluctantly nodded and turning on his heel began walking back to the building. Maguire swung the car against the kerb, he and Walden quickly alighted and they jogged and caught up with Bartholemew just as he was approaching the door to his flat.

Bartholemew turned the key in the lock and pushed the door open inwards. “Will this take long?” he asked impatiently. “As I said, I have an appointment to go to.”

“And as I said, we need to speak with you,” replied Maguire. “It should not take long. Can we go inside please.”

Once inside he handed Bartholemew the search warrant.

“I don’t understand,” said Bartholemew and handed the paper back to Maguire after he had scanned it. “Why on earth do you want to search my flat? What am I supposed to have done?”

“It won’t take long sir,” Walden said. “We have some questions to ask you and we need to have a look around your flat. That’s all.”

Bartholemew looked like he was about to object but instead sat down heavily on the sofa in the lounge and said: “Alright then. Let’s get it over with then please. I have to go out.”

Maguire and Walden separated, Maguire moving around the flat opening drawers and cupboards and examining their contents.

Walden spoke with Bartholemew asking general questions about his background, his work and broadly his activities when he was not working. Bartholemew answered each question firmly while at the same time noting where Maguire was and what he was doing.

When they were all back in the lounge Bartholemew remained seated while Walden and Maguire stood facing him. As he came back into the room from the short corridor Maguire caught Walden’s eye and shook his head.

“You live alone here,” said Maguire.

“I already told this officer that,” Bartholemew replied.

“Do you have friends staying with you from time to time?”

“No.”

“Never?”

“No.”

“Why not? Most single men have friends staying over sometimes, even if it’s not that often.”

“I prefer not to.”

“Why not?”

“I just don’t. Why is that important anyway? If this is my lifestyle what’s it got to do with the police?”

“It’s just a little odd, that’s all,” said Walden. “A single man never having friends around.”

“I didn’t say friends never came to visit,” Bartholemew countered. “I said they don’t stay over. Look, what is this all about please? What am I suspected of?”

“Ever have a girlfriend spend the night?” Maguire enquired. He watched Bartholemew closely as he answered.

“No. Not overnight.”

“That sports shirt,” said Maguire switching the subject. “The one you showed us the last time we were here. I didn’t see it in your room or the bathroom.”

“I don’t have it any more,” Bartholemew replied.

“Why not?”

“It got damaged at the gym and I threw it away.”

“When? Where?”

“A few days ago. I threw it in a dumpster near the gym. Why? Why are you still interested in my shirt?”

Walden and Maguire kept silent for a while and then Maguire said: “Where do you put your rubbish?”

“My rubbish?”

“Yes. Where do you dump your rubbish? You do have a bin outside don’t you? A wheelie bin.”

“Yes of course,” said Bartholemew.

“So you put all your rubbish in that do you?”

“Yes.”

“Nowhere else?”

“What do you mean?”

Walden asked: “Do you ever use other bins in the street? Maybe when yours is full.”

Bartholemew shook his head. “I live alone like I told you. I eat out a reasonable amount. The wheelie bins are large. I never fill one. So why on earth would I put rubbish in someone else’s bin?”

Bartholemew was clearly becoming more impatient.

Again the detectives remained silent for a time. Then Maguire said bluntly: “You were seen dumping something in the bin at the end of the street on the island where that large tree is. Why?”

“That’s rubbish,” Bartholemew said. “I mean it’s not true. I have never done that. Who said I did and what rubbish am I supposed to have put in it?”

Maguire and Walden kept their eyes on Bartholemew without answering.

Finally Bartholemew said: “This is ridiculous. If I’m supposed to have done something wrong tell me what it is. Otherwise I think I’ve answered all your questions. And I have to go out.”

Still the detectives said nothing.

“A sheet and rags,” Maguire said suddenly. “With blood on them. Female blood. You were seen dumping a black plastic bag of something in that bin and a search found blood stained materials. The blood is menstrual. Tell us what happened.”

Bartholemew just stared at Maguire. His face remained impassive. The only change was when he squinted his eyes very slightly before saying: “I don’t have a girlfriend at the moment. I have no idea what you’re talking about. But even if I did have a woman here and if...if it was that time of the month for her, the idea that I would have

blood stained sheets and other rags and that I would have to go up to the end of the street to hide them secretly is absurd.” He paused and went on: “What you’re saying is offensive and I take exception to it. I think you should leave. Now.”

Bartholemew stood and walked straight to the door and opened it. “Thank you,” he said and stood by the entrance.

As they were passing Walden stopped and looked him straight in the eye. “I hope you’re not keeping something from us. If you are it’s a serious matter. Are you absolutely certain that you did not deposit blood stained materials in that bin?”

“Thank you,” repeated Bartholemew and began closing the door.

Walden joined Maguire on the step outside and watched Bartholemew as he slowly closed the door. He heard the key turn in the lock inside.

“Looks like he’s not going out to meet his friend right away,” he said.

“I saw nothing suspicious,” Maguire said. “The rooms were completely normal and I could see nothing that suggests he’s got anything there that could be construed as illegal or dangerous. The place is clean. And that damn sports shirt made of that special material is gone. Or if it’s not gone it will be now.”

“Shit,” Walden said.

“Mmmm,” murmured Maguire. “He’s too cool. No sweating. No nerves. A mite short tempered when we pressed him, but otherwise in control.”

“Me too. That’s my thinking.”

They reached the car and Maguire tossed the keys to Walden. “You drive Martin. I just want to make a quick call to Joan. We’re going to be held back at the office a while tonight I reckon.”

When he ended the call with a “see you whenever” he sat quietly for a minute or two. Then he said without turning his head: “We should keep an eye on him. There’s more there. Something just something.”

It was half an hour later when they were back on the north side of the river that Maguire slapped himself in the forehead.

“Fuck,” he exclaimed. It was so sudden that Walden who was driving and was himself deep in thought instinctively took his foot off the accelerator and moved it across to the brake pedal.

“What?” he said. “What’s wrong?”

“He’s lying,” said Maguire. “That bastard Bartholemew is lying through his teeth.”

“Why? About what?”

“He says he has no girlfriend. That no woman has been to his flat. He knows nothing about the menstrual blood found on the sheet and the rags that that old guy said he saw him take to that rubbish bin.”

“Right.”

“But we know he went to a pharmacy and bought tampons. He’s been lying to us. He’s fucking covering up.”

*

There are some programmes on the television that I do my level best not to miss. I love the CSI and comedy shows and the films on some of the Freeview channels. And nature and science programmes I find fascinating, not that I can truly say I completely understand all or even most of the science ones.

Unfortunately there is also a lot of dross. Reality shows were interesting when they began a decade or so ago, but for the past six or seven years they have become in my view an indictment of the viewing public’s intelligence. Such absolute junk pandering to the lowest common denominator.

Which was why I was at a loose end. I had no good book on the go – I had finished Jo Nesbo’s latest mystery set in Oslo a few days before and had not been bothered to search Amazon for a replacement. Which was why I had resorted to the television for

the past hour and a half. Or it may have been four hours because it seemed that long. And that's why I picked up the BlackBerry and dialled Detective Maguire. He answered it on the fifth ring, just as I expected it to go to voicemail.

"Detective Maguire."

"It's Zack. Zack Tighe."

"Uh heh."

"I just thought I'd give you a call to see if there had been any developments."

"Right."

Lulls in telephone conversations like the one now were lethal. It usually meant the person I speaking to either was distracted on the other end and was not listening to what I was saying or that I could expect the conversation to end very quickly.

"I got an update from Lawrence. The MP," I said to keep things moving along. "His EDM is really catching attention."

"OK."

I was getting little in return.

"He has more than three hundred signatures and has already had a couple of reporters giving him a call. So far nothing's appeared in the papers but Lawrence is confident it will very soon."

"I hope it's more helpful than your latest column," said Maguire.

"How do you mean?" I replied.

"You seem to have gone off the boil. Have you lost interest?"

"Lost interest? Of course not. Why would I call you tonight if I had?"

"Your column was pretty interesting – if you were a tourist coming to London for the first time."

"So?"

"So there was nothing in it that was helpful to us."

"I have nothing to write," I said. "You won't give me anything and the normal channels of police information clammed up long ago. What do you expect me to write? Bullshit?"

"You're supposed to be an investigative journalist," Maguire said. "Instead you write stuff about Covent Garden and the like. How deep is that?"

"Well, we're supposed to be sharing information too," I retorted firmly. "So far I seem to have been doing all the sharing – writing the column, getting in touch with Lawrence, making sure he says the right things to other politicians – while you do all the complaining. It's a two way street you know. Or it's supposed to be."

Maguire said nothing and I continued. "I can't believe you have made no headway whatsoever. That you have nothing you could give me. I think you probably feel you've used me enough and will only get in touch with something further when you think it might be helpful to do so. Not because we're supposed to have an agreement."

"You're wrong about the headway," Maguire said. There was a note of exasperation in his tone.

"What's that supposed to mean?" I answered.

Once more he said nothing.

"Come on," I pressed. "If you have something maybe I can help you develop it. Have you got a lead? Is it a really solid lead?"

The line remained silent.

"Look," I said. I did not want to plead but I felt that if I wasn't careful I would sound exactly like I was pleading, and that was not the tone an investigative journalist should adopt when trying to pry some vital information out of an informant, especially when that informant was a police detective. "Look, why don't we play it this way. Everything is completely off the record. I won't write a word. You tell me what you have so that when the time does come for me to write something it will be on the back of authoritative information and not ill informed hearsay. Totally off the record. Until you give the go ahead. My word."

I could hear Maguire breathing down the line. "Jesus Tighe," he said finally. "You really piss me off sometimes. Why can't you just let things go?"

"You know why," I said. "I'm an investigative journalist. I'm supposed to piss people off sometimes." I paused. "So what have you got?"

"If you print a word of this, or I find you've spoken of it to anybody I will come and cut your balls off and feed them to you."

"I've heard that before. And believe me I have no intention of risking my balls."

When I got no response I pressed: "So?"

When he did speak he spoke quickly. "We have identified a person. We think, or I think, he is hiding something and may be involved. I am not sure how, but I think he is either directly involved or knows something. It's a gut feeling. But more than that. Not much more, but more."

"Why?" I pressed further. "What makes you think he's involved?"

"He's the right age and fits the profile. Well, not the exact profile but there's something about him. And then he's covering up about the loss of some evidence, or possible evidence, that could be vital to the case."

I held my piece and waited.

"What I am going to tell you now Tighe is one thousand per cent off the record."

"Of course. I promised and I keep my promises."

"This person was seen to dump some rubbish in a bin away from his flat and when we searched that bin we found blood stained materials. The blood was from a female. A young girl. He denies having anything to do with any women let alone this young kid and swears it was not him who was seen dumping rubbish in the bin on the traffic island at the end of Rokeby Road, a good hundred yards from where he lives."

"That does sound suspicious," I suggested. "So this person is just a teenager as well?"

"He's almost twice her age."

"Sounds a creep," I said. "If he is the person you're looking for what's your next step?"

"This Bartholemew does not look like a creep," said Maguire "He looks completely normal. In fact in the male stakes he'd probably be regarded as good looking. Which is probably how he gets hold of these women. If he's our man."

Neither of us spoke for a good minute. I broke the silence first: "First, thank you for that. I promise I won't do or say anything about this to anybody. I appreciate your trust and won't break it. And if I hear anything, from anywhere, I will pass it on to you immediately. Presumably nothing dramatic is going to happen soon, so maybe we can talk again in say two or three days. Would it be OK if I called you?"

"I'm holding you to your word," Maguire said. "I meant what I said earlier. If you let me down on this I'll make sure your life is a misery."

"I hear you," I replied. "And I believe you mean it. Trust me. I'll get back in touch in a few days then."

After we ended the conversation I looked down at the notes I had scrawled on the piece of paper on the coffee table.

Solid lead.

Evidence being held.

Bloody sheet etc.

Rokeby Road.

Bartholemew.

I had everything that any journalist would need to put together an excellent by-lined story if not for the front page certainly as an inside page lead. I now knew the police had a suspect. That they believed he was withholding evidence. That the evidence they had unearthed was incriminating, if not to the suspect at least in its very nature. And I even knew the suspect's name and where he lived.

My next question was: What should I do with this information?

*

He must go over all the things that had happened that had led the police to call on him.

Not once but twice.

No three times.

He had to carefully and methodically retrace his steps and his activities over the past weeks.

Maybe even months.

Something, or things, had led the police to him.

And he must know what they were.

Any mistake – heaven forbid there had been a mistake – would have to be explained and corrected.

He had no doubt now that the police were interested in him.

Very interested.

Exactly what they knew he was uncertain.

Most recently they had found the soiled linen he had disposed of.

What a foolish thing to do.

Why had he not taken it in his car and got rid of it miles away?

Instead, that busybody of an old neighbour had spied on him and then told the police what he had done.

Naturally he could keep denying it.

They could not prove it was his rubbish.

Even if they examined the items for fingerprints and discovered he had lied they could do nothing.

After all, what crime had he committed?

And even if they identified the blood as belonging to the girl what could they do?

They didn't know what had happened to her or where she was.

What else had they discovered?

Nothing.

They had failed even to find his gym shirt, the one they were so interested in for some reason.

Had he left traces of it somewhere?

On one of his failures?

So what?

It could not be linked directly to him.

He had to smile at that.

In his haste to mop up the blood from the girl he had unintentionally grabbed the shirt that was hung outside the cellar door.

But he liked the shirt.

Had paid handsomely for it.

Right now it was on the floor in the rear of his car where he had tossed it on the way to dumping the other bloody things.

He had intended washing the blood out of it.

If the police had searched his car that would have been a different matter.

But they didn't.

It was still where he left it.

Of course now he would have to get rid of it.

Which would mean the police had nothing to link him to any of the failures.

And all the while he had this other problem he had to deal with.

The girl.

He could not get her out of his mind entirely.

She kept reappearing uninvited into his memory.

He pictured her young face and young body.

*Not in a sexual way.
It was just that she was so youthful.
Her hurtful words would not go away either.
He recalled them clearly.
And too often.
She had called him a pervert.
And a sick bastard.
Of course he was neither of those things.
There was not a thing about his actions that were perverted.
His experiments were not depraved.
In time they would be seen to be the result of a very special mind.
Nor was he sick.
Psychologically or emotionally.
He prided himself on his control.
But she kept coming back to him.
Well, he could control that.
He must control it.
His experiments depended on his maintaining his control.
Not having any emotion.
Just relying on the feathers and carrying out their wishes to the letter.
Which he had to do now.
It was time.*

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

“Please. Just let me go. I won’t tell anybody. I promise.”

As she said these words she knew instantly that he would ignore her. She also knew that if she was in his place she would know just how hollow they sounded.

In countless films those very same sentences had been spoken and in virtually every one of them the person who spoke them, the person whose life was being held in jeopardy, finished up being killed or if not killed, ignored.

She was no different.

He simply took no notice of her.

He had come into the room once again carrying the tray with the bowl and various other things she could not see clearly. Under his arm were bundles of towels. She knew straight away that no matter what she said, irrespective of how much she pleaded, he would carry out his intentions. And that meant he intended to hurt her once more.

The last time the pain had been severe. But it was not as hurtful as the shame and embarrassment she felt with the commencement of her period. That was something she could not, would never, forget. Such a private thing was meant to be private. Certainly not shared in the least intimate way possible. With a stranger. A man. A man who held her captive. A man who had her totally under his control. Completely naked. Powerless. It was unforgivable.

“Why are you doing this?” she whispered. “Why won’t you let me go? Please. If it’s not sex you want what is it? Why are you hurting me?”

The man had placed the tray on the side table just as he had done before. And repeating his previous movements he carefully laid out the implements. Then the towels he unfolded and shook out and spread them out lengthwise behind her head at the end of the bed against the wall.

“What are you going to do?” she said and lifted her head off the pillow as far as she could so she could see the top of the side table. “What’s that? Is it a shaving knife? An old style razor? Are you going to shave me?” Still with her head raised she looked down at her naked body to where she could see her pubic hair. It was in what was known as the almost natural style with just her inner thighs up to the bikini line waxed.

He continued not looking at her and picked up a feather. Loosely wrapped around the stem of the feather, the calamus, the hollow shaft and which has been used to make quill pens, was a piece of paper. He knew the word pen itself is derived from the Latin penna for feather and in French, plume can mean either feather or pen. None of this held any meaning for her as she tried to see what was written on the paper. The last time he had done this had resulted in his inflicting pain on her. He had sliced off one of her toes. That was also when she had started to menstruate and her hot embarrassment had begun. In her anger, her hot fury, she had lashed out at him verbally when he came back to the room hours later carrying another tray. This time it was a dish of soup that he made her eat, spoonful after spoonful, no matter how many times she spat out the liquid and the occasional tiny bit of gristle or bone. Finally he gave up, wiped away the spittle, and left her alone.

Now once again she feared what was to come.

“What is that?” she repeated, this time meaning the paper that he was reading. She had the impression he already knew what was written on it because he simply glanced at it for a moment, just as he had the previous time, and then carefully folded it into a tiny square and placed it in the same corner of the tray as he had before.

Only then did he look at her and she saw that his eyes were expressionless, dead.

*

Mhhhhhggggggggg.
The feathers had been kind.
His chances of success remained unchanged.
This time he knew there would less blood.
He also knew that the level of danger was low.
Everything was under control.
He looked but didn't touch the girl.
The lobe was tiny which was to be expected.
Her hair was short.
Short enough not to get in the way.
Now the cut throat razor.
It felt warm and comfortable, the slightly curved wooden handle fitting neatly in his palm, his thumb along the length to where the blade joined.
Briefly he examined it.
It was blemish free.
It shone in the light from the bulb in the ceiling.
Mhhhhhggg.
Without looking at her face he reached his left hand and took the lobe of the girl's right ear between his thumb and forefinger.
She shook her head but then suddenly stopped.
She was looking directly at him with wide eyes.
She knows what is going to happen.
She is sensible enough not to struggle.
To fight it risked unnecessary hurt.
He was amazed.
She was actually helping him.
He let go of the lobe and took her ear between his thumb and forefinger again, high up, so that he held the entire ear firmly.
Pulling it slight forward and upward, away from her hairline, he reached forward with his right hand, placed the blade at the top of the ear, close to the skull and in a slow single motion sliced the ear free.
He placed the severed flesh in the bowl, dropped the razor in also, reached above her head taking a single towel and held it bunched firmly against the bleeding.
She was looking at him.
Her mouth clamped shut.
Her eyes squinting.
She was obviously in pain.
But she was not making a sound.
He looked away.
This was a good one.
It had gone well.
If the feathers continued to favour him he would be able to continue his experiments for a long time.
Mhhhhhggg.
He was happy.

*

The serial killings were all over the news.
 Parliament was taking a closer and more vocal interest in the state of the police investigations, thanks largely to the growing following for the Early Day Motion started by Tony Lawrence MP.
 This meant that the media had decided to follow things more closely as well. So far the newspapers, radio and television had given reasonable exposure time to the

murders but now their interest had been stepped up considerably. Now they all wanted answers.

Crimestoppers is a programme separate from the emergency telephone number system that allows members of the public to provide anonymous information about criminal activity. It allows the person to provide crime solving assistance to the police without being directly involved in the investigation process. Crimestoppers programmes are operated in many communities worldwide but it began in Albuquerque, New Mexico in the mid-Seventies which followed the fatal shooting of a female university student working at a local filling station. After two weeks the police had no information when out of desperation a detective approached the local television station requesting a reconstruction of the crime. The re-enactment offered a reward for information leading to the arrest of the killers and within seventy-two hours a person called in identifying a car seen leaving the scene at high speed. It was this quick response that led to the detective helping to design a system where the public could anonymously provide details of criminal events. It also took advantage of every possible media opportunity.

So far Crimestoppers had referred to the serial murders on a number of occasions. But they were mentioned only as some of the details of the deaths could not be revealed and the police were not in a position to inform the public how they might actually be able to help with their investigations. There was simply too little known.

The hosts of the programme had Superintendent Ford in the studio and asked him questions about the murdered women, where they were found, in a little detail the nature of the killings, the dates when the bodies were found, and so on.

For his part Superintendent Ford answered the questions as best he could. Which meant the viewer was no better informed than before, as everything he said had already been published in newspapers and aired on radio and television.

Of course he failed to mention that the police did have one suspect in mind. That would be far too premature. The police had much more digging to do before they would be able to make their next move.

*

As I watched the programme I knew that Superintendent Ford was merely going through the motions. His main purpose was to show that the police were doing all they could to solve the murders and bring the person or persons responsible to justice. At the same time it was an opportunity for him to again issue advice and warnings to female viewers to exercise greater care when on the streets, especially late at night.

But I knew more than the other viewers. I knew the suspect's name and I also knew where he lived.

Alec Bartholemew.

Rokeby Road.

A few clicks on Bing's multimap search engine on the PC and it was a straightforward way of locating the street. I discovered that it was off the main arterial thoroughfare Lewisham Way midway between New Cross and St John's. I was not familiar with it having not been a regular visitor to that part of south London but I could see immediately that it would be easy to locate.

Out of interest I clicked on bird's eye view and noted that it appeared to be a street that was lined on the one side by terrace houses while on the other there was a school built along the H frame model with tennis courts at one end and parking for vehicles at the other. Where Rokeby Road began at the junction of Brockley Gardens and Upper Brockley Road there was open space with a few trees. At the other end of the road on the same side as the school were semi-detached houses. That meant that if Bartholemew lived in a flat which I assumed it was most likely in one of the terrace houses on the north side.

Next I punched in Yell.com in the Google search window. There were two search windows, one for the profession of the address or telephone number I sought and the other to identify the location. I had no idea of Bartholemew's work so I simply entered his surname. The location was easier. Hitting the return key I saw that there were six Bartholemews listed. The first was a residential address in the far north west of London, another was somewhere I did not recognise, a third I also could not recognise, and a fourth was out of the city near Gatwick airport. Of the remaining three two were businesses, one a provider of care homes and the other offering accounting services. The last remaining Bartholemew pointed to an A. Bartholemew of Rokeby Road. The telephone number was in light blue below the address. So now I knew who the police suspected as the serial killer and exactly where he lived. I even knew his telephone number. I sat back and pondered the information I had.

Only recently I had been introduced to a young journalist graduate from the City University of London who was full of excitement and anticipation and hope and everything else that accompanies new graduates no matter what course they have completed. It is natural I suppose for young people embarking on what is to become their life's work. Of course not all continue along the original path and some, if not many, change their minds and head in a completely different direction. But this young Indian woman was determined she told me not to be swayed from what she saw as her calling. She had even been a vocal worker in the University's own Bureau of Investigative Journalism which as a not-for-profit organisation was designed to bolster journalism by producing high-quality investigations for press and broadcast media.

The Bureau was a fledgling endeavour just year or two old, I learned, and worked in collaboration with other news groups such as the BBC, Channel 4, the Financial Times and the Daily Telegraph and Le Monde among others, to get its investigations published and distributed.

It was the conversation I had with the young Indian who said she was embarking on a journey that would define her future for many years to come that I recalled now. I hate the too often used term journey. Far too many people, young and old, use it in my view and it has become personally irritating. But it was her enthusiasm for uncovering the truth and exposing wrongs that made me think of her now.

Here I was, a journalist of not inconsiderable experience, who had for some time had the inside track on the police investigations into the serial murders because of my association with Detective David Maguire, who had used that association to my own benefit as a columnist, and who now had the massive advantage over every other journalist of knowing precisely who the police suspected of the crimes. And I was doing nothing with that information.

"It is incumbent on us as professional inquisitive reporters that we probe matters of public interest," had stated the girl whose name I seemed to remember was Shubra or perhaps Subraj. "It is up to us to discover the truth and to fill the gaps left by other news media. Even if it means we get hurt along the way."

She had then rattled off famous cases in support of her argument: The writer for the New York Tribune who almost a century and a half before had himself committed to a mental asylum and as a result brought about a change to the lunacy laws; more recently around the turn of the twentieth century and work done on poverty in the East End of London; and of course the exposure of drug dealers by the late Veronica Guerin for the Sunday Independent in the mid Nineteen Nineties. There were more than enough examples of the huge risks some investigative journalists took and I was being lectured on them by someone who had yet to even become a serious writer.

"What the hell," I thought to myself. I could either sit on my hands and do nothing and perhaps have to write up more stories about more deaths, or I could try to do something that might be helpful in apprehending the killer.

The walk from my flat to Green Park underground station took no more than twenty minutes. I could have elected to get on the tube at Victoria Station but if I got the Jubilee Line from Green Park instead it meant I did not have to change until I got to London Bridge four stops away. And anyway the stroll past Buckingham Palace and up through Green Park itself was always enjoyable. At London Bridge I waited for a few minutes to catch the Southern train that passed through Brockley and New Cross. It was at New Cross that I alighted and spent another twenty five minutes walking to Rokeby Road.

The properties were substantial semi-detached two or three stories. Invariably the two front doors were adjoining so that the staircases inside also abutted, resulting in the desired separation of the bedrooms. It was only second smaller bedrooms that were next to each other on the first floor while the larger master bedrooms were at the corners. On the ground floors, as with the main rooms above, the reception areas looked out onto the street through large bay windows. In the buildings with loft extensions there were small skylights at the front while at the rear there were either bigger dormer windows or angled Velux windows. Overall the buildings along both sides of the road were well kept.

Rokeby Road was attractive also because of the amount of greenery. There were large trees at irregular intervals and neatly trimmed shrubs also lined the pavements. In some cases the hedges and shrubs at the front were slightly overgrown casting a lot of dark shadow across the entrances.

I could see that this was the case with the building where the suspect called Bartholemew resided. I could make out the entrance door to the front of the building as well as the obviously large rooms on the first floor and the converted loft. But the front reception room to the left was completely blocked by a huge untidy shrub that stood about ten feet high and easily the same across. The occupants were not keen gardeners. I crossed the road and pushed aside the rusting iron gate. From the concrete path I noticed the grass around to the right side of the building was patchy and presumably led to a second or side entrance to the building.

I was now decidedly undecided what to do. Here I was right outside the entrance of the building where the police's prime suspect responsible for the series of brutal murders lived and I really had no idea what to do. I could hardly knock on the door and when Bartholemew answered begin asking him how he felt to be thought of as one of the country's most horrific serial killers. Yet here I was.

Instead of doing what I now considered to be really quite foolish I stepped off the path and walked around to the side of the building. There was indeed a second door with the number of the building above it with the letter b beside it. Immediately I recognised that while I originally believed the building was a sole occupancy I knew now that there was a second flat, and from what I had observed from across the street this ground floor flat was most likely a smaller portion of the whole. My guess was it was a single ground level one bedroom premises.

There was a small square window beside the door at head height but I could not see through it as the glass was opaque which while it did not completely hide the interior it blurred it sufficiently for anyone trying to have a look inside. For a brief moment I wondered what would happen if I tried to get into the premises. I recalled the case of a Hong Kong policeman who had apparently committed suicide because he was involved in serious corruption reports. He was not thought to be corrupt but the story had it that he had informed on colleagues, and then committed suicide. That version of events was ridiculed for more than one solid reason. First, it was claimed that he shot himself a number of times, each time in the body and not once in the head. A second claim was that the flat in which he lived had been locked from inside and therefore as nobody could have got in suicide was the only explanation. But a television reporter went to the flat, pried open a small window, climbed into the flat and filmed his report from the very room where the policeman was said to have shot

himself. The window I remembered was about the same size as the one I now stood in front of at the entrance to what I assumed could well be the home of the serial killer that was terrifying London with increasing intensity.

“Who are you?”

With my mind many thousands of miles away I had not seen or heard anyone nearby.

“What are you doing?”

I quickly took a single step back and turned towards the street to my left. Standing just near the corner of the building was a man dressed in slacks, long sleeved shirt rolled up to his elbows and carrying a sports bag.

“I said what do you want?” the man demanded.

He was probably in his late twenties, maybe early thirties, and the way he carried himself, not to mention the sports bag with the leaping Puma on the side, suggested he was pretty fit.

“Sorry,” I said. “I’m just...” I took another step to the side where I was standing a good six to eight feet from the door. Then: “And you are?”

I had no idea why I was asking him who he was when he had just demanded to know who I was. His question was naturally more appropriate given the strong possibility that he lived here and the fact that I was the unknown intruder as it were. But I had no idea what else to say.

He carefully placed the bag on the ground and advanced slowly towards me. “This is my home. Who are you and what do you want? Why were you trying to see into my flat?”

He kept walking slowly towards me.

“Is your name Bartholemew?” As soon as I said it I knew it was an opening for him that I should not have offered.

He stopped only five or six feet away from me, his arms straight by his wide. “You know my name? Why? You’d better tell me what you want.”

Now I was really in a bind. There was no way I could tell him exactly why I was there. I also now had no idea what I could hope to gain by even remaining there. So I simply muttered: “Sorry, it’s been a mistake.” And I began to walk past him.

But instead of letting me pass, he grabbed me by the right arm.

“You know my name. You were trying to look into my flat. You’re not just going to walk away. Who the hell are you?”

“It doesn’t matter. I’m going.”

I tried to move away but he kept hold of my upper arm.

I pulled to the side. As I did so he pushed me and I stumbled back.

My exercise routine had all but vanished in recent months, years if I was to be honest, so the chances of my rebounding confidently and accepting any challenge were limited to say the least.

However, I had no time to consider as he came at me and began pushing me in the chest. “What the hell do you want?” he demanded again, his voice raised. “Who sent you to spy on me?”

“Look,” I said and tried to fend off his shoves. “I got the wrong address. I’m sorry if I’ve confused you or seem to be messing you about, but I’ll just go.”

“No you won’t,” he said and again grabbed my arm. “Not until you tell me what you’re doing here.”

I struggled and managed to pull free. But not for long. He lunged forward and heavily pushed with both hands in the middle of my chest. I staggered back and fell against a wooden fence covered in ivy. Before I could regain my balance he shoved me hard again and I bounced off the fence again and staggered sideways. This time I managed to recover and as he came at me again I sidestepped so he only hit me with a glancing blow on the shoulder.

I could now see that his face was absolutely determined and I had no doubt that the time for questions and answers was over. We were now in a confrontation situation that could very possibly develop into something I really did not want to think about. During my time living in Hong Kong I had spent a number of years learning karate and had actually done quite well. But that was a long time ago and it did not mean that I would be able to adequately protect myself against someone who looked and acted like he was fitter than me and who looked like he meant business. That business came at me with some force.

He was on top of me instantly, wrapping his arms around my upper body so I could do nothing meaningful to break the grip or get one of my own.. He lifted me off the ground and then thrust me back down, still with me gripped in the bear hug. I tried to squirm out of his grasp but he squeezed tighter and again lifted me off the ground. With my feet a good few inches in the air he carried me towards the fence again and rammed me into it sideways. In doing so he also rammed his right elbow into the fence and I felt his grip loosen.

I spun out and saw him rubbing his elbow with swift rough movements. The funny bone when struck is not funny at all. It is actually the ulnar nerve which runs near the ulnar bone at the elbow joint and is the largest unprotected nerve in the human body. I also knew there was a strange side effect when the funny bone was hit. The nerve is directly connected to the little finger and half the ring finger so when the ulnar nerve is struck the two fingers tingle and for a moment or two seem to have minds of their own. And that's what helped me now.

My attacker looked away from me at his right hand and then ceased massaging his elbow and began wringing his hands and fingers. That was my chance. I jumped forward and knocked him to the ground with a single blow to the back of his head. It was hardly a polished punch but it had the desired result. As he hit the hard ground he stopped trying to bring his fingers back to life and instead used his right hand to rub his head where it had collided with the fence.

I jumped on top of him and tried to turn him onto his front. But he was stronger than me and hit me squarely in the jaw with a left jab. I had not expected it and let go of him. He threw a second punch at my head which I just managed to avoid so that it hit me instead on the clavicle which extends from just under the throat to the edge of the shoulder. It hurt nevertheless and I lashed out with my right fist in a back handed motion. It caught him on the bridge of his nose and I felt it soften. When I looked I saw blood starting to stream from his nostrils. But I also saw in his eyes a terrible expression. They were dark but blank. His breathing suddenly became even and all expression left his face. Blood continued to run from his injured nose but he now showed not the slightest feeling of pain.

As I continued to look at his mask of a face he slammed his right fist into my jaw. I felt a dislocation and thought I heard a dull cracking noise in my head. The next thing I felt was being heaved upwards and to the side so that I landed heavily on the ground with my left arm flung out behind my head. My right arm seemed to be immobilised by my side. And then everything went black.

*

“I don't know who started it. I can't say because I just saw what was happening when I heard the commotion and it was already underway”

Barry Flanagan was explaining to two uniformed police constables what he knew about the fight between Bartholemew and I.

“By then they were well at it,” he said. He glanced in my direction and added: “I thought he was on top of things but then he got hit with a beautiful right cross and went out like a light.”

I was sitting on the grass with my back against the fence. My jaw hurt like hell and I had a king sized headache that was beginning to engulf my entire skull from the outside and work its way inside bringing pain to every sensitive part of my brain.

Bartholemew was standing near his front door looking at me.

“So you can’t say who started it?” asked one of the policemen.

“Not really,” answered Flanagan. He looked at me and then at Bartholemew and then back at the policeman. “I do know who won though.”

“Yes, well, that’s not the point is it?” the policeman said. Pointing to Bartholemew he added: “That gentleman claims the other one began it. Said he was trespassing or trying to break into his flat and he caught him at it and when he tried to find out what he was doing the other one threw a punch at him.”

Flanagan shook his head and shrugged. “If that was the way it started then it was a bad move.”

The other constable moved closer to me.

“Can you tell us what happened here?” he asked.

I shook my head which rattled inside seemingly dislodging crucial bits that are designed to help co-ordinate rational thought processes. I dared not shake it again. Not for a while.

“I was not trying to break in,” I answered. “I did not start the fight. I think I might have to see someone about my jaw. It might be cracked. It hurts like hell.”

“We’ll get you seen to,” the policeman said. “Is there anything you want to tell us about what happened here?”

“Not right now.”

“Right then,” said the policeman and unbuttoned the pocket on his shirt and took out a notebook. “First I’ll need some personal details and then I think we should all go back to the police station where we can sort this out.”

The drive to the police station was silent except for an occasional crackling and jumbled sounds coming from the police radio. The two constables sat in the front. I sat next to Bartholemew in the back seat. Apparently Flanagan had said all he could about the affair and was not needed at this time to come to the station. If necessary the police could contact him again later.

The police station was right on Lewisham High Street and we were ushered to separate interview rooms where I, and presumably Bartholemew, were told to wait until further notice. In my case that meant sitting alone for an hour. Nobody came to take a statement, nobody brought me a drink or something to eat like they always do in the movies, nobody asked me if I wanted to make a telephone call. I ached all over, my head throbbed and while my jaw was bruised I could move it around freely without feeling or hearing any worrying grinding or cracking noises. I had realised by the time we arrived at the station that my injuries were less serious than I originally feared so I had said that any medical treatment I needed I would see to myself when I was allowed to leave.

That came when the door to the room where I was sitting was opened and in walked Detective David Maguire.

“Let’s go,” he said.

I remained seated and started to ask him what was going to happen. All he said was to repeat: “Let’s go.”

Once outside the station, in the rear car park, he stopped and wheeled about to face me. “What the fuck do you think you’re doing?”

I stopped also. “I was just....”

“You’ve fucked me about Tighe. You’re an idiot. A dangerous fucking idiot.”

“Listen, he....”

“You listen you fool. What do you think you’ve done here? What do you think you’ve achieved with your stupid actions?”

“I ...”

“I’ll tell you what you’ve achieved. You might just have blown this whole case wide open. You might just have done so much damage that we’ll now be powerless to do anything that might have brought to an end these killings. You might just have done more than enough to guarantee that our one and only suspect in this case will never be brought to justice.”

I stood staring at him.

He turned and walked a few steps but stopped and turned again to face me. “Protect me from politicians and reporters. I almost trusted you. No, I trusted you with information that I had no right to divulge. And you abused that trust and by doing so you very possibly may have made it possible for the killer to kill again. You must be very proud of yourself Tighe. Well fucking done.”

As Maguire walked to the police car parked near the corner of the open lot I followed five paces behind. When we reached the vehicle he got in behind the steering wheel. He sat there without doing or saying anything until I walked around to the other side, opened the passenger door at the front and got in beside him.

“Listen,” I said. “I’m sorry. I mean I’m really, really sorry. But I’m an investigative journalist and when I get hold of information such as you gave me I just had to act on it.”

“I did not give you anything,” he said. “I only told you we had a suspect.”

“No,” I retorted. “You actually let slip his name and where he lived. How else do you think I knew? You told me.”

Maguire sat silent. Then: “Well that’s just bloody brilliant. Now all this can be traced to me. Now I’m fucked.”

“I won’t say that to anyone. If I’m asked I’ll say I got it from a source. Someone not connected to you.”

“That’s not going to help much. The damage is done and I don’t know if it can be repaired.”

“It has to be. You can’t let my stupidity result in Bartholemew running free. Or whoever the killer is if it’s not him.”

Maguire started the engine and reversed away from the corner and drove out of the car park. When we were proceeding down Lewisham High Street heading towards the north of the river I asked: “What happens to me now then?”

“Nothing,” replied Maguire. “Bartholemew is not pressing charges. You’re out of this.”

“I won’t write anything. I promise.”

“Just stay out of this,” said Maguire. “And stay away from me. Don’t call me and don’t do anything else that has anything whatsoever to do with this case.” He turned and looked me in the eye. “You are out of this. Out. Understand?”

I did not answer. Instead I broke eye contact and stared out the passenger window of the car as we raced down Lewisham High Street.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

*Things were not going entirely to plan.
That was an understatement.
Things were going very wrong.
It had been one difficulty after another recently.
First there was the last experiment that ended badly.
Then he managed to pick a young girl.
A young girl for heaven's sake.
Part of his plan had always been to select subjects who because of their age and experience would be more resilient.
What had he gone and done – picked a specimen barely a teenager.
Stupid.
Then he had the problem with the bleeding.
So much blood.
From that point on his problems had mounted.
The stained sheet and rags had been found in the bin at the end of the road.
His favourite sports shirt had been ruined and he had been forced to get rid of that too.
The police had come to his home twice.
His home.
His private domain.
It was clear they suspected him of something even if they didn't know what exactly.
If it hadn't been for that busybody Flanagan he would not have had so much to be concerned about.
Foolish old man.
It had been Flanagan again who had called the police when he had that altercation with the reporter.
Just what was the reporter doing here anyway?
The police he could understand.
But the reporter?
Christ, what if he also had some information that could incriminate him.
Surely that was not possible.
But what was he doing snooping around his home?
There was no way he could let that situation continue.
So not pressing charges was at least one way to try to get the reporter out of the way.
The police would warn him to stay away.
That's what they did.
And when they did they would be indirectly helping him rid himself of one of his problems.
But other problems remained.
The main one was the girl.
She was different to the others and he had found himself in awkward moments with her, situations that were unwise.
He had to correct that.
Difficult as it was the best way would be to rid himself of her altogether.
Play it safe for a time.
He could begin again when all the suspicions had blown over.
That's what the sensible thing to do was.
Get it over with now.
Rid himself of the girl once and for all.*

*

She heard the door open and then close again. But she did not open her eyes. She lay quite still on the bed without saying a word. Her senses were acute but she could not hear him moving around the room. Normally when he came visiting he shuffled his feet a little as he made his preparations at the table near the doorway and then walked to either the end or the side of the bed. But this time there was only silence. She opened her eyes and raised her head off the pillow.

He was standing in front of the door, firmly closed behind him, and staring at her. His left arm hung by his side and his right arm was twisted behind his back as if he was trying to hide something held in his hand. She could not see what it was but deep inside she feared what it might be. He only came into the room to cause her pain and then afterwards to feed her. If the food was meant as an offering of some kind it failed miserably. It was always tasteless and chewy either with mashed potatoes or gravy to try to make up for its blandness. The soup she had had last time was the worst.

She had not eaten all day and if she was honest she would have welcomed a snack of some kind. Her experience of the day before when he had cut off her ear had drained her, and although the wound was not that painful any more she could feel where the injury was and angry when she tried to picture herself looking in a mirror and seeing the disfigurement.

She examined him, standing about fifteen feet from the end of her bed still not moving. He was gazing at her and although she could not make out his features very clearly she saw that from time to time he screwed up his mouth as if attempting to dislodge something caught in his teeth. But his eyes she could see. They were wide open and unblinking.

He's considering something, she thought to herself. He's trying to make up his mind about something. What to do to me. Maybe let me go. No, he won't do that. Fuck me? Is he going to rape me after all?

Suddenly he blinked four or five times in rapid succession, then turned about, opened the door and left the room.

She was about to call after him but at the last moment caught the words in her throat. As he had retreated she saw what he had been holding behind his back. It was a large heavy looking knife, not a fine one for slicing through compliant flesh, but rather an instrument for piercing flesh that was more resilient. A strong dagger.

*

He couldn't do it.

Killing her intentionally was out of the question now.

He had actually gone to her room intending to stab her in the heart.

That would be the easiest and least messy way to do it.

With her bound to the four corners of the bed there would be nothing she could do to prevent it.

He would just position the blade's point above her heart and plunge it in.

Her screams would not be heard.

He would use the pillow to soak up the blood and dispose of it when he got rid of her body.

But as he stood looking at her he realised he would not be able to bring himself to do it.

She was a young girl.

And it was strange when it struck him, but while he could dispassionately carry out his experiments the thought of intentional murder repelled him.

He was not a murderer.

He was better than that.

So he would continue with his original plan.

He would continue his experiment.

But to do that he would need to replace an implement that he had had to throw away after the last one had gone wrong.

Just in case the feathers this time presented him with a similar challenge.

*

Barry Flanagan considered himself an intelligent man. Maybe not the most brilliant or inventive man but one who had considerable experience of life and who believed himself able to judge others pretty well.

His view now of his immediate neighbour had changed. Over the past few weeks, mostly the last few days, Alec Bartholemew had become something other than just the quiet single man living in the other part of his building. And he was obviously not alone with these thoughts.

Police officers had visited him on a number of occasions so they clearly suspected him of something.

He himself had observed Bartholemew acting strangely, taking rubbish to dump in a bin many yards away from his own front yard when plainly there was adequate space in his own wheelie. And that was something the police were interested in.

And this latest episode involving the reporter. There had to be more to Alec Bartholemew than he had previously thought, else why would a reporter be snooping around the premises. And why would Bartholemew react so uncharacteristically violently?

No, Barry Flanagan thought, there has to be much more to his young neighbour than caught the eye. He had to be up to something not right.

Only minutes before he had seen Bartholemew leave through the front gate and walk towards where he normally parked his car in a street at right angles to Rokeby Road. He had then seen him drive away.

Flanagan made up his mind.

He took off his dressing gown and put on an old woollen windcheater. He went into the kitchen and after rummaging around in a drawer near the sink withdrew a bunch of keys. One of the keys he knew would allow him access to Bartholemew's flat and he intended to use it to see for himself what, if anything untoward, was going on next door.

He left himself out of his front door, walked up to the front gate and glanced quickly in both directions. Then with his head bowed as he examined the bunch of keys in his palm he made his way around the side of the building and up to the door to Bartholemew's flat.

On the fourth attempt the key went into the lock and when he turned it the door slipped off its latch and opened an inch. Flanagan pushed it and stepped inside, closing it behind him.

*

"Enough," said Detective Martin Walden.

"Enough what?" Maguire asked.

"Enough of this waiting around shit." Walden pushed his chair back from the table, folded his arms and said: "While we're sitting around here that bastard is out there planning I don't know what. But whatever it is we have to stop him."

"You're right," Maguire agreed. They were sitting in the Met canteen having spent the last hour briefing Superintendent Ford on the current state of play and then a further hour filling out paperwork. Now they were in the canteen drinking more coffee than was good for them.

"Trouble is," said Maguire, "we don't have the authority to bring him in let alone charge him with anything."

“You know as well as I do that he’s our guy.”

“I feel it in my gut, yes, but am I absolutely certain? I don’t know.”

“What if we’re right?”

“What if we’re not? What if we go and get him and drag him in for further questioning and while we’re doing that another female is taken off the street and killed?”

“But what if we are right? Taking him off the street means we will be preventing another murder. At least while we have him in custody.”

Maguire sipped his Latte. “And the Super? What about him?”

Walden pulled himself up to the table and placed his elbows on it. “What would you prefer? Superintendent Alasdair the-man-who-holds-the-key-to-your-future Ford to be pissed off at you or another killing?”

“If you put it that way, then”

“Seriously, what do you want to do? Sit here or do something constructive?”

Maguire looked hard at his partner and then drained his cup. “Let’s go,” he said.

*

Barry Flanagan had had a good look around the small flat.

The bedroom was neat and tidy, the kitchen clean. In the bathroom the towel was neatly folded over the wall heater so it would dry out without leaving a used smell and there was a new cake of soap in the shower drainer.

The sitting room was also neat with everything apparently in its place. There were two cushions that still had their price tags in the corner on the sofa. A book lay on the coffee table. He picked it up and read the title “Pegasus Descending.” He had never heard of the author who was described on the dust cover as a writer whose books were sustained by lush Southern-Gothic prose. Apparently an American and Flanagan did not read American authors. At least not novelists.

He dropped the book on the table. Just as he did so he heard the door to the flat open and he turned to see Bartholemew enter.

“What are you...,” Bartholemew started. He slammed the door behind him without taking his eyes off Flanagan. “What are you doing in here? How did you get in?”

Flanagan was flustered. “I have keys. I have a right to be here.”

“Like hell you do,” said Bartholemew and advanced towards Flanagan. “You have no right to come in here without my permission.”

Flanagan backed away.

Bartholemew looked around the room and then quickly went and inspected each of the other rooms.

“What are you doing here?” he repeated.

“I have a right to look around,” said Flanagan. “Something is not right. Even the police think you’re up to something. So do I. And that reporter no doubt has something on you as well.”

Bartholemew looked towards the pantry next to the kitchen door and then back at Flanagan. Flanagan followed his look.

“What’s in there?” he asked.

“Nothing. It’s a pantry.” Bartholemew glanced again in the direction of the kitchen.

Flanagan started to move in the same direction. “You’ve got something in there haven’t you? Something you shouldn’t have.” He took another step. “Drugs. I bet it’s drugs.”

Bartholemew stepped between him and the pantry door. “Get out of here now. Get out or I’ll call the police.”

“Go ahead,” Flanagan said. “Yes, go on, call the police. Let’s see what they find in there.” Again he took a pace forward.

But Bartholemew, instead of moving out of the way, grabbed the older man around the shoulders with both hands and shoved him backwards.

Flanagan tried to grab hold of the wall but there was nothing to get a grip on and he lost his balance. His legs failed to keep pace with the speed he had been propelled backwards and he fell heavily on the floor.

Bartholemew watched as he fell and saw that his upper body struck the floor first and then his head snapped back and struck the floor with a loud dull thump.

Barry Flanagan did not move. He lay stretched on the floor, his legs thrust straight out from his torso and his arms outstretched at his sides. His face was looking up at the ceiling but his eyes were closed and a thin red halo began to form around his head.

Bartholemew bent over him and looked into his face. He bent down and put his ear to the older man's chest. He then placed his hand an inch away from Flanagan's mouth and held it there for half a minute. Finally he tried to find a pulse in his neck.

*

Everything was going wrong.

Everything had been perfect before.

Well, not everything had gone perfectly but he was reasonably satisfied that he would have been able to surmount the difficulties he encountered.

Now everything was a mess.

First the girl.

She had become a problem.

Then the police interference.

The first lot he could deal with; the latest visit had been more problematic.

And the reporter.

That had almost been disastrous.

Then the girl again.

He could not bring himself to kill her.

Murder her.

Now this.

The meddling old fool.

Why hadn't he just minded his own business?

Look what he had brought on himself.

His problems had mounted terribly.

He now had two to solve.

First the old man.

Obviously he was dead.

He could not leave him where he was.

And he could not just take him outside.

Maybe dump him in his own flat.

He was such a reclusive old man nobody would probably discover him for a hundred years.

But he could not risk being seen to carry him outside.

There was only one thing he could do.

*

Bartholemew dragged Flanagan's body into the kitchen and lay him out on the tiled floor. He wrapped a tea towel around his head to stem the bleeding that had in any case dwindled. He was surprised at just how light he was; nothing but skin and bones. The carpet in the sitting room where Flanagan had fallen now showed a dark stain about thirty centimetres across. From the pantry he got a small bucket which he half filled with warm water from the sink and with an old hand towel he rubbed the stained

carpet until he was satisfied that the mark would appear to have been caused by little more than a spilt cup of tea or wine. Just to be sure he also took from the pantry a bottle of red wine, unscrewed the cap and took a long swig. He then put it and a glass on the coffee table. He doubted he would need to explain it to anyone but at least he himself was reasonably convinced.

When he was finished he tossed the dirty hand towel in the rubbish bin under the kitchen sink, rinsed out the bucket and returned it to the pantry.

Snapping on the overhead bare light bulb he cleared the towels that were hanging on hooks at the back and then held down a latch that opened inwards the hidden door leading to the basement. Returning to the kitchen he took hold of Flanagan's arms and walking backwards dragged the body into the pantry, through the open door and with the old man's feet slapping on each step he reached the second door at the bottom. Dropping the dead man's arms he took a key from his pocket and unlocked the door behind him. Then he bent down again, picked up the limp arms and pulled Flanagan's body into the basement.

When she caught sight of Bartholemew dragging the body of Barry Flanagan into the room young Florence Hurd let out a muffled scream. She followed this with a much louder: "What are you doing? Have you killed that man?"

Bartholemew did not reply.

The girl wanted to hit Bartholemew with a host of further questions but the words caught in her throat and she slumped back on the pillow and screwed her eyes as tightly shut as she could manage. Her breathing deepened and became quicker and panic thoughts fizzed in her head.

When she opened her eyes and lifted her head off the pillow again Bartholemew was gone. The door to the cellar was once again shut. The body of the older man lay stretched out against the wall diagonally across from where she was fastened to the bed.

Oh my god, she thought. Is he going to kill me too?

*

Back upstairs Bartholemew dropped onto the sofa and with his elbows on his knees rested his face in the cups of his hands. Control, he told himself. Control.

The accidental killing of the old man was really bad. He reminded himself again that he had not intended to kill the man. It was an accident. But the old fool had provoked him. He had to react. He had to stop him going into the pantry. Even if he had not found the secret door at the back he could not permit him to go in there. It was his entrance to the basement. His. And then there was the accident.

But he had recovered. The body was hidden. It would be a long time before anyone discovered the old man was missing. Nobody would suspect him. He had time to think and then to act. And that is what he had to do now.

His first decision was to later that night wrap the body in plastic bags. He was a short and frail man so two large black plastic rubbish bags should suffice. He would then stuff him the largest suitcase he had under his bed, wheel it to his car and then in the morning he would drive out into the country and bury it in bushland where it would not be discovered.

Having decided that Bartholemew moved on to his next task. The girl. The feathers. The experiments could continue.

*

"How serious are your doubts?" asked Walden

The drive from the Metropolitan Police headquarters to Rokeby Road in Brockley was around twelve kilometres. Allowing for the likely traffic the journey was expected to take around twenty to thirty minutes.

"I'm not sure," answered Maguire.

They had already passed through Parliament Square and were just coming off Westminster Bridge. Waterloo station was off to their left and ahead of them was The Elephant and Castle station. That was where they would enter New Kent Road which would become Old Kent Road and then New Cross Road. Before they reached Rokeby Road they would pass New Cross Gate rail station as well as the New Cross station a further kilometre on. New this. Old that. New this. Signs of the times.

"He's ticking many of my boxes," went on Maguire. "Sufficient to check him out again."

"It all points to him," said Walden.

"A lot of it does. But there is nothing we can say with absolute certainty that he's the one. It's that lack of certainty that leaves me short of a hundred per cent."

They drove in silence for a while.

The Elephant and Castle is actually a major road intersection. It sits in the extremely busy borough of Southwark. But The Elephant as it is known for short is also used as a name for the surrounding area which was originally known as Newington. The Elephant and Castle can be traced back to a coaching inn of that name on the site suggesting its origins were at least two hundred and fifty years old. Yet it is claimed that prior to that the site was occupied by a blacksmith and cutler and the coat of arms of the Worshipful Company of Cutlers does feature an elephant with a castle on its back. Famous people associated to The Elephant and Castle include Michael Faraday, Charlie Chaplin and latterly Michael Caine.

None of this occupied the minds of Walden or Maguire. Both were focused on nothing but Alec Bartholemew and the series of murders.

"Well, my money is on him," said Walden.

"We'll find out more soon," said Maguire.

*

The tray.

The bowl.

A single feather with the paper wrapped around the stem and fastened with a rubber band.

Mmmmhhhhggg.

He was now totally focused.

Carefully he unwound the rubber band.

Even more carefully and slowly he unfolded the piece of paper.

Mmmmhhhhggg. Mmmmhhhhggg.

This would require extreme caution.

And precision.

He stooped and opened the doors beneath the kitchen sink.

Finding what he was looking for he placed it on the tray next to the bowl.

Then he opened the drawer to the side of the sink and took out the short knife.

It had a gleaming blade and he tested it against the thumb of his left hand.

He had honed it many times and it immediately drew a thin line of blood.

He placed the knife on the other side of the bowl.

There were only two more items he needed.

Going into his bedroom he opened the closet door where he kept his linen.

Removing two thick full size towels he returned to the kitchen.

Last he walked into the pantry and from a shelf high to his right, near the ceiling, he took down a roll of duct tape.

*He was ready.
This would be the challenge that could define all his future experimentation.
Similar tasks had ended in failure before.
But each time he felt he had learned something.
Now he was hopeful he had learned enough.
If he was successful this time there would be little to stop him going on and on.
To ever greater success.
He went back into the pantry and opened the door at the rear.
Then with the tray with its implements, and the towels tucked under an arm, he made his way to the door to the cellar.
He unlocked it, pushed it open and walked in.
The young girl appeared to be sobbing.
But that did not bother him.
Not in the least.
He was focused.
Absolutely focused.*

*

Maguire glanced at his wristwatch as he switched off the ignition.
“Three thirty,” he said and tugged the handbrake on. “Let’s go and see what this fellow can tell us.”
They had parked right outside the gate leading to the front door of Barry Flanagan’s flat. As they walked down the cracked concrete path and then around the side of the building to the entrance to Bartholemew’s flat Maguire looked at the window to the front reception room and then above to the bedroom windows.
“The old man is not out spying this afternoon by the looks of it,” he said to Walden.
“Might be having a lie down,” Walden said over his shoulder.
“Yeah, when you get to his state an afternoon nap is a must I guess.”
“So they tell me,” said Walden who walked straight up to Bartholemew’s front door and knocked loudly. He waited a minute and then knocked again.
“Let’s not go into this like a bull in a china shop Martin,” cautioned Maguire.
“We need to press him,” said Walden.
“I agree,” Maguire answered, “but not so that he clams up and raises steel barriers.”
A third time Walden rapped the door.
He was about to do it a fourth time when there was a click from inside and the door opened and Bartholemew faced them.
“Yes,” he said.
“Alec Bartholemew,” Walden said. “I am Detective Martin Walden and this is Detective David Maguire. We need to speak to you. Can we come in please?”
“What is it about this time?” asked Bartholemew.
“Can we come inside please?” repeated Walden. “We can do this here in the open if you like but it would be better if we did it inside.”
Bartholemew did not say anything but stood to the side and held the door open wider. Walden and Maguire walked in and went and stood in the middle of the lounge. Bartholemew closed the door and joined them, standing slightly at a distance in the hall.
“What do you want?” he asked.
“Do you know a girl called Florence Hurd?” asked Walden.
“Who?”
“Florence Hurd. Do you know a young girl by that name?”
“No. Why? Who is she?”
“We have reason to believe that you might well know her.”
“I don’t know anybody by that name. Why do you think I do?”

“Do you know any of these women – Kay Roberts, Maxine Hughes, Virginia Hughes, Grazyna Litavincuk, Paula Gibbons.”

“No,” Bartholemew replied. “I don’t know any of these names. Why are you asking me? Who are they?”

Maguire stepped forward.

“They are all women who have been murdered since the beginning of the year,” he said.

“I’ve never heard of any of them,” Bartholemew said.

“Do you read the papers?” asked Walden.

“Of course I do.”

“All those women have been mentioned many times in the press and yet you say you have never heard of them.”

“I said I don’t know them.”

“You said you’ve never heard of them,” Walden said. “That you’ve never heard or seen their names. How can that be?”

Bartholemew seemed undisturbed. “This is ridiculous,” he said. “How am I supposed to remember the name of every person the newspapers write about? Is that a crime? Is that what you want to arrest me for?”

“Who says we’re here to arrest you?” Walden said.

Bartholemew shuffled his feet but remained in the hallway. He made no comment.

“Do you mind if we look around your flat?” Maguire asked.

“You did before,” Bartholemew answered. “If you want to do it again go ahead.”

Maguire and Walden separated. Maguire walked into the kitchen as Walden moved down the hallway and into the bedroom. Bartholemew remained where he was.

Maguire opened drawers and cupboards and then looked past Bartholemew. He walked passed him and looked down at the carpet.

“What happened here?” he asked.

“Wine,” responded Bartholemew. “I spilt some red wine. Is that a crime too?”

“No,” said Maguire. “Just asked.” He moved back to the kitchen.

Walden was in the bedroom going through drawers and opening the cupboard and pulling aside clothes that were hanging inside. He looked under the bed and then walked into the bathroom.

Maguire left the kitchen and walked into the pantry. He switched on the overhead light and examined the items on the shelves.

Then he walked further inside. He lifted various items off the shelves on either side and examined them.

“Good to have a walk in larder,” he said.

“Yes,” Bartholemew replied and took a step towards him.

Maguire eyed him.

He in turn stepped further into the pantry. At the end he wiped his hands on one of the towels hanging from a hook. As he did so it fell to the floor. He bent to pick it up and noticed the latch.

“Is this a door?” he asked and turned to face Bartholemew.

Bartholemew did not answer.

Maguire pushed down on the latch and the door swung in.

He turned and looked at Bartholemew. But instead of addressing him he called to Walden: “Martin,” he said. “You’d better come and look here.”

Walden came out of the bathroom and walked down the hall to the pantry.

“Look here,” said Maguire.

Walden turned to Bartholemew. “Where does that lead?” he asked.

Bartholemew remained silent.

“Stay there,” instructed Maguire and took a step in. Walden followed.

When they reached the bottom of the steps Maguire tried the handle on the second door that faced him. It had been left unlocked and opened easily.

As he entered the basement room Maguire exclaimed: "What the hell?"
Walden had followed him into the room and also stared at the naked girl tied to the bed. He also saw the body lying against the wall to his left.
Maguire turned and pushed past his colleague.
"Stay here," he said. "Help her." And with that he rushed up the stairs three at a time.
When he emerged from the pantry he quickly checked each of the rooms.
Bartholemew was not in the flat.
From below Walden called out: "You better come down here."
Maguire took the steps down to the basement as fast as he had gone up. The girl was now sitting up on the bed with a towel wrapped around her shoulders covering her nakedness.
Walden pointed to the small table across the room. "Check out the tray," he said.
Maguire turned and did as suggested.
On the tray was a bowl, a knife, a hacksaw, a roll of duct tape, and two towels were next to it. There was also a feather, a rubber band and a square of paper.
Maguire picked up the piece of paper and read what was written on it. There were two words: "Left leg."

*

*He had to get away.
The game was up.
For now.
He could not stay at the flat.
They would find the girl and they would very quickly work out he was responsible for the other failures.
So he had to get away and plan for the future.
He had more to do.
More experiments.
More to achieve.
But right now escape was his priority.*

*

"Jesus Christ," Maguire said.
He immediately rushed back up into the flat, but Bartholemew had disappeared.
He ran outside and into the street but could see him nowhere.
Back inside the flat he called in what he and Walden had discovered and instructed that an apprehend notice be issued for Bartholemew. Then he went back down into the basement.
Walden had his arm around the girl who was still hunched on the bed. She was sobbing and her shoulders shook violently. He had stripped the bed of the sheet and had wrapped it around the girl. He looked at Maguire and then at the side table near the door and the tray with its paraphernalia. He shook his head.
"Jesus," repeated Maguire softly.

*

An hour later Maguire and Walden stood in the yard outside the front door of Bartholemew's flat. Inside, other police and forensics experts were doing what they had to do. And two women officers were with Florence Hurd in the lounge waiting for transport to take them to hospital. The young girl was still visibly upset but the policewomen, both specially trained to deal with similar situations, were helping her

come to terms with her freedom after such a terrifying ordeal. They would stay with her for as long as they were needed.

“You know what this is all about?” said Walden.

“I’m having trouble getting my head around it,” answered Maguire. “He was going to cut that girl’s leg off if we hadn’t come.”

“She’s not the first,” Walden said.

“I know,” Maguire said. “It explains a lot.”

“He’s a monster. He was going to use a hacksaw to cut her leg off. God know what else.”

“The others. It explains the missing body parts. He’s been cutting them all into pieces.”

“But why?”

“Did you notice that he had already mutilated the girl? Her toe. He’d already chopped one off.”

“Jesus Christ,” said Maguire. “What’s his point?”

“We won’t know until we catch him,” Walden said.

*

He was not sure where he was going.

Or how he was going to get there.

All he knew was that he had to get as far away as possible.

Provided he could lose the police who would already be on his tail he stood an even chance of disappearing.

At least even.

Money was not a problem.

He had left the flat with his wallet in his hip pocket.

And they would not be able to trace him immediately when he used his credit card.

That would take time.

By which time he would be miles away.

Out of reach.

With time and the ability to continue where he left off.

Where he had been forced to leave off.

Experimenting.

*

There are almost fifty thousand personnel in the Met. This number includes just over thirty thousand sworn police officers, another four thousand or so Community Support Officers and around five thousand Special Constables who work part time. All of this makes the Met the largest police force in the country and one of the biggest forces in the world.

If they were all mobilised with the single aim of apprehending a known and identifiable individual who had just hours before escaped from custody or eluded capture the chances are they would succeed, if not speedily then certainly within a reasonable time.

But not every single man and woman in the force had been mobilised, or could be mobilised, for the single purpose of tracking and taking into custody Alec Bartholemew. He knew that and detectives Maguire and Walden knew that. But Maguire and Walden also knew they could call on support that while not faultless would be an enormous help.

During the London riots the police faced two enemies. One was the rioters themselves. The other was BlackBerry Messenger. BBM is a proprietary internet-based instant messenger application included on BlackBerry devices which allows

messaging between BlackBerry users. It is also well known that exchanging messages is also possible via dedicated discussion or chat groups which allow multiple BlackBerry devices to communicate in a single session. In addition to offering text-based instant messages, BlackBerry Messenger also allows users to send pictures, voicenotes, files, and location on a map over the BlackBerry network.

But in contrast to the text and BlackBerry messages used by the rioters, the Met police have to rely on a highly centralised communications system. At its heart is a special operations room where senior officers view screens showing footage from helicopter cameras and keep track of police movements by radio. The nerve centre contains other specialised equipment and is plugged into London's vast network of CCTV. On a normal day the Met handles up to six thousand emergency calls and more than twice that number of non-emergency calls.

The police radio system is provided by a secure network used between the emergency services, and while previous radio systems could easily be listened into the current service is encrypted and cannot be scanned.

The special operations room has teams of dispatch operators sitting in front of computers who communicate with officers on the street by using the network and via the mobile data terminals in police vehicles. The facility includes a CCTV monitoring suite where tens of thousands of cameras feed into the system. Images are displayed on large video walls. In terms of making the most of other types of technology, particularly social networking, the Met also uses Twitter.

Monitoring an event or series of events such as the riots was reasonably successful. But in terms of tracking down an individual all the Met's specialised equipment had its gaps.

As soon as Maguire had called in about Bartholemew the massive police system swung into action. Every member of the force was on the lookout for him. Every CCTV camera's pictures were being constantly monitored.

*

The first sighting was at 1755hrs at London Bridge.

It was luck that he had been sighted. It was not through the CCTV network but rather a uniformed police constable who saw him acting unusually. Not the usual street sleeper or pickpocket who begged or stole in the tourist area. Rather someone who looked extremely nervous and who looked about in all directions furtively.

The constable followed him at a distance while at the same time checking via his beat radio for a description of anyone who might be wanted for questioning. As they passed the London Dungeon and the Britain at War Experience and headed up to the corner where the sign pointed to the Clink Prison Museum, a relic from the eighteenth century, the word was fed back to the constable that the man he had in his sights could be the serial killer.

The policeman quickened his step and narrowed the gap. But the man suddenly turned left at the junction with Borough High Street and sprinted away. By the time the constable rounded the corner the man had disappeared. He immediately radioed back to the control room that he had lost sight of the man.

Minutes later Maguire swore: "Shit. Bartholemew was spotted at London Bridge. A uniform almost had him but he got away."

Walden swung the car they were in against the kerb. "We're not going to do any good in the vehicle," he said. "He's going to use the underground every chance he gets."

As they both sprang from the car Maguire called: "The Transport Police have his description so they might spot him. But you're right. If he's going underground we should too."

And with that they leapt up the steps leading to the New Cross Gate Rail station.

*

1846hrs

The King's Cross St Pancras tube station is in Camden. It is five stops north from London Bridge. That was where Bartholemew was seen for the second time.

King's Cross has a notorious background. It is the fourth busiest station on the entire underground system and serves more lines than any other station. Another reason for its notoriety is that in 1987 there was a devastating fire that killed thirty-one people. The blaze was attributed to a lit match falling into an escalator machine room which caused the fire to unexpectedly and violently explode into the station. This appalling fire was the single most significant reason for smoking being banned on the whole of the underground network.

The area around the station used to be associated with prostitution and drug peddling, but since the station's modernisation and the building of the St Pancras international station next door which is home to the cross channel Eurostar it has moved upmarket and is no longer regarded with such distaste. But despite the changes and the clearing away of unwanted human traffic, King's Cross St Pancras is somewhere where one could reasonably expect to not draw undue attention.

That is unless you are Alec Bartholemew and the most wanted man in the whole of the United Kingdom. No fewer than three CCTV cameras in the vicinity picked up his movements.

*

He was calm again now.

He was lucky back there.

That policeman almost caught him.

Not really though.

Of course he noticed the constable eyeing him.

Uniformed police, he had thought for years after watching numerous television programmes, were the worst in the world for tailing anybody.

As soon as they saw someone acting suspiciously they acted as police are supposed to act.

Which meant they were easy to spot.

So he kept behaving as he was and headed for the corner.

He knew that if he kept a good distance ahead he would be able to round the corner and at that point he would be unsighted.

Then it was a matter of sprinting up to his left, almost doubling back on his route but using an alley that diverged at an angle and took him back to the station via another entrance.

The issue at hand now was that the police believed they knew where he was.

Or the area he was in.

But he had other ideas.

*

"It'll take us around fifteen minutes to get there," Maguire estimated.

They were on their way to London Bridge where Bartholemew had been seen and they planned to get off the train there and help other police who would also be converging on the area to track down the killer.

"He sticking to known territory by the looks of it," answered Walden. "And it's not an easy area to find someone who's intent on not being found."

The train pulled into Canada water where the Overground rail meets the Jubilee Line. From there it would be only two stops to London Bridge.

The red light at the top of Maguire's mobile blinked. He clicked it open and read the text message.

"Bastard," he said. "He's just been seen in King's Cross. He's chopping and changing direction."

"Bugger, that'll take us another twenty to thirty minutes," cursed Walden. "And by the time we get there he'll have switched again. But where? What's his next stop?"

"We don't have a choice," Maguire answered. "If he decided to move onto somewhere else we won't know about it. Right now we know he's at, or was very recently at, King's Cross. So that's where we go."

1933hrs

CCTV picked Bartholemew up in Leicester Square.

For the past year and a half the square had been a huge construction site as scores of architects, surveyors and workmen toiled around the clock to get it ready for the Olympic Games a little over six months away. As one of the major entertainment areas in central London it was little wonder that the area was covered by cameras.

Bartholemew was spotted mingling with the crowds outside one of the casinos and a major cinema. The hoarding around the square itself narrowed the pedestrian walkway, pressing the people together.

Immediately he was identified in the control room a message was transmitted throughout the force and to the various search teams and Maguire and Walden picked it up.

"He's definitely trying to lose us," said Walden.

"Well, he knows we're bound to be on his tail," Maguire said.

"He's switching direction all the time. Trying to make us think he's heading one way and then heading in the other."

"I know. But for now all we can do is follow the cameras."

*

What a mess they had made of the square.

But it played into his hands.

The crowds were probably no bigger than usual but because of all the barricaded area there was a crush.

Spotting him in the crowds would not be easy.

But he still had to work on the assumption that he would be sighted sooner or later.

Of course there were spy cameras everywhere in London and no doubt Leicester Square would have its share.

There was the glockenspiel.

Outside where the Swiss Centre used to be.

Now it's an M&M emporium of all things.

What next?

At least the fabulous clock with its bells that had been taken away half a decade ago was back in its place.

But he could not stop and admire it.

Standing still was not an option.

He had to keep on the move.

And not just moving but confusing those who were undoubtedly trying to follow him.

*

1957hrs

From Leicester Square to Piccadilly Circus is a quick walk; no more than a few minutes.

*And from there the Bakerloo line goes straight south through Charing Cross to the Embankment and across the Thames to Waterloo.
There he would go up to the surface, walk around the block, and then descend again.
Surely there were CCTV cameras all around Waterloo.
And surely they would pick him up.
But he would evade them for a moment, making everyone in the control room believe he was still in the vicinity.
But in fact he would be miles away.*

*

“Waterloo?”
Walden looked quizzical.
“He’s heading home?”
Maguire was silent.
“So far,” said Walden, “he’s been seen at London Bridge. Then it was King’s Cross. Going north. After that Leicester Square, directly south. Now Waterloo. Again heading south.”
“It’s not random,” Maguire said. “He thinks he’s leading us anywhere and everywhere without reason. But it isn’t.”
“What do you mean?” asked Walden.
“I reckon he’s working to a plan,” Maguire answered. “First north. Then north again. Then south, and south again. What if he’s heading home?”
“Home? What, back to Brockley?”
“Why not? Maybe there are things there he needs. His car for one.”
“Right. So?”
“So, let’s see if we can meet him half way.”
The train was nearing London Bridge and slowed for its entrance to the platform.
“We get off here,” said Maguire. “Then let’s split up. You watch the arrivals from the Jubilee Line and I’ll stay up here. If he is heading for Brockley he has to go through both checkpoints.”
“And if he does we’ve got him,” said Walden.

*

2100hrs

Most of the rush hour traffic had finished. City workers from the Docklands who used London Bridge as a transit point were on their way home or still in the pubs near their offices. There was still a measure of commuting between the capital and towns to the south but by and large the station was becoming less and less crowded.
Maguire paced back and forth along the array of turnstiles. Above them were screens showing arrival and departure times for the various trains that would depart from any of the platforms from nine to fifteen. Then he moved to the end away from the first platform and stood partially concealed near a sandwich counter. Carefully he examined each and every person, man or woman, either leaving a platform after a train arrived or slotting their tickets into the turnstiles to pass through to the platforms. Nobody looked like Bartholemew. Or Bartholemew if he had tried to hide his identity. Maguire waited impatiently for ten minutes.
Three levels below Walden watched people arriving through different turnstiles. People coming up from the Jubilee Line invariably appeared to be in a hurry. It was getting late and they were either on their home or in some cases heading for pubs and clubs outside the station for a few drinks before call it a night. As with Maguire ten minutes passed and there was no sign of Bartholemew.

Suddenly there were cries for help from further inside the station, on the tube side of the turnstiles, and some people stopped and looked behind them. There was another cry for help and two of the station attendants rushed towards where the cries had come. Walden decided to do the same and hurdled the turnstiles and followed the attendants. As he rounded a bend he instinctively glanced to his right and slightly behind him. Out of the corner of his eye he caught sight of a figure, a man, dart away from a group of suited businessmen and race to the turnstiles. Walden stopped and watched as the man leapt over the turnstiles and ran for the station exit. Walden realised without a doubt it was Bartholemew and started to give chase.

As he did so he reached into his jacket and took out his mobile and punched a single digit. Then a few seconds later he shouted into it: "He's down here. Headed for the exit."

On the level above Maguire sprinted for the escalator, sped down, through the short shopping area, round to his right and out of the exit into Tooley Street which was the main road leading from the station to Borough High Street. Ahead of him was the church with the market behind. London Bridge itself was to his right. On the near side of the High Street to his left was Guys Hospital. But when he looked in both directions he could see neither Walden nor Bartholemew.

He shouted into his mobile that was still open: "Where? Which way?"

"The High Street," came the reply. "He's heading for the hospital area."

Maguire ran down the High Street as fast as he could. When he passed the hospital on his left and came to the junction with Newcomen Street he met Walden coming in his direction.

"Did you see him?" Walden asked breathlessly. "Did you see him anywhere?"

"No," answered Maguire. "Did you? Where was he the last time you saw him?"

"Around here. Somewhere here. I think he went down this street but I can't find him."

"Well if he doubled back I didn't come across him."

"He must be here somewhere," said Walden.

Maguire looked about him. "Let's scout the hospital compound. He might have run in there."

For half an hour the two detectives prowled the area. They walked the hospital grounds, went back down Newcomen Street and then back up to the High Street. They separated and probed both sides of the road heading back to the rear of the London Bridge Station.

Bartholemew had once again vanished.

*

He had given the detective the slip.

Unlike the detective he knew the area pretty well.

He knew for instance that the primary school diagonally across from where Newcomen Street met the High Street had been closed for the past week leading up to the Christmas holidays.

He also knew that there was an entrance to the grounds where the wood fencing had been pushed in and there was a gap.

He had noticed this on one of his prowls months before.

It had been easy to slip in, get around the back of the school which was in complete darkness, and wait there until he was sure the way was clear.

Now, an hour later he was five blocks away and walking casually into Borough Station.

From there he knew exactly where he could remain undetected.

Until the morning when he planned to get away from the city altogether.

Then they would never find him.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

0837hrs

If I hurried I could make it to the shops in time for last minute present buying and get back home in time to have some of the day left to enjoy. There were only a few days remaining and I had put it off as long as I could. I did not have that many presents to sort but the problem was that I had also left it to the last minute to buy Christmas cards as well. For most of my friends, and there were a lot of them still living overseas, I resorted to electronic cards and best wishes. But there were still some in London and one or two in the counties who I had to send cards to. So I decided to kill two birds with the one stone.

The Westfield London shopping centre in Hammersmith, or rather in the borough of Hammersmith and Fulham, was opened to much fanfare a little over three years ago. A number of times over that period I had promised myself that I would see what all the fuss was about. Years before I had made the mistake of visiting the Bluewater shopping and leisure facility close to the M25. The biggest mistake was making the trip on the weekend it was officially opened and the crowds were so huge that I vowed never to fall into the same trap again.

Now three years had passed since the Westfield complex near Hammersmith had opened and I considered it was time I risked a visit. What better time than when I had to complete my last minute festive buying.

Westfield is situated in White City and is actually part of the White City district, where there are several other large scale development projects. The development is on a large brown field site part of which was once the location of the 1908 Franco-British Exhibition. The centre is noted for its size with a retail floor area of around a hundred and fifty thousand square meters which is roughly the size of thirty football pitches. When it was opened it was reported to be the third largest shopping centre in the country.

To get to my destination I would take the District Line from Victoria as far as Hammersmith and then hop on the Circle Line heading north to Shepherd's Bush Market which was the nearest stop to the centre. All going well, largely down to whether the Circle Line would be operating satisfactorily, something that could not always be relied on, I could be there by half nine, complete my shopping by half ten and be back in the flat by lunchtime.

I was standing on the platform waiting for the correct train to come along, in eleven minutes according to the information screen suspended from the ceiling. As I looked down the siding at the growing mass of people I started. Standing about thirty paces away was the man the police all over the city and probably the country were hunting on the assumption that he was the serial killer responsible for the most appalling murder of five women. Alec Bartholemew stood staring straight ahead.

I did not know what to do. My immediate thought was to raise the alarm. To shout a warning to the other commuters. But just as quickly I realised there would be no point. My second thought was that I had a bit over ten minutes to decide to do something and to do it. Should I confront him myself? That would be foolish. The last time I did that Bartholemew beat me to a pulp, and suspecting the lack of gung ho in the average British citizen when risk was involved, I reckoned I would get little outside support. There was only one thing I could think of doing.

I dialed Detective Maguire's mobile. There was no answer so I whispered a desperate voicemail message telling him where I was, that Bartholemew was on the same platform, that the next train was due in around ten minutes, and that he should do everything he could to get down to Victoria as quickly as he could. Then I stood and glanced at the wanted man while trying to stay hidden myself behind other innocent people.

*

Maguire listened to the message on his mobile and then called Detective Martin Walden on his. He explained what he wanted and also that he was at the time in a police car in heavy traffic around Parliament Square.

Walden rushed out of the Met building and ran across the road to St James's Park underground. If he was very fortunate he might, just might be lucky enough to catch the exact train that Bartholemew was waiting for. St James's Park station is one stop away from Victoria and there was the chance that as the train pulled into Victoria and Bartholemew prepared to get aboard Walden would be waiting for him. At the same time Maguire would be doing everything he could to get to Victoria as well.

*

I watched as the District Line train slowly emerged from the tunnel and hissed its way alongside the platform. From that point on things happened in quick succession. It was serendipity repeating itself. The carriage that Walden was in was the same carriage that Bartholemew faced.

The doors clanked open and passengers began stepping out of the carriage onto the platform.

Bartholemew moved slightly to one side to allow some to pass.

Walden saw him and pushed his way passed two other commuters and reached for Bartholemew.

At the same time Bartholemew saw Walden and turned to run.

Walden stumbled as the passenger in front of him suddenly stopped.

Bartholemew crashed into a woman behind him who was waiting to get into the carriage.

Both men half fell to the concrete platform.

They were just a meter or two apart.

Bartholemew was first to his feet and started to run but Walden dived after him and grabbed one ankle which brought him down.

The commuters in front of me had largely managed to get into their carriages and I could now see the two men grappling on the platform as other commuters stepped around them but with nobody trying to intervene.

I ran forward and when I reached the wrestling men I tried to grab hold of Bartholemew to pull him away from Walden.

As I leant down a flailing arm from Bartholemew caught me on the side of the head and I was knocked sideways.

At the same time Bartholemew brought his knee into the groin of Walden who grunted and loosened his grip.

I got to my knees and on all fours looked at Bartholemew.

He sprang to his feet and kicked Walden hard in the head.

I saw his boot strike the detective's temple and I heard a deep sigh as Walden rolled sideways and ended up with his face pressed against the side of the train.

Bartholemew then turned and was about to aim a kick at me when from behind he was struck hard on the back of his head.

He lunged forward and crashed to the platform.

Maguire instantly bent down and snapped handcuffs on Bartholemew's hands behind his back.

He then went to Walden who had not moved.

The train suddenly juddered forward no more than a meter and again came to a stop.

Maguire rolled Walden onto his back and then bent down and put his ear to his chest.

*

1000hrs

Maguire sat facing Alec Bartholemew across the table.

He stared intently at the man.

Bartholemew kept his gaze down but briefly raised his eyes and looked at the detective.

“Just tell me why,” said Maguire.

Bartholemew studied the table again.

“Why kidnap those women and then mutilate them before murdering them?” Maguire asked again.

Still Bartholemew remained silent.

“Didn’t you feel anything? Nothing at all?”

Silence.

Maguire kept staring at the killer.

“I can’t understand. It defies all logic and the inhumanity of what you did to those women defies belief.”

Still Bartholemew said nothing.

“What is just unbelievable is not that you slashed the women haphazardly. You carefully cut them. Hacked them at times with a saw. But then you seem to have shown some remorse and tried to tend the wounds. It’s just.....why on earth....?”

Maguire shook his head. “It’s inhuman,” he said.

There was a silence between the two men and then finally Maguire said: “You will spend the rest of your life in jail. You’ll never get out. If I had my way you’d be strapped to a chair and a million volts drilled into your worthless body.”

He paused: “With any luck while you’re inside your fellow inmates will inflict equal pain on you. Over a long time.”

He got up from the table and walked to the door of the room.

As he was about to leave he turned and faced Bartholemew a last time.

“One more thing,” he said. “We recovered all the bodies but not all the parts you removed. What did you do with them?”

Bartholemew raised his head and looked at Detective David Maguire.

“I’m hungry,” he said softly and a smile briefly crossed his lips. “Would it be possible to get something to eat? A steak would be nice.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

I confronted Maguire as he left the courthouse.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I don't know how many times I have to tell you, but I really am sorry."

Maguire stopped but then tried to walk around me without saying anything.

"Christ," I said after him. "Look, I know it was wrong. I know I almost screwed up the entire police operation. But Jesus you got the guy and the judge just gave him life so he's going to rot in jail until he dies. Maybe even get killed himself inside."

Maguire spun around and faced me. He took two steps forward so we were just a pace apart.

"In the past month Tighe I have not given you a single thought," he spat. "Not a single minute of consideration. You didn't deserve my time. Now after all the shit that has gone on with my friend and partner being killed, and I hold you to blame in part for that, and a young girl almost butchered, not to mention the ghastly murder of the other women, you seem to think it's alright to just sidle up to me and say you're sorry. That everything will then be fine."

"I know...." I began.

"Well, let me spell it out for you. Clearly. So that even a fucking reporter can understand it. It is not all alright. It is all fucked up. You fucked up. I fucked up."

"Bartholemew is behind bars."

"Right. He is. But it's no thanks to you. Your contribution very nearly led to his getting away and being free to maim and kill again and again."

He turned to walk away from me once more.

"Did he say anything to you?" I called after him. "Did Bartholemew tell you anything?"

I did not hear clearly what Maguire said as he continued walking away from me, but it sounded like he was seeking saviour from journalists and politicians.

*

He did not mind being left alone in the cell.

The solitude was welcome.

Gave him a little time to think before they came for him.

He had already had a lot of time to think and he knew that never again would he be allowed the freedom to do anything but think.

But like all great men he was on top of everything else a thinker.

He had already demonstrated that.

At least five times.

Those five at the very least recognised him as a thinker.

He recalled two literary sayings he had once read.

It was Shakespeare who wrote: "For murder, though it have no tongue, will speak with most miraculous organ."

As for death itself he was certain a second writer whose name he could not remember was personally prophetic: "I have a rendezvous with death at some disputed barricade."

Mmmmmhhhhggg.

EPILOGUE

Around midday, I dialled the mobile of Detective Inspector David Maguire. The new year was well under way and it had been some time since our last encounter outside the courthouse..

"I hear on the grape vine that there has been a double murder out in woodland in Buckinghamshire – and I'm not talking about the way your favourite teams were annihilated at the Marlow Regatta either," I said.

"Who's this calling?" replied Maguire. "If you are a reporter, piss off."

"No change there then," I said. "Still the most friendly and easily accessible copper on the block.

"Still the most suspicious and untrusting of journalists. Piss off."

"How's the delightful Mrs Maguire?"

"Delightful. Now piss off. And don't call my mobile again. I'm busy."

"With the murders?"

"If I tell you will you then piss off?"

"Sure. Cross my heart and hope to die."

Maguire hesitated. "Not like these two you wouldn't. You remember only too well the Feathers murders a while back? The one you almost let escape? Just as bad Tighe."

I held the BlackBerry closer to my ear. "How could I forget?" It wasn't that long ago and the memory of it was as clear as anything else stored in the darkest recesses of my mind. "But it is a one-off isn't it? I mean just the two murders in the same place at the same time? Not two different murders? Christ, you know what I mean."

"Right," answered Maguire. Then after another pause he added quietly: "But I have a bad feeling about this. It doesn't have the right vibes to be a one-off. I hope I'm wrong, but I do have bad feelings about it."

*

He had been so close.

If only he had had more time he was certain he would have been able to keep his experiment with the feathers going longer.

But he had new hope.

Maybe together they could achieve what he had failed to achieve by a whisker.

Well, maybe not a whisker.

With his background and experience and her determination success might well still be within their grasp.

He had high hopes.

Their correspondence had been infrequent.

It had to be.

And they had to be extremely careful.

Even encrypted communication had its risks.

And while he could communicate with her, she could not communicate with him.

Directly.

Nevertheless, he had latterly adopted coded messages in certain paragraphs.

Messages only they understood the meaning of.

Now he only could sit back and watch his experiments continue.

Not have a presence in the room, or wherever.

Not even within sight of his cell.

That was not possible.

Yet computers linked everyone to everything.

Computers had no borders.

Computers meant the internet.

And the internet meant freedom.

*Even for him the internet meant freedom.
His only daily connection with the outside world was the television he was permitted
to watch for one hour day.
And that included very little news.
He did not even need that for now.
Still, he was confident he would know.
When the time was right.
It couldn't be kept from him.
She would make sure the world knew what she was doing.
What they were doing.
And even in his severely confined world he would know.
The experiments would go on.*

CHAPTER ONE

Another general election is nearing, and the Prime Minister has been spending the last weeks rescheduling his life.

Dreams of Party immortality and political history-making have been replaced with tiny nightmares; nightmares that are not of the kind to have you bolting upright in the middle of the night in a cold sweat screaming in fear.

The tiny nightmares are more debilitating because they persist, and because they persist they have a sense of reality and inevitability about them. Tiny nightmares are far worse than the big ones created so successfully by imaginative Hollywood screenwriters.

Tiny nightmares don't stay up on the celluloid; they come down and crawl around inside your brain like an earwig burrowing from one side of your head through to the other.

*

"Problem? Can I help?"

The young man approached quietly, not wanting to unduly startle the woman leaning into the engine of the Mercedes Benz. It was getting late and the station sedan, its bonnet raised, stood about fifty metres from where a dim orange lamp drooped from a pole set back into the tree line beside the lay-by. Twenty paces away in the other direction the girlfriend of the young man sat staring through the windscreen of their car into the headlamps of the Mercedes as her boyfriend, surrounded in a sort of misty aura, approached the apparently stranded car. Once or twice she glanced to the rear to see if there was any other traffic pulling into the rest area. Lights blazed momentarily but none turned onto the slip road.

The young man spoke again as he neared the front of the Mercedes. "Are you OK? Is there anything I can do to help?"

The woman suddenly stood upright hitting her head on the inside of the bonnet. Rubbing it as she backed out she said: "Shit. You surprised me. That hurt." Then with a nervous half laugh she turned. "Sorry, I didn't mean to say that. I mean, oh gee heck, I bumped my head."

Mark Peterson guessed she was in her early to mid-thirties. What else he noted left him temporarily speechless. She was stunning. Short dark hair, he could not tell if it was brown or black or auburn in the faint orange tinged light, clung to her scalp and curved around her ears in crescents. With a mind of their own, his eyes cascaded over her body, absorbing her bare shoulders, her full breasts, a narrow waist and long, very long legs sheathed in stone washed jeans. Nanosecond appraisal, disrobing, redressing. Stunning on reflection might not be the appropriate word. She was enchanting.

"Actually," she broke the spell, "I am in real trouble. The blasted thing began slowing of its own accord a few miles back. Then when I pulled in here to see what it might be it just stopped. Not the engine. I don't know why but I thought I should look inside it to see if I could see anything obvious that might be the problem. I can't of course. I think it's the wheels. They just began slowing down as if the brakes were on. Which they're not. At least I have not put them on. Does any of this make sense? Or am I a crazy woman affected by the full moon."

He listened to her prattle. She looked wonderful, she spoke with an educated voice, and her entire manner was relaxed. Put them together and he thought her to be the sexiest thing he had come across in a long time. An older woman but sensual as hell.

"Well," she said. "Does it? Does any of that make any sense to you?"

"Uhh. Mmmm." He coughed an embarrassed laugh. "Not right off. I, ahh, I'm no mechanic when it comes to cars, though I know a little, but not always enough." He wanted to help. He wanted the woman to be grateful to him, to recognise his abilities even if to his mind he had not demonstrated any mechanical aptitude in the past.

But a faint bell did ring in his memory.

"It started slowing a way back, you say. As if you were applying the brakes." She smiled at him then and nodded. "Did it also start pulling to one side?"

"Yes," the woman beamed. "Absolutely. It started to pull towards the left. Do you know what it is? You sound as if you do."

Peterson was not sure, but it sounded like it could be the callipers. Sometimes with a one year old car a calliper could be faulty. Even with a Merc. They gripped and tugged the car to a standstill but once they cooled down the wheels again moved and all was well until they heated again. Then it was repeated.

Peterson again laughed lightly. He wanted to share this woman's space a little longer if he could. He glanced in the direction of his own car where his girlfriend sat, no doubt wondering what was going on.

"Do you have a manual?" he asked.

"I guess so. It's probably in the glove compartment." She opened the side door and leaned in, resting her right knee on the seat. He moved around to the other side so he could watch her through the driver's window.

"No. I can't see it," she said. Her forehead smoothed as a slight frown darkened her eyes. "Wait a minute. It might be in the trunk in the back."

The rear seat had been laid forward and in the back, filling the gap along one side, was a large sturdy wooden chest, or trunk, with an anchor carved into the lid. What looked like heavy rope fishing net was piled on top.

"Oh dear," she sighed. "Would you help me. That rope stuff is like lead. Can you just shove it off, anywhere will do, and see if the car manual is inside with all the other papers. I am sure it is. It has to be."

Peterson was happy to. A while longer with the beautiful woman was fine by him. When he raised the lid of the chest it was empty and as he turned to tell her, he saw that she was half into the back with him. The swinging arm with the wrench caught him high on the cheek and he dropped like a stone.

The stunning woman had little difficulty lifting the dead weight and tumbling him into the chest, dropping the lid and piling the rope back on top. Then she backed out and rounded the side of the car and walked towards Peterson's vehicle where his girlfriend sat peering into the glare of the Mercedes' headlamps. The woman smiled, shrugged and raised her hands palm outwards in a sign of puzzlement.

*

Tina Turner's *The Best* blared out from the stereo as the Mercedes raced along the motorway. It was her favourite song, her absolute favourite, and she joyously sang the snatches she could remember. If she could have she would have attempted the Tina strut as well, but at a hundred and ten kilometres an hour, and with her special cargo in the back, caution prevailed. She could strut later if she wanted to. Then she would certainly have something to strut about.

Another two and a half to three hours of motoring north and she would be where she could do whatever she wanted, where the woodland was dense but she had discovered how to drive into it and all but disappear from the rest of the world. Then there was no more than a few minutes walk and nothing else mattered.

Nobody else knew about it. It was her secret place, hers alone, and she would be able to entertain herself for hours before she would have to retrace her steps south,

changing the tyres on the way home, and once there work out for a time before getting ready for another totally normal everyday day.

You are the best! rasped Tina as the Mercedes swished along the macadamised road surface.

*

Mark Peterson came to to find himself immobilised.

It did not take him long to remember every detail of what had gone before, and to realise that he was standing erect with his back against the rough bark of a tree. A rope bit into his flesh as it circled across his chest and under his arms, and another wound twice around his belly and a third bound his legs to the base of the tree. A wedge of material filled his mouth and was held there by a bandanna knotted at the back of his head.

He was somewhere in a forest, that was plain. It was dark, obviously late at night, some hours since he had pulled into the lay-by and seen the stricken station sedan, but his mind was clear enough to recognise his surroundings. And despite the throbbing to the left side of his face his eyes quickly focused and he saw Norma Clark sitting on the ground to his side, her hands thrust under her.

To the other side the driver of the Mercedes sat leaning back in a canvas backed chair he had last registered as being in the back of the station sedan. She was smiling, the moonlight giving her face a silvery sheen and dusting her eyes with sparkles.

Peterson realised he was naked and started to panic very seriously.

"Well, how is our young stud there? Feeling alright are we? Just a little sore no doubt. Sorry about the slug to the face, but you do understand I'm sure. Had to be done. You wouldn't have just gone along now would you?" The woman's voice was no longer the defenceless female. Now there was a confidence lacking before.

Turning to Norma Clark she feigned a scowl. "See," she said. "I told you he would be alright and that there was no need for you to worry." A smile quickly returned. "Your young man is strong and can take a punch. Just like a professional pugilist. As long as he's not hit with a steel wrench of course." She tittered. "Even our Lenox would probably have gone down with that."

Norma Clark began to blubber. Her wrists were still red and raw after spending hours bound and trussed in the filthy rope netting. She had not been hit, just securely tied and wrapped after being shown her boyfriend's bleeding body lying motionless in the chest in the back of the woman's car. The woman had pointed a short barrelled pistol at her, the one she could see resting in her lap as she sat with her feet tucked up under her, and threatened to shoot her there and then if she did not do exactly as she was told. Now here she was with tears and mucus streaming down her face, too frightened to even remove her hands from under her buttocks.

"Oh please," chided the woman. "Here, use this to wipe away those awful tears and make yourself presentable." She held out to her a white handkerchief with a little floral pattern in one corner. "Come on. I am not going to bite you. Come and get it."

Peterson had watched the exchange with terror mounting in his breast. He felt like wetting himself. Worse, if he wasn't careful his bowel would empty itself. There would be nothing he could do to stop it.

As if she sensed his thoughts the woman turned to him and gave him her sweetest smile. As if to reassure him that he needn't have a worry in the world, as if they were all friends out for a midnight picnic and only some minor irritation had occurred which she was easily rectifying.

It was this casual attitude which Mark Peterson feared suddenly. The woman was without normal warmth. The smiling lips and eyes were turned on unhesitatingly but there was nothing behind them. They were superficial. Below the surface was

emptiness, a coldness. Heartless. The word struck him blindingly. He believed the woman to be without a heart.

"There," she crooned to Norma. "That's a lot better. You look beautiful again. I can really see what he sees in you. You are a lovely young woman. But there is a lot more isn't there. There is much, much more that he likes about you. Let's cheer him up shall we. Come on now. Show him some more of what you have." She distractedly picked up the pistol and waved it in the air. "Start with the slacks. Then your blouse. We'll see where we go from there."

Norma Clark shook her head slowly from side to side. Why was this happening to her? Why her? What did this horrid woman want with her, want her to do? It was impossible. It couldn't really be happening. It was a terrible, terrible dream that she would wake up from soon. She would open her eyes and they would not be almost blinded by the salt, her head would be quiet and not ringing, the ache would not be blocking her tubes deep inside her breast. It would all have gone away.

But she knew it was real and she dreaded what might come.

"Please," Norma pleaded. "Don't do this to us. Please let us go. We won't tell anyone. Don't hurt us. Just let us go."

The woman smiled her sweet smile and nodded gently, soothing, like she would to a child upset by something that was simple to make go away. "First the trousers. Then the top."

Norma Clark unbuttoned the waist and pulled the zip down at the front. Awkwardly she began to push the trousers over her hips, down her legs. They clung and it took a great effort.

"Wonderful. See. That wasn't all that hard was it. Now the blouse."

With unsteady fingers and streaming eyes, Norma opened her blouse and slipped it over her trembling shoulders.

"Look at that would you." The woman beamed and pointed the pistol at Mark. "Look what you have done to him. There he is all tied up, feeling sorry for himself a short while ago, and now look at him. Your man is beginning to show his mettle." She gave a little giggle. "My what fun we are going to have."

The woman took a very deep breath, exhaling it audibly. "Oh yes," she said, "You two are going to give me the show of shows. I just know it."

She rose from her chair and walked across to Mark. Taking him in her hand she looked over to Norma. "Come here my sweet. Show me how you make your soldier stand rigid to attention."

*

Two hours before dawn the woman who called herself The High Priestess turned onto the motorway and pointed the Mercedes Benz south. She was sure that it would be a long time before the bodies were found. They would have decomposed so much or been tormented by wild animals to such an extent it would be extremely difficult to identify them, let alone determine with accuracy the cause of death. It may even take a little while to realise that some missing body parts were not down to animal interference.

By then she would have found others to entertain her.

And she would have already begun experimenting just as he had.

The High Priestess is coming to Amazon soon.