The Crawl

By Richard Stainton

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Decker fell.

One stumble and he was gone; an avalanche of old skin and bones down the stairs. It took just a matter of seconds but it seemed longer, as if he was dwelling needlessly on every thump and crack, until he came to rest in an undignified sprawl, face down, his feet still on the bottom steps, one slipper half hanging off and the other lost on the descent, along with his glasses.

Immediately, the pain shot through him. Gut-wrenching hurt that made him scream and almost faint.

With it came an awful recognition, and a memory of when he was a foolish young man rather than a foolish old one.

He’d broken both his legs.

Decker was walking a tightrope, with arms outstretched, one foot right in front of the other, slowly at first but then with increasing speed and confidence, even though the bricks beneath him were chipped and worn. It was all a matter of self-belief, of which he had no shortage. There was no-one to stop him doing what he wanted now. No moron with stripes to shout him down or threaten him with the glasshouse. The night belonged to him; he was invincible.

“Bollocks to you, Sergeant Major Jones. Bollocks to square bashing and boot polishing and all the bloody lot of it. Bollocks to the British Army!”

“Come down, you bloody idiot,” laughed Dave, but with an edge of seriousness. Even full of beer, he was still Mr Common Sense. “You’ll break your bloody neck, man.”

Decker ignored his friend and carried on along the steelworks wall. The pavement was for dullards, he had decided.

“Jesus, it’s so good to be alive!”

“You won’t be alive much longer if you’re not careful. Come on, don’t be a prat. I can’t afford any bother with my application going through.”

“Why the hell do you want to join the police? Really? Why does anyone want to spend their life in uniform?”

“You’d never understand.”

“You’re right, I wouldn’t,” said Decker, stopping for a second to perform a hand jive.

“Anyway, you chose to join the Army.”

“Aye, don’t remind me. It just seemed the only way out of this bloody town at the time.”

“And now you’re back.”

“Now I’m back. Off the leash and ready to enjoy the permissive society.”

“That girl in the White Swan didn’t seem very permissive.”

“Stuck up cow. Just because she’d lived in London, she fought she were the bloody Queen. I bet if I had a southern accent, I’d be poking her down the Rec by now.”

“You’d be lucky.”

“I am lucky.”

He wobbled for a second and giggled childishly, unphased.

“I don’t know why you’re so hard on the Army. It’s got you a trade, hasn’t it? All that electronics stuff.”

“Sod electronics. I might apply to join the circus, you know. It’s a doddle. An absolute doddle.”

“What?” sneered Dave. “Become a clown? You already are one.”

“Very funny. But just look at this.”

He was near the corner now. Instead of attempting a 90-degree turn, he jumped to the next bit of wall. He landed fine at first, celebrating with a cheer, but then toppled forward, his grin turning to a comical look of horror. He smashed into the pavement with a sickening crack and his scream pierced through the night.

He screamed again. The pain was intense, tugging at every nerve of his body. He gasped for air in deep unsteady breaths, the sweat pouring from him.

Two legs fractured, he was certain, but the pain was so overwhelming he couldn’t quite work out where the breaks were. In the left leg it was definitely below the knee, while in the right leg it seemed higher. He knew it took quite a lot of force to break the femur, but it had been a hard fall and he was an old man with brittle bones, with little flesh to cushion them. If there was anything to take solace from, it was that he had no sensation of his skin being ruptured, so he wasn’t going to bleed to death. But he was still seriously injured.

He felt stupid, foolish, a useless geriatric. His bladder leaked, his memory failed him, and now he couldn’t even walk down a flight of stairs without a feat of acrobatics. Though only a minute before he had descended the precarious ladder from the loft. If he could manage that, why couldn’t he cope with stairs?

He’d broken his left leg years ago, and now it was both. A matching pair as testament to his clumsiness. The first time he had at least had the excuse of youthful high spirits. When had that been? The throbbing agony fogged his mind. Must have been around 1967. Then there had been Dave to help him, knocking on the door of the nearest house and asking to use their telephone. As soon as the ambulance had come, his friend had scarpered, worried about anything that would put his police career in jeopardy.

Now there was no-one to help. He would have to call an ambulance himself, which meant getting his mobile from his coat pocket. And his coat was in the kitchen if he remembered rightly. If only he hadn’t got rid of the landline here in the hall, but he’d just been so pissed off with all the cold calls.

He attempted to crawl, but just the slight movement of his legs sent another lightning bolt of pain through him. If he’d eaten anything, he would have been sick.

How many feet to the kitchen? Ten? Twelve? And he would have to turn in the narrow hallway. It was impossible. The pain was so intense that he wouldn’t be able to move more than a few inches without blacking out.

He would have to wait here until someone came. But who was going to come? The postman only came as far as the outer gates and left the mail there. That just left Magda, the cleaner, and she’d gone back to Poland for two weeks.

Who else might come and ring the intercom buzzer at the gates? No-one.

Nobody was going to come anywhere near the place. Not at Christmas.

Decker would have driven straight past the entrance if he hadn’t been behind the estate agent’s car. What at first looked like nothing more than a passing place, curved sharply round to a dirt track and then suddenly straightened, heading a couple of hundred yards through the forest before arriving at a pair of tall metal gates. The estate agent slipped out of his Austin Princess to unlock them and then drove into a large square clearing. The rough track became a surfaced driveway, widening into a parking area at the front of a solitary house.

The estate agent was out of his car before Decker, smiling smarmily, all shiny suit and blond highlights, like a reject from a fashionable New Romantic band.

“So, here we are,” he beamed. “Quite a hidden gem, isn’t it?”

Decker took a good look. The house was only two storeys, but seemed sizeable enough for him to rattle around in. Though not that old, just Edwardian at the earliest, it had the appearance of a far more ancient farmhouse, with its huge wooden door beneath a weathered gable, and the mass of ivy creeping up the Purbeck stone. But thankfully no thatched roof, which he considered nothing more than an attractive fire hazard.

“As you can see,” continued the estate agent, “as well as the house you get these gorgeous grounds, which stretch right round the back of the house too.”

Grounds was the right word, thought Decker. You couldn’t really call them gardens, given that they consisted of nothing but slightly overgrown lawns and a few bushes. As he had little time for gardening, that suited him just fine.

“And over there we have a very spacious outbuilding, which you could use as a garage, or maybe even convert into a guest room.”

It was a barn, basically; a ramshackle wooden construction in urgent need of repair. Decker supposed he might use it as a garage, or just knock it down and build a new one.

“Let’s take a look inside the house, shall we?”

Decker waited silently while the young man looked for the right key and wrestled with the huge wooden door.

Inside, the house was a shell, stripped of furniture and all clues as to its former inhabitants, apart from the fact that when it came to painting walls their imagination didn’t stretch beyond eggshell white. The carpet had been ripped out too, leaving an uneven, blotchy stone floor. It had that horrible musty smell that all houses have after being left uninhabited for a while.

“As you can see, it’s very spacious,” said the estate agent, as he led the way into the living room. “The rooms are very big for a house of this type. Nice high ceilings too.”

Decker gave a non-committal grunt, only half-listening to the well-rehearsed sales pitch. He was imagining his own possibilities for the place; where the bookcases would go, and where each picture would hang.

He had been thinking for some time that he should have a proper home again, rather than just a perfunctory roof over his head. He was a wealthy man now, yet he was still living in a pokey flat in Boscombe, with half his belongings stuffed in boxes. He had neglected his home life because he associated home with family – the family he no longer had. That was stupid, he knew. A nice place to come back to would help him relax and think straight.

He followed the estate agent into the kitchen, where some of the paint was flaking and there was evidence of damp. Decker’s mind was inevitably thrown back to that first look around the cottage on Sketby Moor. With its holes in the roof and half the plasterwork crumbling, that place had been in a far worse state, making the effort needed here seem minimal.

The cottage… He quickly shook away the memory as it wasn’t somewhere he wanted to go right now. It would always be associated with what had happened there.

He turned his attention back to the estate agent, who was droning on about the land at the rear of the house. Decker made some appreciative noises and followed him back out into the hall and up the rather steep stairs. On the landing, they stopped to look up at the hatch to the attic.

“The attic’s pretty big so you could have a conversion. Or just use it for storage.”

“Can I have a look?”

“Er, yes. Sure.”

The estate agent picked up the loft hook that was lying on the floor and stood on tiptoe to pull open the hatch and bring down the ladder, along with a cloud of dust and cobwebs.

“Right…” said the young man. “It’s a bit dusty – I don’t really want to mess up my clothes.”

“’Where there’s muck, there’s brass’, my Dad used to say. You want to sell the place, don’t you?”

“Of course, yes, but…”

“Oh, don’t worry,” said Decker, exasperated. “I’ll go up on my own.”

Decker climbed the ladder and found the light switch on the floor. Inside the attic was a sea of dust, littered with offcuts of lino and rusting tins of paint. It was, however, as spacious as the estate agent had promised – nicely wide and with a fairly high roof. Decker was tall but only at the edges did he have to stoop. In one of the sloping walls was a skylight, which would be perfect for his telescope. The rest of the space would be ideal for the moonscape.

“What do you think?” shouted the voice from below.

“It’s good. Definite potential,” answered Decker. He returned to the ladder and brought a load more dust with him. He brushed his shirt down while the estate agent, keen to stay as immaculate as possible, went into one of the rooms.

“Now, through here’s the main bedroom.”

Decker entered a squarish room with a high ceiling. He paced around, getting a feel for its size, then went to the window. It looked out on to the back of the house, where there was another stretch of lawn, this time ornamented with a few flower beds and a small pond. Beyond the rear fence were more trees. This was one of the parts of the New Forest that was actual woodland rather than heathland.

“Your nearest neighbours are quite a way away,” said the estate agent. “It’s ideal if you like your privacy.”

“Yes,” said Decker. “I like my privacy.” Or to be more exact, he liked seclusion, being away from people.

This was the perfect place, he had decided. After a hard day’s work, he could come back here and, for a few hours, forget the world existed. There would just be him, in his little castle, hidden away in the heart of the forest. Here he would be able to think.

He didn’t need to see any more, or hear any more sales patter. He has been pretty much convinced on first sight of the place, and the attic had swung it.

I’ll take it,” he said.

The old carriage clock, a gift to Decker’s father on his retirement from the steelworks, ticked away remorselessly. Everything in the hallway was as it had been for decades: the splintery old chest used as a toolbox, the hat-stand with shoes heaped at the bottom, the bookcase crammed with vintage science fiction novels. Framed photos of his wife and daughter all over the walls.

A still life picture with Decker at its centre, unable to move. The pain was still overwhelming, making him bite his lip so hard that he drew droplets of blood. His bony fingers dug deep into the carpet and tears welled up his eyes.

He’d chosen this place all those years ago because he wanted to be alone, giving little thought to what it would be like to one day be a frail old man in the middle of nowhere. Where the nearest neighbour was a quarter of a mile away and would never hear a scream for help. Where there were no passers-by to alert.

No-one came to visit either. No friends or family would pop round this Christmas Eve to offer their best wishes. Anyone who had ever cared about him was either dead or had given up on him long ago.

Through living here, and from years of being anti-social, he had created the perfect prison for himself, and he knew it might well be the end of him, unless he got to the kitchen and that phone.

Did he care? Not so much about dying. Even ignoring all that had happened to him, and the dark underbelly of life to which he had been exposed, it was not a world he viewed with relish. All the preaching and the lying. All the poisonous ideologies pretending to make things better but only making them worse. All the vacuous hype about things that had no worth. He wouldn’t be sorry to leave all that behind.

The only sting from death came from this: that he would die without knowing the answer to the question that had plagued his life. What had happened to his wife and daughter? Who had taken them?

She walked through the ward like a ballerina dancing across a battlefield, entirely incongruous in the ugliness and misery around her. Even the act of pushing a silly little trolley couldn’t mar her elegance. To Decker she seemed like someone from another universe altogether. A realm without such sordid things as broken limbs and bedpans.

Lying there for days, with his plastered leg in traction, he had already reached the crude conclusion that even the plainest of women were leant a touch of bewitchment by a nurse’s uniform. But this was the kind of woman who would have looked good in an old coal sack.

He felt slightly pathetic at being reduced to ogling nurses. While stationed in Gibraltar, he had met plenty of beautiful women but they had always brought their mother along as a chaperone. There had been other kinds of girls of course, ones you had to pay for, but with them came the risk of a dose of something. The consequent frustration had made him more homesick for Sketby than anything else, with the possible exception of his parents. On being demobbed, he had returned here full of hot-blooded ambitions concerning the old girlfriends he would look up and the new ones he would discover. But now, thanks to his drunken stupidity on his first night back, he was stuck here, bored beyond words, and incapable of anything but fantasies.

Still, she was some fantasy. He watched her as she glided gracefully from bed to bed, checking temperatures and handing out drugs like manna from heaven. Even the old guy opposite, who looked half-dead most of the time, perked up when she arrived.

“You’re new,” he said when she finally reached him and began straightening his bed clothes.

“Only to this ward. I’m just helping out.”

“Oh. I see. What’s your name?”

“Nurse Baxter.”

“No, what’s your first name?”

“Don’t worry about that. I’m just Nurse Baxter to you.”

As she leant over him, he caught her wonderfully clean, soapy smell. Up close she was even more entrancing.

“Is it Arabella? Clara? No, I’ve got it – Grace. Princess Grace!”

“Yes, that’s right. Like I said, I’m just helping out here. I’m flying back to Monaco tonight.”

“Can I come with you?”

“You’re not flying anywhere any time soon, are you? Here, take this.” She handed him a painkiller and a glass of water.

“I fell off a wall,” he informed her, before swallowing.

“That was a silly thing to do, wasn’t it?”

“Aye, but I had a good reason. I were celebrating leaving the Army.”

“I take it you didn’t like the Army.”

“Not much. I’d rather have been in the Air Force. I like planes, though not as much as rockets.”

“Rockets?”

“Oh aye, it’ll be all rockets soon, you know, up to the Moon and back. There’ll be bases on the Moon – whole cities. And then it’ll be Mars.”

She smiled – with an air of condescension, but it still delighted him.

“I think you’re letting your imagination run wild,” she said.

“What’s the point of having an imagination if you’re not going to let it run wild?”

“I suppose.”

“Everything in the world was just someone’s imagination’s once. Perhaps I’ve just imagined you.”

“Perhaps you have. And now I’m going to vanish in a puff of smoke.”

With that she was gone, off to the next sorry case, leaving Decker staring wistfully after her. When he got out of here he was going to find a woman just like that. Someone smart and classy, not someone like Eileen Burke, who would let you put her hand down her blouse at the bus stop as long as you bought her a bag of chips.

If he died here, he would never know what had become of Laura and Zoe. It was the unknowing more than anything that had kept him going all these years. While there was the just the faintest hope that the bodies would be found, and give up clues to whoever had taken them, he could not surrender to death. He had kept himself as healthy and fit as possible, eating well, rarely touching alcohol, running miles until his knees gave out ten years back, and even then, still walking for miles across the forest. He had a congenital heart condition but that was under control, thanks to the pills. He had done everything in his power to hang on to life, just in case the world finally showed him some justice.

But now it seemed any chance was gone, lost in a moment of geriatric clumsiness. Unless he could somehow get to that phone. Could he overcome the pain and make it to the kitchen? He knew he had to try.

He pulled at the top of his jumper and stuck it in his mouth, to give him something to bite. Then he dragged himself towards the front door – just a few inches but the sensation was sickening. As his feet hit the floor there was another jolt of pain. The wool muffled his scream.

It took him a couple of minutes to recover and work out what he was going to do next. The kitchen was behind him, but there was no room to easily turn 180 degrees. He could try crawling there backwards, but that would put even more pressure on his legs. The only solution that he could see was to get face up and then sit up. Then he could get more leverage from his arms and push himself there.

Turning himself face up was not going to be easy. Wincing with pain, still biting the jumper, he twisted the top half of his body over. His legs, a dead weight, remained where they were. Bracing himself, he slid his hand under the left one and quickly pulled it over, losing his remaining slipper in the process. The pain was so unbearable that he almost blacked out, and it was another five minutes before he thought about moving again. He sat up and shuffled towards the kitchen, inch by inch, pushing himself forward with his arms. Every foot or so he stopped for a while, to catch his breath and quell the awful feeling of nausea that was overcoming him

He passed by the doorway to the living room and then finally arrived at the threshold to the kitchen. Gasping for breath, he looked up, expecting to see his coat on the back of the chair by the table.

It wasn’t there.

Then he remembered. When he’d come home that morning, after a trip to the shops in Lymington, he’d put the food away and then gone straight up to the loft, still wearing his coat. While working away up there, he’d got too warm and taken it off. It was still up there, on the chair. There was no way he could get it back. Even if he could get up the stairs, getting into the loft involved standing on tiptoe with the hook to pull open the hatch and drag down the ladder. And then getting up that ladder. With two broken legs that was impossible.

There was no way in the world that he could get to his phone. He was trapped.

2

Amid the darkness was a dull grey surface scarred with crags, craters and pools of hardened lava. It looked remote, forbidding, but there were people here.

In a valley between two high ridges, a small buggy had come to a halt. In it sat two figures, their faces hidden by the impenetrable black visors of their spacesuits. On the back of the vehicle was an array of excavating equipment: laser drills, sonic disruptors and even an old-fashioned spade, along with a couple of metal barrels for collecting ore samples.

The buggy had left trails in the dust that stretched all the way over a hill to a plateau beyond. At the heart of this plateau was a giant silver dome surrounded by a number of smaller domes and silos, connected by a complex web of pipes and tunnels. There were tiny windows in some of the buildings, and if you were to stare into them you would see people: men and women of all races, some working with scientific apparatus, others relaxing in the recreation areas.

Just past the base was a landing pad with two shuttles on it. And beyond that, more dusty, craggy terrain, until it came to a sudden end.

Then there was a huge drop and on the other side of it a small table littered with brushes, tins of modelling paint, a couple of half-painted astronauts and the remote control that moved the moon buggy.

Next to the table was a chair, with a heavy black winter overcoat hanging on it. And in the pocket was Decker’s mobile phone, plus the keys to the house and car. They might as well have been on the actual moon for all the chance he had of reaching them now.

It was Dave who spotted them first. Just a glimpse across the busy, smoke-filled pub was enough to get him excited, given that The Coach and Horses had an otherwise unappealing clientele. There were a few younger people here but largely it was an older crowd: ruddy faced, gaunt old men, who looked like they had been there forever; fat, cackling women drinking port and lemon; aging teddy boys with awkward combovers, on the prowl for one last desperate fling. Decker hated the place, and Dave had to admit it was hardly the best hangout for two lusty young men. But needs must; every week they started here because the beer was cheap.

“Hey up, John, cast your eyes on that pair of crackers!”

Decker looked up from his pint and peered through the nicotine fog towards the bar. At first, he only saw the brunette, and thought Dave had been describing the young woman’s more than ample chest. But then the crowd shifted slightly and he saw the equally attractive blonde standing next to her. A smile of recognition flashed across his face.

“Both a bit of alright, aren’t they?” suggested Dave lustfully. “I think I’ll take the blonde one though – I’m more of a leg man than a tit man.”

“Sorry, Davey-boy,” said Decker, “but the blonde one’s mine.”

“Who says?”

“Watch.”

Decker headed to the bar, manoeuvring his way around various drunken obstacles.

“Hello, Nurse Baxter,” he said. “Remember me?”

She turned and inspected him, rather clinically. “No. Should I?”

“Six months ago. Broken leg after falling off a wall. You were helping out in the ward.”

“Oh, yes. I remember, vaguely. Fully recovered, I see.”

“Thanks, to your expert care, aye.”

“I gave you a painkiller, that’s all.”

She took her change from the barman and pushed one of the lager and limes to her friend.

“Celebrating coming out of the army, weren’t you?”

“That’s right.”

“And what are you celebrating tonight?”

“Oh, just being alive, Nurse Baxter. Just being alive. But I can’t call you Nurse Baxter anymore, can I?”

“It’s Laura.”

“Laura. It’s lovely to meet you out of uniform, Laura. Though I’m not sure which is worse – this place or the hospital.”

She laughed, and Decker sensed a hint of approval. He was not unwelcome here. This was an opportunity if he played his cards right.

“Eeh, are you wearing that shirt for a bet?” piped in her mate. Decker found her attractive too, but in a much showier way. He preferred the elegance of Laura.

“What’s wrong with it?” protested Decker, looking down at the bright orange paisley.

“What’s right with it!”

“Don’t mind Wendy,” said Laura. “She’s a little outspoken. It is a bit colourful though.”

“It’s psychedelic – it’s all the rage. Besides, I always wear bright colours. I wouldn’t be seen dead wearing any dull black. And I won’t get run over at night, will I?”

“No, that’s true. We don’t want you in hospital again.”

Decker, happy with the opening shots, decided it was time to push on. “Wendy, perhaps you’d like to meet my mate Dave. He’s got much more restrained taste in clothing. We’re just sat over there, in the corner.”

Wendy didn’t look impressed. “We’re not staying here long. It’s a right dump.”

As if to confirm her opinion, an old man with straggly hair and what looked like dried egg on his jacket, staggered past them towards the toilet.

“Dump? You can’t say that about The Coach and Horses! Noel Coward drinks here, you know.”

“Noel Coward?”

“Well, he used to, till he got barred for cheating at dominoes.”

“Oh, give over.”

“We’ll join you for a bit,” said Laura, “but as Wendy says, we’re not staying.”

“Nor are we – we’re off to the Roxy later. There’s a band on apparently.”

“Are they any good?”

“Probably not, if they’re playing the Roxy. But a couple more drinks and anything’ll sound decent. Come on, we’re over here.”

As he led the way through the boozy crowd, he felt a sense of anticipation and excitement. It was more than just lust, more than just the hope that by the end of the night he would have her in his arms. It was as if he was standing on the threshold of a whole new world of wonderful possibilities, all of them involving Laura Baxter.

His life hadn’t flashed before his eyes when he tumbled down the stairs. That remembrance would take place now, at a slow crawl. Every horror, every mistake, played back before him like a film he had seen too often and hadn’t even enjoyed the first time. Even the good parts would bring no joy because their goodness had turned rotten. He would be reminded of every sorrow he had ever known before he departed this world.

Though he wasn’t totally sure that he was going to die because of this. He could make the extra few feet into the kitchen and get food from the fridge and cupboards, so he wouldn’t starve. And the central heating was on, so he wouldn’t freeze either. It went off at night but then he could always turn the oven on. It was possible to survive.

The main worry was his legs. Untreated, he knew it was possible for the fracture to become infected and for that infection to kill him. There was also the sheer agony of it, and the stress that would put on his heart. His pills were in the bedroom so at some point he would have to try to get upstairs. He wasn’t sure that the medication was strong enough against this incredible strain, but without it he would certainly succumb.

Getting upstairs though? How could he possibly bear the pain of that?

“And that,” said Decker, pointing up at the full moon, “is the Ocean of Storms. Or to give it the proper Latin name, Oceanus Procellarum.”

“What am I looking at?” asked Laura, squinting through the binoculars.

“That large black patch on the left. Though it merges into the Mare Ibrium and a few other seas.”

“Why do they call them seas if they think there’s no water up there?”

“Oh, the names date back hundreds of years. They thought differently back then.”

“They didn’t know it was made from cheese, obviously,” said Laura.

“No, it were Galileo who worked that out.”

She handed him back the binoculars and leant back against the van, pulling her cardigan tight against the chill. Here at Hallerby Point, a rocky escarpment on the edge of Sketby Moor, there was a fantastic view of the moon and stars, but it wasn’t the most comfortable of places.

“Not exactly warm, is it?”

“I can tell you’re thrilled by the wonders of the moon,” replied Decker sarcastically.

“I’m thrilled that you’re thrilled. Isn’t that enough?”

“Maybe.”

He leant back beside her and gripped her hand; it felt cold and fragile, like porcelain.

“Most blokes don’t bring women out here to indulge in astronomy, do they? It’s just I find it fascinating. I’ve always found it fascinating – everything up there, but particularly the moon.”

“I suppose you’d be mortally offended if I said it was just a dead piece of rock?”

“But it’s not dead, is it? The moon is life itself. Every time you stand on a beach and the waves lap at your feet, that’s due to the moon. That piece of rock is the tides, it’s moonlight, it’s thousands of years of folklore, and poetry and romance – and it’s our future. One day soon a man is going to walk up there. And then one day, we all will. It’s our stepping stone to the planets and the stars.”

She smiled and Decker wondered for a moment if he was going to ruin everything with his boyish enthusiasm. Women wanted men, not boys.

“I like it when you’re passionate like that,” she said, sweeping the hair back from her face.

“Really? But you’d rather I were passionate about you?”

“Just for the moment, yes.”

He dropped his binoculars on the grass and took her in arms. For a few minutes they forgot all about the moon and anything else. The universe was them and nothing more. His hands explored, slowly but surely, only being pulled away when he attempted to go beneath her blouse.

“Like I said,” he grinned. “The moon and romance – it’s always been the way. Hey, I wonder if Dave’s been bringing Wendy out here.”

“Probably. They seem to be getting pretty serious.”

“Well, she’s probably seen the size of his truncheon.”

Laura jabbed him in the ribs. “Don’t be crude!”

“Oh, come on. There’s no need for you to be prudish. You’re a nurse – you must have seen it all.”

“I’ve seen enough, yes.”

“Aye, but I haven’t.”

He took her in arms again and continued where he had left off. This time she didn’t resist as he his slid his hand slowly up her top.

The pain made it hard to think. His mind was a fog of fear and memories when he needed to concentrate on a clear plan of action – a way out of this impossible situation. He dug his fingernails into his palms and tried to focus.

Was there any other way he could call for help? There was the computer, but that was in the loft too. Did he still have the old mobile phone, the one with the cracked screen? No, he’d chucked it, and that wouldn’t work without that little card in it anyway.

With his legs in this condition he wouldn’t be able to drive, even if he found the spare car keys. Crawl to the road, then wait for a passing car? No, it was way too far – the pain and exertion would surely kill him.

His only choice was to stay here and wait, hoping he could hold out until Magda returned from Poland in the New Year, or until someone buzzed from the gates. There was an intercom station in the hall, and although it was fairly high up, he might be able to reach it. He would have to make sure he didn’t stray too far from there, in the unlikely event that someone did call.

But first he had to get to those pills, and that meant getting upstairs. Was it possible? Could he bear the pain?

Maybe not, but he knew he had no choice.

“A real beauty, isn’t she?” beamed Brian, proudly patting the bonnet of his Rover 3500.

“Nice,” said Decker, not really interested but trying to be polite. It was a just a car – a very nice car perhaps, but ultimately just a way of getting from A to B. Unlike a plane or a rocket, which, unshackled from the confines of the ground, seemed so much more.

“Four-wheel disc brakes, de Dion tube suspension, syncromesh transmission – this is state of art, my friend.”

Decker wondered if Laura’s brother-in-law knew what any of that meant or whether it was just a memorised spiel given out to impress people. In this case it had failed, as Decker was covertly paying more attention to the mini-skirted brunette walking on the other side of the road.

“That’s your work van, is it?” Brian nodded to the rusting heap parked a few yards down the street.

Obviously, it’s my work van, moron, thought Decker. That’s why it says Fairway Electricals on the side. The man was obviously trying to make a point: he was successful enough to have a flash car while Decker’s poverty forced him to drive Laura around in a borrowed vehicle. Despite only meeting Brian for the first time twenty minutes ago, he had already weighed him up. The man was full of himself and wanted the world to know it.

“Aye, they let me use it at weekends,” said Decker.

As far as he was concerned he had nothing to prove to this idiot, but he was going to stay friendly and civil. It was all part of the ritual of having a new girlfriend. He had been with Laura for several weeks now and it was time for him to meet the family. He’d been spared her parents for now and was starting with her sister and brother-in-law, which was perhaps going to be more of a baptism of fire than he had expected. But if he got through this with smiles and good manners, he’d be judged fit to meet Mummy and Daddy.

“TV repairman, aren’t you?”

“That’s right.”

“Money good?”

“It’s alright.”

“I work down at the glass factory. Just been promoted to operations manager, actually.”

“Oh,” said Decker, wondering if the man expected a round of applause. Tired of this silly contest, he suggested they go inside to see how the women were getting on. But even as they walked down the garden path, Brian kept up his stream of bravado, telling him all about his wonderful job. Decker wasn’t even that interested in his own work, let alone anyone else’s.

The aroma of roasting beef hit them as they entered the house and Decker relaxed a little. There was something wonderfully homely about that smell.

“Won’t be long now,” said Debbie, emerging from the kitchen in her pinny. She bore only a slight resemblance to Laura and had a far more earthy, ebullient manner. Decker had taken an instant liking to her and wondered what she was doing with an idiot like Brian.

“Good, I’m bloody starving,” said Brian bluntly.

“You always are. Why don’t you get John a beer?”

“Aye, reckon I will.”

“Debbie, where’s the cornflour?” called Laura from the kitchen. Debbie hurried back in to help while Brian went into the larder and emerged with two bottles of brown ale.

“Cheers,” said Decker, as they sat down at the table.

“You a sporting man?” asked Brian.

“A bit. I follow football but I don’t play anymore.”

“Football? You mean the round ball variety, I take it? I’m more of a rugby man myself. That’s a real sport. Though I mean League of course, not that Union nonsense.”

“Of course,” said Decker, who had only the faintest clue about the difference between the two codes. “Do you play?”

“Oh aye,” said Brian. “I’m scrum half for Sketby Town.”

He then proceeded to go into great detail about his rugby career. Decker nodded and made appropriate comments but wished to hell that he hadn’t asked. It was a blessed relief when Debbie called out for her husband to come and carve the joint.

The food was good and with the two women there, the conversation became more interesting, with less opportunity for Brian to show off. Decker asked lots of questions of Debbie to give her the chance to do the talking, and the afternoon slowly developed into a enjoyable one, helped along by another brown ale. He would have had a third if Laura hadn’t reminded him that he was driving.

“Well,” asked Laura, as they drove home later across Sketby Moor. “What did you think?”

“I like your sister,” said Decker.

“But not Brian?”

“Less so.”

“A bit full of himself, isn’t he?”

“He’s full of something, that’s for sure.”

“Yes,” she said, with a hint of anxiety in her voice. “And that’s not all.”

“What?”

“Oh, maybe I’m just imagining it.”

“Imagining what?”

“It’s nothing really, it’s just sometimes I catch him looking at me. Looking at me funny, you know.”

“No, I don’t know,” said Decker, accelerating to overtake a cyclist. “Looking at you funny in what way? Sticking his tongue out and pulling his ears?”

“No, stupid. Looking at me like he fancies me.”

“Well, he probably does. You can’t blame him – you are rather gorgeous.”

“He’s married to my sister!”

“I suppose that is an issue, aye.”

“And there was this other time…” She stared out the window, at the darkness descending over the moor. “Well, maybe it was just an accident. Maybe he just brushed against me, but I’m not sure.”

“He touched you?”

“I think so.”

“Bloody hell. Did you tell Debbie?”

“No, of course not. I’m not totally sure, am I? And she worships the guy – she’d never believe me.”

“Might have been a bit tricky, I suppose. But if he touches you again, tell me and I’ll knock his bloody head off. Even if he is scrum half for Sketby Town Gorillas.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea either. Anyway, I’m sure he’ll back off now you’re on the scene.”

She placed her hand affectionately on his knee. Just a simple touch like that was enough to excite him.

“Fancy stopping for a bit? You know, while I’ve got the van.”

She looked behind her, at the tattered tartan blanket and the toolbox.

“It’s not exactly romantic, is it? Or comfortable.”

“Where then? I could sneak into the nurses’ quarters but I don’t think your roommate would be amused.”

“Okay then,” she relented. “But not here on the main road – somewhere quieter.”

“I know just the place,” said Decker, trying to contain his delight. A few hundred yards later he turned the van sharply down a narrow, unlit lane.

3

He needed to urinate, and soon.

He hadn’t thought about that, or any other bodily functions. Perhaps in a few weeks’ time they would find him dead in a pool of his own piss and shit. He pitied the poor sod who would have to clean up the mess.

What he needed was some kind of receptacle, which meant crawling a few feet into the kitchen. Steeling himself, he bit on his jumper again and in short, agonising bursts, reached the fridge. He stretched up, opened the door, and grabbed a plastic milk bottle with a couple of inches left. After hurriedly drinking it down, he leaned against the freezer, pulled out his dick and put it to the mouth of the bottle. He pissed inside but some of it dripped back on him as he finished.

He zipped himself back up, cursing the indignities of old age and wondering what the hell he was going to crap into when the time came.

The pervading aroma was of burnt fat. For the rest of his life he would bizarrely associate that smell with learning he was to become a father. Every time he walked past some greasy café, he would be transported back to the Firenzi, with its plastic chequered tablecloths and faded posters of Florence. He would even remember the song on the radio – *Legend of Xanadu* by Dave Dee, Dozy, Beaky, Mick and Tich, competing with the sizzling of pans and the owner arguing in Italian with his wife.

“You’re sure?” he asked.

Laura nodded. She was pale, on the verge of tears.

Decker put his head in hands. “Oh… great.”

“Is that all you have say? ‘Oh great’?”

He reached across the table and clutched her hand. “No, no, of course not. I don’t know what to say. No-one rehearses anything like this, do they?”

“Do you want kids?”

“I wanted kids at some point, aye.”

“But not now? Want to play the field a bit first?”

“No, it’s not that. You know I don’t want anyone else but you. It’s just that… well, I still feel like a kid myself. I’m a kid with a job, a kid who drives a van and fixes TVs, but still basically sees life as a bit of a wheeze. This has pulled the rug from under me. I have to be a grown up now. An adult with responsibilities. Am I ready for it?”

“I don’t know. Are you?”

Decker shrugged his shoulders and toyed with the tomato-shaped ketchup bottle.

“I’m taking you want to keep it?”

“Of course,” she said, clearly offended by the alternative.

“That’s good,” he said, not altogether sure that it was. “I’m glad.”

“God knows what my mum and dad will say though. I told you how old-fashioned they are. They might disown me for being an unmarried mum.”

“Then we’ll get married.”

She looked unimpressed.

“Is that such a bad idea?” said Decker.

“No, I just had romantic notions of how any proposal would be. Not in some greasy spoon café while waiting for a bacon sandwich.”

“I’ll ask properly, somewhere else. Somewhere utterly romantic. Moonlight, violins, the lot. This is just the ground work, not the proposal.”

She smiled faintly and he held her hand again.

“It’ll be alright, believe me. You’ll be a great mum, I’ll be a good dad. It’ll all be fine.”

“But where are we going to live, John? We can’t all stay at the nurses’ quarters.”

“We’ll get our own place.”

“We can’t afford it.”

“Then we’ll save. We can stay at Mum and Dad’s until we’ve got enough money together.”

“Your house? We can’t stay there, John. There’s no room.”

“There is, if we move things around a little.  It’s not ideal, obviously, but it’ll only be temporary.”

She seemed less than convinced but any further protests were cut short by the arrival of lunch. The owner slapped a sandwich in front of each of them and then returned to the counter to continue the row with his wife.

“Just think,” said Decker, squeezing sauce over his bacon. “One day we could be as happy as that pair.”

Laura laughed, breaking the tension. “You think so?”

“If we work on it, absolutely.”

As he ate, he looked at her sitting there, as beautifully incongruous as she had been that first time he saw her in the hospital. She even managed to make the act of eating a bacon sandwich seem graceful.

It was all going to be alright, he told himself. Yes, it was all a little too soon, but what did that matter? He had found a wonderful woman who would be the perfect mother to his children. It was a reason to celebrate, not worry.

The only real problem was how the hell was he going to afford a ring?

He lay down on the kitchen floor. The stone was wonderfully cold, a salve to his soaring temperature.

He knew he had to get upstairs and get those pills, but he needed to summon the strength first. For now, he just had to lie here and rest.

Would it be so bad, he wondered, just to die here? Just to slip away quietly into the blackness with nothing but the hum of the fridge-freezer as a farewell? It would be a blessed relief, not just from the pain, but from all the years of misery. From all the memories that plagued him – that were haunting him now, even at the very end.

Auntie Vi, all fifteen stone of her, was gyrating wildly to *(I Can’t Get No) Satisfaction* by the Rolling Stones which, given she had produced five children, seemed hilariously ironic to Decker. Stood by the dancefloor, tears of mirth rolled down his face as he revelled in the moment. For all the silly rituals, the massive expense and stress, weddings were worth it for things like this. People letting go, enjoying themselves. Happy in someone else’s happiness.

“Here,” shouted Dave, nudging him from behind. He was armed with a couple of pints.

“Bloody hell, Dave. I can’t have any more – it’s my wedding night!”

“It’s a bit too late for that, isn’t it?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, Laura’s a bit far gone, isn’t she? If you’re not careful, you’ll give that baby a black eye.”

“Oh, don’t you start,” he said, sinking his current pint and taking the new one. “I’ve had enough from Laura’s mum and dad – they’ve been looking daggers at me all day.”

“They’ll be alright. I saw them a few minutes ago, having a laugh with your Uncle Pete. Hey, have you been crying?”

“With laughter, aye. Look at her.” He nodded towards Auntie Vi, who was now swaying to *Pretty Flamingo* by Manfred Mann.

“Blimey, she’s going for it, ain’t she?”

“Not half.”

“Hey, do you think Laura and Wendy will look like that one day?”

“Maybe. But what will we look like? Maybe like old Jack Robertson over there, with a huge beer belly and three strands of hair combed over our bald spot.”

“Jesus. Well, here’s to the future then.”

They clinked glasses and watched as Aunty Vi fell over, showing the whole function room her voluminous pink knickers.

“Christ, they’re as bright as one of your shirts,” laughed Dave. “Though not today at least. Nice to see you dressed a little more restrained for once.”

“It weren’t my first choice,” said Decker, looking down at his grey suit. “That was shot down in flames.”

“What were it? Pink with green spots? And presumably as best man, I’d have to wear the same. Thank God for Laura putting her foot down.”

“Aye. Well, I suppose I’d better get used to that.”

“Hey, I was talking to your brother-in-law at the bar. He’s a bit full of himself, ain’t he?”

“He’s a solid gold wanker. If you’re on duty and see a white Rover 3500, do me a favour and pull it over will you?”

“Sure. Hey, look out, here comes trouble.”

Wendy, the chief bridesmaid, approached, looking anxious.

“John, it’s Laura.”

“What about her?”

“She’s a bit upset like.”

“Why?”

“Why do you think?” She made a baby bump gesture to stress the point.

“Oh God. Where is she?”

“Outside.”

“Right, hold this.” He gave his pint to Dave and made his way to the exit, smiling off various congratulations on the way, and dodging Frank Dunne, who was staggering towards him, spilling beer everywhere.

Outside in the beer garden, he found Laura sat alone on a bench, her eyes red from crying. He sat down beside her.

“What’s up?”

“What do you think?”

“I don’t get it. You seemed happy earlier.”

“I was. It’s just ... it’s sunk in tonight. Seeing all these pretty young women dancing while I’m waddling around like a great fat lump.”

“You look beautiful.”

“I look like a whale. And I’ll look like that on all the photos. All that’s missing is my dad pointing a shotgun at you.”

“I’m sure he’d love to. Actually, I think he’d like to do more than just point it.”

He kicked at an empty crisp picket that was lying on the path.

“Look, I know it’s not exactly how you imagined it. Then again, you probably imagined marrying Robert Redford, not me. But it’s still a happy day, isn’t it? It’s you, me, together. Forever.”

She nodded, smiling through the tears. He put his arm around her.

“I am happy. It’s just, difficult you know.”

“Aye, I know. But even with that bump you’re still the most beautiful woman here. And I’m the luckiest guy. And even if it’s not the perfect beginning, what does it matter? There are thousands more days to come and some of them will be perfect. For you, me and little junior there.”

He gently patted her stomach and pecked her on the cheek.

“Oh… you,” she said. “Why do you always have to go and say the right thing?”

“It’s just a bad habit. I’m sure you’ll beat it out of me.”

They kissed passionately and his hands began to wander.

“Hey, not here!” she protested.

“Hasn’t the honeymoon begun yet?”

“No, it hasn’t.”

“Shame. Dry your eyes then and we’ll go inside and see Auntie Vi’s knickers.”

“What?”

“You have to see it to believe it. Come on, it’s cold out here.”

He handed her his handkerchief and she wiped away the tears. Then he took her back inside, dodging Frank Dunne again as he stumbled over to the fish pond to bring up the wedding buffet.

Decker noticed the mop leaning in the corner. Despite the continuing pain, now that the initial shock was over, he had a clearer head and could think about ways to cope with the situation. The mop had definite possibilities. He could use it to pull food from the fridge and the cupboards, and after that, turn it into makeshift splints. That might be tricky but he had an idea as to how.

The food came first. He grabbed the mop and held it aloft, trying to prise open the wall cupboard. The door remained obstinately shut until in a fit of temper he smashed the mop against it and it sprang open, allowing him to reach in and slide out the contents, bringing down a rain of tins and packets. A couple of bottles smashed as they hit the work surface, but only a little broken glass reached the floor. He heaped the supplies into one of the bottom cupboards for later, and threw the glass shards to one side. Then he pulled a few things from the top of the fridge and placed them on the bottom shelf where he would be able to reach them later, without the help of a mop.

Now came the splints. He sat up and pushed himself backwards towards the corner of the kitchen. Then he grabbed the mop and manoeuvred himself to push the handle into the narrow space that lay between the fridge-freezer and the cupboards. Holding the head firmly, he pulled it toward the cupboards, hoping the fridge-freezer wouldn’t budge and would give him enough leverage. The handle bent slightly but at first there seemed little likelihood of it breaking, as he had so little strength and wasn’t able to move himself easily across the kitchen floor. He pulled harder, mustering every drop of his failing energy. The mop bent another inch, and the fridge-freezer thankfully didn’t shift. Finally, with his last surge of exertion and a scream of rage, the mop snapped in two. He reached over and pulled out the half that was lying beside the cupboard.

Now all he needed was some way to attach the splints to his leg. He leaned over to one of the drawers and pulled it all the way out, scattering half its contents across the kitchen floor. String and screws and candles and batteries rolled around him as he rummaged through, looking for something that would do the job. He found some duct tape. Wincing, biting his jumper again, he put the pieces of the broken handle against the sides of his leg and taped them down as firmly as possible. The mop head wouldn’t detach so he had to keep that as a bizarre embellishment.

He breathed deeply and admired his handiwork. It might not stop the pain but it would hold the breaks still and hopefully prevent any further damage to the muscles and tendons in his legs. Equipped with this, he might just get up the stairs.

He held Zoe tightly aloft with one arm and pointed out the window, up at the night sky. “See that? That’s the moon.”

She sucked her thumb and paid little attention but Decker continued, undeterred.

“A man called Neil Armstrong – he’s just walked on the moon. He went all the way into space in a big rocket that went whoosh! And then a little capsule broke off the rocket and went down on to the moon. Mr Armstrong got out and said, ‘One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.’ And he were right. Because he’s just the first of many – the first of thousands of people who will walk on the moon. When you’re older, you’ll be able to go up there. There’ll be moonbases by then, maybe whole cities. You’ll be able to live there and work there, up on the new frontier. Won’t that be wonderful? I might be too old by then to go, but I’ll look up at the moon, just like we are now, and I’ll know you’re there, in that brave new world. And I’ll love you just as much as I do now.”

He kissed her on the forehead and rocked her gently in his arms. But he knew there was little chance of getting her to sleep with all the noise from downstairs: the banging and clattering from the kitchen as Mum made tea, with Laura doing her best to help; Dad guffawing away at some sitcom and as usual not lifting a finger to help.

It worked, at least for now. Laura liked his parents and they adored her. But he saw the tension that bubbled beneath the surface, with them all stuck together in this tiny terraced house. Laura felt trapped, having even less freedom than she had in the nurses’ hostel. And his parents, as much as they loved having a granddaughter, were obviously being severely tested by being awoken each night by her crying. It could hardly be what they imagined for their September years.

Decker felt that it was all his fault. He had failed to provide a proper home for his wife and daughter, and he was being an unreasonable burden to his parents. He had to find more money somehow, and soon.

Men might walk on the moon, but for him there were only earthly realities.

4

“Whoooooh! Approaching moonbase! Approaching moonbase! Space Captain Zoe Decker coming in to land!”

He ran down the lane, pushing the pram and making ridiculous rocket noises. On either side of him was the vast expanse of Sketby Moor, as bleak and desolate as any lunar landscape.

“John, be careful!” shouted Laura behind him. “She could fall out the pram.”

“Oh, don’t be silly.”

“She could. What if you tripped over?”

“Okay, okay,” he sighed, slowing down. “Let’s not have any fun.”

“It’s not a question of not having fun – it’s just about not taking stupid risks.”

Decker was fed up. Coming out here was meant to be an escape from the confines of the house, but it was not going as planned. A dreary silence hung over them as they walked. Eventually he felt compelled to break it.

“Things will get better, you know.”

“Will they?” she said.

“Yes. Of course they will.”

“I do like your mum and dad, you know. It’s just…”

“I know, I know. It’s not an ideal situation, but it’s not forever.”

“You keep saying that. But how on earth are we going to afford somewhere to live? Even if they give you that raise, it won’t be enough.”

“We could rent for a while I suppose. But that’s just wasting money – if we stay where we are we can at least save for a deposit.”

“But it’ll take ages.”

“Not ages, just a while.”

Silence fell over them again. Decker stared out across the moor and felt an urge to run off across it, forgetting all these tiresome adult responsibilities. There was part of him that felt he had grown up too soon, too quickly, trapping him forever among petty squabbles and domestic duties. He was saving every penny he earned when he should be out spending it, having fun. But there was another part of him that just wanted to make it work, so he could be a family man with a nice home, like any other sensible grown-up. A man who could make a success of things.

Laura took the pram for a while and Decker walked ahead to escape the tense atmosphere. The lane dipped and then rose again, to a wide plateau of gorse and heather. It was a pleasant day but Decker could imagine the wind sweeping cruelly across here. Winters would be savage, but the summers could be glorious. It was so wonderfully wild and forsaken, a million miles away from the noisy, crowded terraces of Sketby.

The road sliced the plateau in two, and halfway down there was a cottage. It was the only landmark in sight, apart from a small copse a few hundred yards to the right. As he got nearer, Decker saw the building was abandoned and in a state of disrepair, with its windows boarded up and the front door hanging off one hinge. There was a small overgrown garden and the stone wall that surrounded it had collapsed in places. But despite its ruinous state, it was possible to imagine the place having been beautiful once. A quant little English home, standing in perfect isolation and defiantly facing the elements.

“Hey, Laura,” he shouted down the lane. “Come and look at this.”

“That’s weird,” she said, approaching. “I wonder why it’s abandoned.”

“The owner probably died. If they didn’t leave a will, that can cause a lot of problems. Let’s have a look inside.”

“John, it might be dangerous!”

“It’ll be alright.”

He pushed the door ajar and slid into the hallway. Inside, the cottage was a husk, stripped of all furniture and belongings, with the floorboards covered in a carpet of dirt and leaves. The wallpaper was peeling, exposing crumbling plaster, but there was no sign of any major structural damage – at least not of the kind that would cause the place to fall down any time soon. He was sure it would be possible to restore the place to its former glory.

“Laura, come in and see. Don’t worry, it’s safe.”

She pushed Zoe’s pram into the front garden and cautiously entered the cottage, frightened it might collapse, or at least get dust all over her new cream coat.

“Oh, my God.”

“It’s not that bad,” protested Decker. “With a bit of work, this place could be as good as new.”

“You’re not serious?”

“Why not? It will be dirt cheap.”

“With emphasis on the word ‘dirt’, yes.” To make the point, she ran a finger down the wall and showed him the grimy tip.

“We’d have to find out who owns it, of course. But I can’t imagine them not wanting to sell.”

“We couldn’t live here, John,” insisted Laura, wiping her hand clean with a tissue. “Look at the state of it.”

“Aye, but we wouldn’t live here at first. We’d stay in town while I did the place up at evenings and weekends. It would only take a few months.”

“Could you do it though?”

“Most of it, aye. We’d have to hire a plasterer, and maybe someone to do the plumbing, but I could do the wiring myself. I wonder how bad it is upstairs.”

“John, be careful,” she urged, but he was gone before she could stop him.

“Not too bad,” he shouted down. “The roof’s obviously leaking in one place, but it doesn’t look like a massive hole.”

He came back down the stairs, the boards creaking uncertainly under him. She gave him a nervous look, knowing what he was like when he got an idea in his head.

“John, even if you can do this place up, is this really where we want to live? Yes, it could be a nice cottage, but it’s miles from anywhere.”

“So? You’re always moaning about the noise from the neighbours. You won’t get that out here.”

“I won’t get any shops either. Or see any friends. I’ll be stranded alone with Zoe while you’re out at work. And what about when she has to start school?”

“You can learn to drive and we’ll get you a car. We’ll be able to afford that with the money we save on this place.”

“Oh, you make it all sound so simple, don’t you?” She ran her fingers through his hair and brushed away the dust that had fallen in to it.

“Okay, okay – we’ll investigate. Find out who owns the place first and then see where we go from there.”

“But we won’t rush into anything – you promise me?”

“I promise,” he said, and sealed the vow with a kiss. But in his heart, he was already decided. They were standing in the hallway of their new home.

Pain was relative, Decker decided. It was agony crawling backwards along the hallway, but nowhere near as bad as the journey had been without the splints. It was slow going though, and he had to stop regularly before finally reaching the bottom of the stairs. Thankfully, this time he was facing the right way so he didn’t have to worry about turning.

He looked up. Just fifteen or so steps but it seemed like the north face of the Eiger. He took a deep breath, grabbed the bottom baluster and pulled himself forward with a tremendous jolt of pain. Undaunted, he carried on, a baluster at a time.

After ascending a couple of steps, he was agonised and exhausted. A horrible cold sweat was pouring down him and he was gasping for breath.

He knew the strain of this might well be too much for him. It was touch and go whether he would make it to the landing alive.

“There you are,” said Decker, tightening the last screw on the back of the set. “As good as new.”

To prove the point he plugged it in, switched it on, and watched as the Flower Pot Men slowly came into view.

“Brilliant,” said Ruby, sat on the sofa, a fag smouldering in her outstretched hand and a miasma of nicotine gathering around her. It was the afternoon but she was still in her pink dressing gown. A fresh layer of red nail varnish gleamed on her toes.

“Unfortunately, there’s still nothing worth watching,” laughed Decker, sliding the set back into position. “But I can’t fix that.”

“Thanks ever so much, love. Fancy a cuppa?”

“No, thanks. I’d better be getting on.”

“Oh, go on. Stay and have a brew – you deserve it.”

“Well, alright then,” he relented. It was not as if he was a rush to get back to the shop and his idiot boss, Mr Ganley. “Thanks.”

She went into the kitchen while he put his tools away and watched Bill and Ben converse with Weed.

“Flobadob,” said Ben.

“Weeeeeeeeeeed,” said Weed.

Well, they make as much sense as Mr Wilson and Mr Heath, thought Decker.

“I like your shirt,” said Ruby, when she emerged a couple of minutes later with two cups of tea.

“Thanks,” said Decker, wondering if she was being sarcastic. The shirt was a swirling mix of green and yellow spirals, with fashionably wide collars. Dave had said it made him feel seasick.

“Very colourful,” she added, as if it wasn’t obvious.

“Colour’s the way forward,” he said, tapping the screen. “Black and white has had its day, I’m afraid.”

“You think I should get a colour set?”

“Aye, definitely. They’re so much better.”

“Really? They’re expensive though, aren’t they?”

“They’re coming down in price all the time.”

“Right. I’ll save me pennies then.”

He sipped his tea and felt slightly embarrassed by the silence. He was aware that she was staring at him but wasn’t quite vain enough to consider that she was mentally undressing him.

“You must see some sights,” she said. “Doing this job.”

“Oh aye. Last week I were in this place and there were dog mess in the hallway. I mean, why worry about your TV not working when there’s dog mess in your hall?”

“And what about all those bored housewives? Do they throw themselves at you?”

Decker shook his head and laughed. “No, all that’s a myth I’m afraid – the stuff of seaside postcards. Maybe milkmen have more luck, but not TV repairmen.”

“I’m bored,” she said suggestively.

“Well, I’m sure you won’t be now your telly’s working again.”

“My husband’s a long-distance lorry driver, you see. Hardly ever here and sometimes gone for days on end. And probably playing around, knowing him. While I’m left here on me tod. No-one to keep me warm or give me any attention.”

“Oh… right. Shame.” Decker was now feeling quite uncomfortable and was wishing he had declined the cuppa.

“Why don’t you come and sit next to me on the sofa for a while” she purred, patting the cushion beside her. “Keep me company.”

He scratched his chin, his standard nervous reaction. Beneath his embarrassment there was a germ of temptation. Though a good ten years older than him, she was still attractive in an earthy, unsubtle way. Pulled tight, her short dressing gown hinted at a shapely, pneumatic figure. She wore too much make up, and her hair was an unnatural black, but her face had a wild, inelegant beauty, with full red lips and autumnal eyes.

He thought of Laura and shook the temptation away.

“Maybe, that’s not the best idea.”

“Oh, come on. Don’t be shy.”

“I’m a happily married man.”

She laughed. “What’s that got to do with anything? Just because you’re getting happiness at home, it doesn’t mean you can’t get it anywhere else. It’s not rationed, you know.”

“But would it make me happy?”

“What do you think?” she said, crossing her legs and affording him a glimpse of smooth, alluring thigh.

“I think at first it would, definitely. But in the long run, I’m not sure I’d feel that good about myself.”

“Oh, guilt! Guilt’s a terrible thing, you know. All it does is stop people having fun.”

“Maybe, yes. But life’s not all about fun, is it?”

He gulped down his tea, grabbed his toolbox and made a polite but hasty retreat.

Halfway up the stairs, he retrieved the glasses he had lost in the fall. He was only slightly short-sighted so hadn’t felt completely lost without them, but there was something strangely reassuring about putting them back on. It felt like he was slowly piecing himself back together. First his eyes, and soon his heart. It gave him a little bit of extra courage for the second part of the ascent.

Though he wanted to stop and rest, it was difficult, as he had to hold on tight to the balusters to prevent himself sliding back down the stairs. He couldn’t make any purchase with his legs, which were now just two stiff, useless lumps. He dug his right hand in the carpet of the next step, grabbed the next baluster with his left and slid himself up a few more inches. And then again, a few more times, until the landing was just a few feet away.

He could make it now, he was sure. The only problem was that the stairway curved at the top, which would be hard to negotiate.

As he moved another step higher, he saw that the carpet was loose where one of the tacks had come out. This was where he had tripped. He hadn’t been so clumsy after all, just unobservant. Not that it was much comfort, as the consequences remained the same.

As he feared, turning proved difficult. He couldn’t move on to his side so he just had to swing his legs over the far wall and then inch round. Inevitably, his legs were pushed against the wall, and with the edges of the stairs rubbing against them too, the pain was excruciating. Every move brought another anguished howl.

Eventually he was facing the right way, but then came the hurdle of getting on to the landing. For once, there was something in his favour as the door to the bedroom was directly opposite the top of the stairs, obviating the need for further turning. However, it was still torture dragging up his legs, and as there were no more balusters, he had to sink his fingers in hard to pull himself forward.

Finally, he came to a stop, half in the bedroom and half on the landing, gasping for air, quietly sobbing, and feeling the least he deserved was a flag to mark his ascent.

“John,” said Laura, exasperated. “I can hear dripping.”

He’d heard it himself, for the last five minutes, like Chinese water torture. But he’d tried to pretend it wasn’t there.

“Yeah, I know,” he sighed, getting out of bed and switching on the light. Water was coming through the ceiling and splashing on the bare floorboards.

“Oh, bloody hell, John – I thought you said you’d fixed that.”

“I thought I had. Hold on, I’ll go and get a bucket.”

“I can’t sleep with that going on all night.”

“Well I can’t fix it now, can I?”

He disappeared downstairs and came back a moment later with an old tin pail. Laura sighed and rolled her eyes.

“Don’t use that one – it’ll make too much noise. Use the plastic one and put a towel in the bottom.”

Tired and frustrated, he swore and slung the pail down against the skirting board.

“Mummy, I’m scared,” came the fragile little voice from next door.

“Oh, that’s brilliant, John. Absolutely brilliant.” Looking daggers at him, Laura got out of bed, put on her dressing gown and went next door.

Decker picked up the pail and crashed down the edge of the bed. He wasn’t sure what annoyed him most: this cottage or the unrealistic expectations being placed on him to make it perfect immediately. It was an old house in need of a lot of work – that was why it had been so cheap. It was obviously a long-term project.

He heard Laura comforting Zoe, trying to lull her back to sleep. His daughter was four now and sensitive to any kind of conflict between her parents, which was increasingly common due to this cottage.

The dripping increased in tempo as the rain hammered down outside. Decker trudged downstairs and looked under the kitchen sink, impatiently pulling out paint pots and bottles of bleach until he found the plastic bucket. Then it was back upstairs to the bathroom, where he snatched a towel from the rail.

“Don’t use that one – it’s clean,” said Laura, coming out of Zoe’s room. “Use a dirty one from the laundry basket.”

“Okay,” he growled through gritted teeth and started rummaging through the basket on the landing.

“Which colour would you prefer? Green or blue? I don’t want to get it wrong again.”

“Don’t be an idiot, John.”

He stuffed a towel in the bucket and placed it under the leak. The drip, drip became the dullest of thuds. Laura took off her dressing gown and got back into bed.

“This house,” she said. “This bloody house.”

“I said not to move in so soon. You could have stayed at Mam and Dad’s.”

“I couldn’t stand it any longer. I was going stir crazy.”

“And now you’re going crazy here!”

“Keep your voice down. I don’t want Zoe upset again.”

Decker shook his head, switched off the lights and got back beneath the blankets.

“It’ll be alright eventually,” he said. “It’ll just take a little time.”

“How much time? You said it would only take a few months. It took you six months to find the owner and another six to arrange the sale. And now a year later, the place is still a mess.”

Decker groaned. “I’ll fix the leak when I come back from work tomorrow.”

Thud, thud, thud, went the water against the towel – quietly but in its irritation somehow deafening. Decker placed a pillow over his ear but knew he was too tense to fall back to sleep. He tried to think comforting thoughts and all that came to mind again was that woman, in her pink dressing gown, with the promise of everything that lay beneath.

He reached up and switched on the bedside light to give himself a clear view of the way ahead.

The next obstacle was the bed. His pills were on top of the bedside table on the far side, nearer the window, but crawling round was going to be difficult as it was a king-size bed with a narrow channel of floorspace surrounding it, particularly between the end and the chest of drawers. Turning would be a nightmare.

The alternative was to go over the bed, if he could pull himself up there with just his arms. It didn’t seem much easier, but he decided to give it a go.

His first attempt just ended up pulling down a load of duvet. He pushed it angrily to one side and sank his fingers into the mattress. His muscles were still fairly strong, from a lifetime of carrying television sets around, so he was able to slide up diagonally. But then at the last moment, he lost his grip and slid backwards a little. His legs smacked back on to the floor, causing him to let forth an almighty screech.

Quickly, he pulled himself forward again, right up on to the bed. For a moment he just lay there, face down, sweating and gasping for air. Then he grabbed his pills from the bedside table and swallowed one, hoping to hell that it would be enough to counter the tremendous stress to his heart.

He put his head to the pillow and stared out of the window at the darkness outside. There was no hurry to get back downstairs. He’d stuffed some biscuits in his pocket in case he got hungry. And if he needed to go to the toilet he’d just do it in the bed – he couldn’t afford to be squeamish about things like that now.

Gradually his breathing shallowed and the pain subsided a little. His eyelids drooped and he finally succumbed to the mercy of sleep.

He sat in the car outside her house for over ten minutes, staring at the door and flipping a coin in his head. Lust or love. Betrayal or loyalty.

The thought of her hadn’t left him since the day he had fixed her TV. On the contrary, it had become an obsession. Even though she wasn’t as attractive as Laura, or as young or as graceful, there was something wild about her. Something primitive and exciting that seemed to offer the perfect escape from all the pressures of domesticity. He needed this; a diversion from the daily grind of work and the increasing frustration of renovating the cottage.

He didn’t want to hurt Laura, but if it was just a one-off, how would she would never know? It seemed to him that the only real issue was whether he could deal with the emotions it might stir. Could he cut off the guilt? Put in a box where it wouldn’t intrude on the rest of his life? He told himself he could. He was a healthy, hot-blooded male, unbound by illogical sentiments. He could separate love from lust quite easily.

Gradually, he convinced himself. He got out the car, strode up the path and rang the bell.

A moment later Ruby answered the door, wearing that same pink dressing gown.

“Oh, it’s you,” she said, without enthusiasm. “Come in.”

He followed her into the hallway and stood there unsure what to say, the courage draining from him.

“I wondered if you’d come back,” she said, leaning against the wall and eyeing him with disdain. “I suppose you think I’m some kind of slag?”

“N-no,” stuttered Decker.

“But you think I can be just turned on and off, like one of your TVs, do you? One day you can say no, the next you turn up here and have what you want?”

“I’m sorry – I wasn’t thinking. I’ll go.”

“Jesus, make your mind up. If you were a real man, you’d have said ‘yes’ the first time. Or said ‘no’ and never have come back. Now I’m not sure about you. I like real men, you see – not dilly dalliers.”

Decker stared down at his feet, embarrassed. She laughed.

“You’ve got a lot to prove, boy. Come on.”

Ruby led the way up the stairs and Decker, his heart thumping, followed sheepishly behind.

For a while he slept like a baby, his sheer exhaustion overruling the constant throbbing from his legs. But then, unconsciously, he turned and the immediate pain awoke him with a scream.

Reality sank back in. It had been no nightmare – he was still here, alone and trapped, with two broken legs and the strong possibility that they might be the death of him, even if he did have his heart pills now. It was a horrible situation, but one for which he could blame no-one but himself. Life had been harsh to him, but that didn’t mean he had to isolate himself totally. It didn’t mean not taking sensible, practical measures against the possibilities of illness or accident. That was just foolishness.

He was lying face up now, staring at the ceiling. It was galling to think that his phone was just a few feet away, up there in the loft, but nonetheless unreachable. It had been stupid getting rid of the landline but he had got fed up of all the constant cold calls on it. Half the time there had been no-one on the other end of the line, or they had been selling something he didn’t want, like PPI or double glazing or, irony of ironies, stair-lifts. No friends ever called him, because he had no friends. And no family any more either. He only kept the mobile for the rare occasions he needed to phone somebody, usually to complain about something.

He stared out the window at the blackness of the forest. It was just after 11pm. In less than an hour it would be Christmas Day, an occasion he hated at the best of times. It was up there with Laura and Zoe’s birthdays and the anniversary of their disappearance.

There were no decorations here, no tree and just one card – from his old protégé, Luke, who always sent one, even though Decker never sent one back. He despised the jollity of Christmas, when there no was joy in his life, just memories of it.

He could still clearly picture Zoe unwrapping her presents and her squeals of delight as she discovered a doll or a set of crayons. She should have had many more Christmasses like that. It should be her children, his grandchildren, opening the presents now. All those years, stolen from her, and from him too.

Half delirious with pain, he began to hum to himself. It was only after a minute or two that he realised the tune was *Silent Night*.

Decker lay silently in the dark, his arms clasped around Laura, feeling the softness of her hair on his chest. He wondered if he had any right to touch her and be with her, after what he’d done. But then he held her even more tightly, for fear that he might lose her – as if she would vanish into thin air if he let her go.

He was a fool, a stupid lecherous fool. An idiot ruled by his balls, not his brain, and certainly not whatever he had for a heart. He had the perfect woman here at home and he had gone looking elsewhere, for someone who couldn’t possibly compare.

He was sure Laura didn’t suspect anything, but she must have noticed how quiet he was. He had been consumed by guilt since that day with Ruby. It had eaten away at him, making him ill. The only consolation was that he knew he couldn’t do such a thing again if it meant feeling like this.

She stirred in her sleep and he moved his hand gently down the smoothness of her arm. She was everything he had ever wanted so it seemed so ridiculous to have strayed. He loved her absolutely. Her face, her voice, the way she moved. But most of all, her strength of character, and the way she was a perfect mother to Zoe. She answered every question the little girl asked with patience and understanding. She would shape Zoe into a woman who could take on the whole world.

But the problem had never been Laura. It was all to do with him, and his need to recapture the freedom of his youth. What he needed was other ways, rather than infidelity. Ways that weren’t so horribly self-destructive.

By the time he finally got to sleep, he had come up with an idea.

5

Decker wondered how the hell it was possible to have a raging temperature and be shivering with cold at the same time. He wished his body would make its mind up what it wanted to do.

That was the strange thing about growing old. You no longer saw your body as an integral part of yourself, but something independent, and often an obstacle to what you wanted to achieve. Even without two broken legs, his body was no longer always at his command. He gasped when he needed breath, he tired when he needed stamina and, worst of all, he had to go to the loo in the middle of the night when, more than ever, he needed a good sleep.

He guessed it must be even worse for others, as he was fit for his age, his congenital heart condition excepted. On the rare occasions he met people of his age, they often seemed more geriatric, both mentally and physically. It made him feel better about himself, but maybe that was the problem. It had given him a false feeling of security, and a lack of understanding of his own vulnerability. He hadn’t realised that he was a brittle-boned old man, who couldn’t afford to live alone.

He had always dreaded old age. He remembered being a child, sat at the dinner table, desperately wanting to leave but not being allowed to by his parents, while his grandfather slowly and audibly mashed the food in his mouth, with custard or gravy flecked round his lips. Then the old man would sit on the sofa all afternoon, snoring away, but awaking occasionally for interludes of babbling bigotry.

Young Decker had told himself he would never be like that. He would never let go of his dignity, and if he felt it slipping it away, he would go suddenly out in a blaze of glory. That was the foolishness of youth – not realising that all you would ever be is a different kind of antique.

The truth was that time had made a mockery of him more than most. He had become bitter, lonely and mean. He couldn’t totally blame his plight on the awful things that had happened to him. Some of it had been his choice, down to the way he had reacted. He had driven people away with his standoffishness and misanthropy, until there was no-one left to care. Other people had taken their misfortunes and built something positive out of them, but not him.

He yawned. Perhaps the tiredness and pain made it impossible to be make sense of anything. He wrapped himself tightly in the duvet, hoping it would stop him turning in his sleep, then switched off the bedside light and let exhaustion overwhelm him. He was off in a matter of seconds but it was poor quality sleep; a delirious drifting in and out of the worst kind of nightmares.

Sketby Moor. That desolate, hateful landscape, where the cold seeped into your bones. Where the colours of the sky, the grass and even the flowers seemed drained, giving way to an all-pervading greyness. Where the wind had distorted trees into curious, skeletal shapes, and the bold, black crags loomed ominously, like the fossilised remains of ogres.

Decker shivered.

It seemed as if he had been here forever, wandering mile after mile, tramping through the mud. Across the plain next to the cottage, through the copse, down into the valley and across the stream. Through the gaps in the gorse, never caring if he was scratched.

“Laura! Zoe!”

All the time he shouted their names. The words echoed and distorted, as if pulled apart by the wind. It was growing ever colder, stinging at his face and shrivelling his knuckles. And then the rain began to fall. It felt as if the elements were mocking him and doing everything they could to hinder his search. They were never going to let the moor give up its secrets.

“Laura! Zoe!”

Dense black clouds were sweeping down, so close he believed he could almost touch them. It grew so dark that he lost all sense of direction. He wandered back and forth, and around in circles, confused as to where he was. The rain became far heavier, blowing in freezing squalls against him as he stumbled on. The ground beneath him turned into a quagmire and his feet sank deeper with every step.

“Laura! Zoe!”

He was up to his knees now, wading through a sea of mud. It smelled foul, like a thousand rotting corpses. A horrible, oozing filth, even blacker than the sky, sucking him down until he could move no more.

The moor had him; it would not let him go now. Slowly, he began to sink.

“Laura! Zoe!”

As the mire swallowed him up, the pale white hands of a woman and a child reached out to welcome him to the dark.

Decker ran his hand across the living room wallpaper. He had spent all of yesterday putting it up and was keen to inspect his handiwork. The pattern was a fashionable display of bright orange and yellow flowers, even more striking than the lilac short-sleeved shirt he was wearing.

“What are you doing?” asked Laura.

“Looking for bubbles. You know, air pockets.”

“There aren’t any. You did a good job. For once.”

He stuck his tongue out, knowing she was joking.

“Here you are,” she said, handing him a paper bag and flask. “Cheese and pickle. And hot sweet tea.”

“Marvellous. You’re a star.”

He put the lunch in his rucksack and slipped on his bicycle clips.

“Where you off to today?”

“Devon and North Cornwall. I’m expecting to fall off near Bovey Tracy.”

She looked nonplussed.

“*Monty Python* – remember?”

“No, I don’t. Seriously, where are you off to?”

“Down to Ferridale, I think. Then through Pell and Armby.”

“Well, be careful. There’ll be a lot of Sunday drivers about.”

“I’ll be alright, don’t worry. Hey, Zoe, what do you think of the new wallpaper? Do you like it?”

The little girl looked up from her dolls and nodded.

“Are you going to the moon again, Daddy?”

“That’s right, Zoe love – I’m cycling all the way there.”

Laura gave him an exasperated look. It was difficult to educate your daughter rationally when your husband was prone to flights of fancy.

Decker kissed her goodbye and rustled Zoe’s hair on the way out. As he was unlocking his bike, Laura came out into garden to ask him what time he would be back.

“About 3 o’clock, I think. You don’t mind me going out, do you?”

“No, you deserve a break after all that work you did yesterday. Though wouldn’t you rather just put your feet up?”

“No, I fancy a bit of fresh air. See you later.”

“See you.”

He was away then, down the lane. He felt the breeze on his face and his spirits soared. He loved this, and the sense of freedom and exhilaration it gave him. He wasn’t able to go for a ride every Sunday, but he tried to do it at least twice a month. It was a wonderful escape from all the everyday pressures. Even though things were good at home now, he still needed this, for his mental well-being as well as his physical health. This was the way he had found to recapture his youth.

He cycled for miles, across the bleakness of the moor, up merciless hills and then down again, until he reached the wider, greener valley of Eastdale and all its sleepy little villages – Ferridale, Pell, Lower Pell and Armby. Funny, half-forgotten little places full of lopsided stone cottages and scraps of land grazed by mangy-looking horses. In every village he saw the silly little shop that would also serve as a post office, and at least one village pub. The Drake, the Feathers, the Three Shepherds, the Green Man – he had been in all of them at one time or another, and met all kinds of characters, some of whom had stepped out of another century. Once in the Feathers, a farmer had bought his horse in with him, saying it was too cold to leave the creature outside.

Today, however, he saw but a few people, and only a couple of vehicles overtook him. Perhaps everyone was in church, or maybe they were sleeping off hangovers. Whatever the reason, he was glad. It was as if the whole landscape belonged solely to him. Every winding road, every wandering stream and hillside forest was part of his playground.

After a couple of hours, he stopped, more out of thirst and hunger than tiredness. He pushed the bike down a little path by the side of the Crooked Bridge and sat on the banks of the river, eating his lunch while watching the water splash its way over the branches of a fallen tree. The May sun was brighter now, giving every leaf and flower a wonderfully vivid colour. The hypnotic aroma of wild garlic and the gentle chatter of birdsong conspired with the warm weather to put him at ease. He stretched out in the long grass and kicked off his shoes.

Life was good. He had a wonderful wife, a lovely young daughter, and now the house was nearly finished, so too were all the rows. He no longer felt the need to look for excitement elsewhere – the very idea of it repulsed him. The only negative he could see was that his job was still average and poorly paid, but that was hardly a major issue. Soon he would have time to look for a better one.

It was crazy, he realised, to be trying to recapture his youth when he had never really lost it. A wife and a child and a mortgage didn’t change the fact that he was still a young man with so many years and opportunities ahead of him. There were countries to be seen, friends to be made, and days to be celebrated. The future was as golden as the sun.

He lay there for half an hour, just enjoying being alive and not even bothering to open his Asimov paperback. Until eventually the sky began to cloud over a little and he knew it was time to turn back. He put his shoes back on, pushed the bike back to the road and immediately got on his way again, taking a slightly different route that bypassed Armby and Lower Pell and instead went down some extremely narrow lanes. He saw even fewer people this time.

His muscles seemed to have tightened during his rest, as he found it much harder going, particularly up the hills. But he still made it to the cottage at around the promised time.

As he locked up his bike, he noticed that the front door was ajar by half an inch. Which was unusual, as Laura normally kept it locked, out of the fear that Zoe might go wandering out on the moor.

“Hello,” he said, as he stepped into the hallway. “I’m back!”

No-one answered.

“Hello!”

Still no answer.

“Laura? Zoe?”

They weren’t here, clearly. They had to be in the back garden.

He walked into the kitchen but couldn’t see them out there. He opened the back door and shouted their names, but to no avail.

Where were they?

They hadn’t gone out for a drive as both the car and the van were still parked out front. They must have just gone for a walk. But it was unusual for Laura not to lock the front door behind her. She was so careful about things like that. And why go now, when the sky threatened to unleash a downpour at any moment? It would have made more sense to have gone out earlier.

He shrugged his shoulders and put the kettle on. They would be back soon enough if they had just gone for a stroll on the moor. Munching on a biscuit, he took his cup of tea into the living room and crashed on the sofa. He stretched his aching limbs and yawned. Maybe he’d overdone it a bit today.

Zoe had been drawing again, he noticed. Her latest effort was lying on the carpet next to a scattering of crayons. A spiky picture of him with the word ‘Dad’ scrawled next to it. He picked it up and put it on the coffee table, making a mental note to take it to work tomorrow. He already had a couple of her drawings pinned up in the repair room.

Quarter of an hour passed and they still hadn’t returned. He switched the radio on but didn’t really listen to it. He wanted Laura to be here so he could tell her all about his bike ride and Zoe so he could compliment her on her drawing.

Another quarter of an hour. What on earth were they up to? Had they got lost on the moor? It was easy enough to lose your way out there, but only for a while. Keep in a straight line and you would always hit some kind of road. And anyway, Laura wouldn’t put herself and Zoe in a position like that. She was far too cautious to stray too far from the house without knowing the way back.

Ten minutes later and he was really starting to worry. He went back out the front and repeatedly shouted their names as loud as he could across the moor. The words vanished into nothingness.

He went to the back of the house, to the other side of the garden wall, and did the same again. Still nothing.

Agitated now, he went back into the house and hurried upstairs. Perhaps there would be some clue or note to tell him where they were.

Then he saw the vase lying in pieces on the floor on the landing. The one that had rested on top of the bookshelf. He picked up a shard, as if it would reveal something. Had Zoe had some kind of accident here? Had Laura taken her off to hospital, and in the panic forgotten to lock the front door? But if so, why not use the car? Had they called an ambulance?

There was no sign of blood among the fragments. He went into Zoe’s room and the bathroom, but there was no sign of anything unusual there, and no note either. But in the main bedroom the blankets were crumpled, when he knew that Laura had made the bed in the morning, as she always did. What the hell had been going on?

He wondered if he should call the hospital and ask if Laura and Zoe were there. Or maybe he should call the police. Was he worrying ridiculously? No, he told himself. Something was definitely wrong. Something had happened here.

Dave – he would know what to do! Decker hurried downstairs and rang from the phone in the hall. Wendy answered.

“Hi Wendy, it’s John here.”

“Oh hello, John. How you doing?”

“Not great. Laura’s not there, is she?”

“No.”

“I don’t know where the hell she is then. Is Dave there?”

“Yeah, he’s just come back off shift.”

“Put him on then, will you? I need to ask him what to do.”

“Aye, of course,” she said, sounding worried. She shouted to Dave and handed the phone over to him.

“Hello mate. What’s up?”

“It’s Laura and Zoe – they’re not here. I came back from my bike ride and they’re just gone.”

“Oh… Well, they’ve probably just popped out.”

“But she didn’t lock the front door. She always locks the front door. And there’s a vase broken upstairs – like something’s happened here. Can you come round? I’m sure there’s something wrong.”

“Aye, okay. I’ll be round in twenty minutes.”

Decker hung up and went back upstairs to see if he had missed any clues to whatever had happened. But there was nothing to see. He was frantic with worry now and outside, it had started to rain. Heavy drops smacked against the window pane. Were they out on the moor in that?

He returned downstairs and looked again for a note from Laura, wondering if it had fallen somewhere. While searching in the kitchen he saw the panda car pull up at the back of the house.

“Hiya mate,” said Dave, still in uniform, as he strode in. “They still not turned up?”

“No. They’ve been gone at least two hours now. They can’t be out on the moor in this weather.”

“They’ve probably just wandered too far and got a bit lost. They’ll be back soon.”

“But why didn’t she lock the front door? And why’s that vase broken? She wouldn’t just have left it in pieces on the floor.”

“Let’s have a look.”

Decker took his friend upstairs and showed him the smashed china. Dave knelt down and carefully picked up a couple of pieces.

“Zoe probably knocked it off and didn’t tell Laura. You know what kids are like.” Despite the reassurance, there was worry in his voice. “Is there any sign of anyone else being here? Or is anything missing?”

“No, but there’s the bed.”

“The bed?”

Decker showed him.

“She always makes the beds first thing – so why are these blankets all ruffled?”

“It was probably just Zoe again, messing about.”

“Dave, something’s wrong here – I know. Can’t you sense it? Surely as a copper you realise that there’s something weird about all this? Not just the bed, or the vase, or the door, but the whole thing. It’s not right.”

“Perhaps,” Dave admitted, pulling back the blankets and staring at the bed, pensively. “It’s probably nothing, but I’ve got the panda with me, so I’ll radio through to the station and ask if they’ve heard anything untoward.”

He headed downstairs with Decker tailing anxiously after him.

“I’ll get them to contact the hospital too. And if nothing comes of that, we’ll put out a missing persons alert. Can you remember what they were wearing?”

“Laura had a blue dress on. Well, it’s blue and white – this kind of floral pattern. Looks a bit 1950s.”

“Hold on, let me write this down.” He took out his police notepad and searched through his pockets for a pen.

“Here, use this,” said Decker, handing him the felt tip lying by the phone.

“Ta. Right, blue and white floral dress, looks a bit 1950s,” repeated Dave as he scribbled it down. “And what about Zoe?”

“Oh, God, what were she wearing? I can’t remember.”

“You can. Think.”

“I am thinking,” snapped Decker. “Oh yeah, I remember, it were this blue thing – not like Laura’s, a much darker blue – with straps at the top. I don’t know what you call it. A kind of dungaree thing. And she had a red top underneath. It’s hard to describe.”

“That’ll do, don’t worry.” He headed to the kitchen but stopped on the threshold, looking pensive. “Hey, I’ve just had an idea. There’s that copse isn’t there? A few hundred yards to the back of the house. Do they ever go there?”

“I don’t think so. I took Zoe there once but I don’t know that Laura has.”

“It might be worth a look though – they could be sheltering from the rain there.”

“Yeah. You’re right. It’s a possibility. I’ll go and have a look.”

Dave went out the back to his panda car while Decker hurried across the moor without even bothering to put on a coat. By the time he reached the copse, he was soaked through and the lack of any reply to his shouts made it clear they weren’t there. But he went in all the same, still calling out. It was dark, the trees huddled together like conspirators with the thick canopy of branches reducing the rainfall to a series of irregular trickles and cascades. Decker leaned against a tree for a moment, to catch his breath and work out what was happening. None of this made any sense. It had been such a good day and now it had descended into some bizarre nightmare.

He wondered for a moment if he was being foolish. There had to be some rational explanation for all this. It was probably just some minor mishap. Maybe some stray dog had run into the house, smashed a vase, messed up the bed and then ran outside. And Laura and Zoe had gone chasing after it, not locking the door behind them.

No, he realised. That was nonsense. Why would they chase after the dog?

But he told himself it had to be something like that. Something a bit odd but ultimately mundane. Perhaps Dave had already found out the reason and was waiting back at the house to tell him. With a sudden burst of optimism, Decker ran back out into the rain and all the way back to the cottage.

“Well?” said Decker, as he hurried sopping wet into the hall. Dave was stood by the door to the kitchen, looking worried.

“I’ve given the details to the station and they’re making a few calls. You know, hospitals and the like. But there’s been no reports of anything involving a woman and a little girl.”

“Right…” said Decker, instantly deflated.

“No news is good news perhaps.”

“Perhaps.”

He trudged upstairs, back to the bedroom, where he could get a good view of the moor from the window. Perhaps he would see th hurrying back across the moor. Or perhaps they were sheltering somewhere, waiting for a break in the weather. Though the copse was the only place nearby where you could find any kind of cover, and not much at that.

It was awful out there now – the bright summer day of the morning seemed a hundred years ago. The rain was getting heavier all the time and fierce squalls were slamming it almost horizontally across the road. Dark, unpleasant pools were forming on the heathland, turning it into a treacherous swamp.

It wasn’t good to be out in this, though if that was the most unpleasant fate that had befallen them he wouldn’t mind. This was something far worse, he was sure. Instinct told him that this was no simple mishap or misunderstanding. Whatever had happened here, and perhaps was still happening out there in the descending gloom, was drastic and life-changing. He sensed the presence of evil; the lingering coldness of its touch. It had intruded here into his home and taken away those he loved most.

The worst possible outcome seemed somehow inevitable to him. He was never going to see his wife and daughter again.

6

The morning light rudely awoke Decker after a few merciful hours of proper sleep. The duvet was still tightly wrapped around him and he was soaked with sweat. The pain seemed to have subsided to a dull ache, but as he elbowed himself some room, it shot mercilessly through him, causing him to let out a muted scream.

Reality bit again. He lay there, staring at the ceiling, trying to work out what he needed to do to survive this. It was only after a few minutes that he remembered that it was Christmas Day. People were waking up to gifts and good wishes. Meanwhile, Santa Claus had brought him two broken legs and a sackful of pain. Wonderful.

Usually, on this day, he would just distract himself by working on the moonscape or giving himself special jobs to do, like decorating or cleaning the car. There would be no special dinner, no celebratory drinks, and he wouldn’t even dream of switching on the television. It would be day of contrived ordinariness. Anything to stop himself dwelling on the fact that there was a massive hole in his life where a family had once been.

As he couldn’t do that today, he decided he might as well go to the other extreme and revel in the memory of his loved ones. He gently uncocooned himself and pushed himself slowly around so his head was at the foot of the bed. Then he reached back to open the top drawer in the chest behind him, where he kept some of his most treasured mementoes of Laura and Zoe. He blindly pulled out the first things he grabbed, which was a clutch of photos, including some from his wedding day, and one of Laura, holding young Zoe in her arms outside the cottage. He’d seen the picture a million times but that hadn’t blunted its power over him. He started to cry.

The room was small and stark, as if designed to induce a sense of claustrophobia. A little light crept in from a tiny square window, high up the wall, but the main source of illumination was a metal lamp which hung low over the table, making Decker feel oppressively hot. The place stank of stale sweat and smoke.

“Did you and your wife argue?” asked Detective Inspector Jones. He seemed bored and slightly frustrated by the exercise; as if he had already come to a conclusion and now resented having to prove it. Beside him sat a bulldog-faced Detective Constable, a smouldering cigarette clutched in his chunky fist. He said little but stared at Decker with undisguised animosity, as if he wanted to reach over and thump him. Decker supposed it was just an act, but even if it wasn’t, nothing could happen while his solicitor, Mr Willow, was present.

“No,” said Decker. “Occasionally, perhaps, but not seriously. It were just bickering. Most couples bicker, don’t they?”

DI Jones shrugged his shoulders. “Maybe. What did you bicker about?”

“Nothing much. The house mainly. It took a long time to do up – longer than I thought. But it’s largely done now. Things have been looking good.”

“Did you love your wife?”

“Of course I did. I still do. You’re talking about her as if you think she’s dead.”

“That we don’t know yet,” said Jones, in a horribly matter of fact way that angered Decker. “But you didn’t resent her in any way? You didn’t feel trapped by the situation?”

“Why should I feel trapped?”

“Because you’re still a young man, fairly good looking. Maybe you didn’t want to be stuck at home with a wife and kid. Maybe you wanted to be out playing the field.”

“I didn’t. I had everything I wanted – a beautiful wife and child.”

“Were you faithful?”

“Yes.”

“Always?”

“Always.”

“And what about Ruby Bell?”

The colour drained from Decker. How the hell could they have found out about that? The police were obviously poking about in every aspect of his life, looking for weaknesses. What did his innocence matter if they could pull him apart at the seams?

He immediately regretted lying but it was so hard to think under the circumstances. He was sick with worry and weak from a lack of sleep and not eating. And now, to make the situation even grimmer, it seemed the police were treating him as a suspect, rather than a victim. Under the fierce light and incessant questioning, he felt close to breaking point.

“Who told you about her?”

“Never mind who,” said Jones. “Is it true?”

The bulldog smirked and stubbed out his cigarette. Decker shifted uncomfortably on the wooden seat.

“Aye, but that was ages ago and it was only a one-off. It were just a fling and I regretted it immediately afterwards.”

“But you must meet lots of other bored housewives in your job?”

“No, not really. Look, I were only unfaithful once. I loved my wife – I wouldn’t have done anything to hurt her.”

“Mrs Bell didn’t make you dream of a wilder, more unrestrained life?”

“Anything but. Look, why are you wasting time with all this? Why aren’t you trying to find my wife and daughter?”

“We are, Mr Decker, but we have to pursue every line of enquiry.”

“It seems like I’m the only line of enquiry right now. Can’t you see how cut up I am by all this? Do you think I’m fucking acting or something?”

“Calm down, Mr Decker. It’s only a few questions – if you’ve nothing to hide, you’ve nothing to fear.”

Mr Willow coughed and took off his glasses to polish them – his sign that he wanted to speak. “Gentlemen, if I might interrupt. I think we have clearly established that Mr Decker loves his wife and daughter, and that he has no motive at all to cause them harm, unless we seriously think that some brief, regrettable dalliance makes him a potential killer. If such a thing is true, I’d suggest that the vast majority of the population be brought in for questioning.”

“Imagine the fees, Mr Willow,” said Jones.

“Quite,” he said. “But it remains that my client has no motive, and also has an alibi.”

“Yes, let’s take a look at that, shall we? You say, Mr Decker, that you left home at 10.30am. Is that correct?”

“Yes.”

“You then cycled along the West Road to Ferridale, and then down towards Pell. You went through Lower Pell and then Armby, and just past there you had your packed lunch by the River Rask before turning back. On your return journey, you went via the back roads, missing out Armby and Lower Pell. Returning home at 3pm. You stand by all that?”

“Yes,” sighed Decker.

“The strange thing is, we’ve spoken to lots of people in those villages and not one of them recalls seeing you.”

“I don’t recall seeing them either. Those places are small, quiet. There’s not many people about, especially on a Sunday.”

“I would have thought those places were busier on a Sunday. People at home, rather than at work in Sketby. Lots of people out enjoying the countryside.”

“Well there weren’t.”

“Really? So, it’s not really much of an albi, is it?”

The detectives stared at him, like a couple of schoolboys with a spider trapped in a tin.

“It’s not meant to be an alibi. An alibi is something criminals have – an excuse. I don’t need an excuse because I wouldn’t hurt my wife and child. Obviously.”

“Perhaps it’s obvious to you, Mr Decker, but it’s not obvious to us yet – that’s why we have to ask these questions. I’ve been in this game a long time, you know. I’ve come across a lot of men who snapped and hurt their wives. Some hurt their kids too.”

“Maybe. But, I’m not that kind of man.”

“Okay,” said Jones, not sounding as if he believed Decker for a second. “Now, let’s go back to what you found when you got back to the house. A broken vase and some ruffled sheets – is that right?”

“Aye, that’s right,” groaned Decker, tired of repeating himself.

“But nothing else? No other signs of the kind of struggle?”

“No, nothing. Apart from the door being ajar.”

“Oh yes, the door. You say your wife always kept it locked?”

“Always. The front door and the back door. She didn’t want Zoe to wander off across the moor.”

“There’s a chain on the door, isn’t there?”

“Aye.”

“So, if someone abducted your wife and daughter, she must have opened the door and taken the chain off to let them in?”

“Maybe,” said Decker, puzzled. “Or they could have got in by an open window. It were a warm day in the morning. She would have had a couple of windows open.”

“Did you find any windows open when you got back?”

Decker hesitated for a moment as he tried to remember. “No… I don’t think so.”

“Interesting. Now, we found a couple of unwashed plates in the kitchen, probably from lunch. What time did they normally have lunch?”

“About one o’clock. I always wanted to have it earlier but she said that would just make me feel hungry in the afternoon.”

“One o’clock, right – so we know Laura and Zoe were there at least until then. And, as you say, she would have had a couple of windows open in the morning. But it turned it a bit chillier in the afternoon, didn’t it? Particularly out on the moor. Presumably she’d have shut the windows then?”

“Aye.”

“That would have been after 2pm, don’t you think?”

“Aye, probably.”

“So, they were there until after 2pm and you got back at about 3pm. So that’s less than an hour, isn’t it? Less than an hour for your wife and child to be abducted. Less than an hour for Laura to open the door and take off the chain to her abductor. Less than an hour for them to be taken with few signs of any struggle?”

“I suppose. But that’s possible, isn’t it?”

“I don’t know. You tell me.”

Jones folded his arms and an accusatory silence fell over the room. Decker looked nervously to Willow, who was busy pencilling down notes.

The situation was looking bleaker by the minute.

Decker took another blind handful from the drawer behind him: more photos and a headscarf that Laura used to wear. He put it to his nose and sniffed it. The smell of her had faded from it long ago but it in his mind it was still there. The sweet but subtle perfume of her golden hair.

She was still so vivid to him, or did it just seem that way? Memory, he knew, was a simplifying thing. Had time worn away her sharp edges? Had it robbed him of her nuances and subtleties, dulling her into an ideal?

Perhaps. But time could not steal the essence of her. She’d been everything to him, despite their difficulties. So smart, so caring, so beautiful. He wondered what she’d be like now if she were still alive. Still caring, he knew, and still beautiful. No grey hairs or wrinkles could diminish her.

And what kind of life would they have had? Another child perhaps, and then maybe later she would have gone back into nursing. She loved that job and was bloody good at it. Maybe after a few years they would have sold the cottage for a healthy profit and bought a bigger place, maybe far out of bloody Sketby.

Sketby. Just the mention of the name was enough to make him shudder.

Decker walked like a zombie.

He hadn’t slept properly for days and he’d hardly eaten a thing. Off work, he sat for hour after hour on the sofa at his parents’ house, staring at his feet and the same chilling questions reverberating around his head.

*Where are they? What’s happened to them?*

They had been gone a week now. A whole week. It all seemed so crazy. In some of the more way-out science fiction books he read, people slipped into alternative realities. That was how this felt: like he had fallen into another universe where nothing made sense any more. A universe without logic or joy.

“Why don’t you go out and get some fresh air, son?” his mother had said, not knowing what else to suggest. Having no better ideas, he had followed her advice.

He trudged blindly, with no destination in mind. Down street after street, noticing nothing and no-one. He didn’t even notice that it was a warm sunny day.

Nor did he see the evil looks or hear the background noise of mutterings. He didn’t see the mothers pull their children close or the old women shake their heads at the sorry state of the world. He was insensible to the men who clenched their fists and dreamed of violence.

Someone had taken Laura and Zoe, that was clear to him. His wife had no reason to leave, and even if she had, she wouldn’t have left without any of her things. In all certainty both of them were dead. The two people he cared about most in the world, gone forever. He would never see their faces again. Never hear them laugh or smile.

And what horror had they known in their final moments? That thought more than any other appalled him. A defenceless young woman and a four-year-old girl at the mercy of some vile abductor. They wouldn’t have stood a chance. Tears welled in his eyes and he felt sick to the pit of his stomach.

He looked up and saw that by accident rather than design, he had wandered into the High Street. Only a matter of yards away was his old haunt, the Coach and Horses, as tatty and tawdry as ever. It seemed like fate. Much as he hated the place, they sold just what he needed right now – oblivion.

The saloon was half empty which made the stale beer smell even more noticeable. The barmaid gave him a dirty look but the smattering of lunchtime drunks paid him no attention. He ordered a large whisky and immediately downed it. Wonderful rivers of fire burned down his throat.

“Another one,” said Decker, without his usual politeness. “And a pint of best too.”

The barmaid almost slammed the glasses in front of him. Decker ignored her and went over to a corner table, where he gulped down the second whisky before starting on the beer. He was so weary and malnourished that the alcohol worked quickly, numbing the pain but evoking other senses. He slid back in time to that Friday night six years ago when he had chatted up Laura here. That was the real world, not this imposter.

By the next drink, everything had shrunk from view. There was no past, no future, nothing to comprehend but the table in front of him. He tried to focus on the words carved into the wood: ‘Barry 4 Eileen’, ‘Scozz woz here’ and ‘LUFC’. Monkeys might type Shakespeare eventually but an idiot with a penknife would never manage anything but gibberish. Decker laughed at the ridiculousness of it all.

“Something funny, John?”

Decker looked up and saw Brian standing there with three of his similarly mesomorphic mates. They reminded him of a whoop of gorillas and their inherent absurdity made him laugh again.

“I liked Laura,” said Brian, with implicit threat.

Decker smiled. “Oh aye, I know you did.”

“And little Zoe. Anyone who hurt them deserves what’s coming to them.”

“Of course. That’s if the fucking cops can be bothered to find out who did it.”

“They seem to think you did it.”

“Really? So why haven’t they charged me? Maybe, they should take a look at you instead, Brian.”

“You what?”

“Laura told me about the way you used to look her. And ‘accidentally’ touch her. Under all that bravado there’s something not quite right about you, isn’t there? Something rotten.”

Brian’s face tightened into a grimace of rage. “You, evil little shit.”

The punch floored Decker instantly. It was followed by a barrage of boots, thumping into his head, stomach and groin. Even the booze couldn’t soften the pain. The onslaught seemed to last for an age, and for every kick there was an epithet. Monster. Pervert. Bastard. Cunt. Decker prayed for the next blow to be the last, even if it was a fatal one. But the attack went on.

“Alright,” said the barmaid eventually. “That’s enough.” There was no hint of compassion in her voice, just concern about a murder on the premises.

Two of the men stopped while Brian and one of the others carried on.

“I said that’s enough!”

The attack ended, but not before a huge ball of spit splashed against Decker’s cheek. His assailants departed, muttering obscenities, leaving him in a bleeding heap on the sticky, beer-stained floor. He looked up at the drunks and saw not a trace of sympathy, or any other emotion. He turned his aching body to the barmaid and looked at her pleadingly.

“Please,” he sobbed, the blood and snot pouring down his face. “Help me.”

“You can help yourself, sunshine,” she said, coldly, while collecting the glasses. “It’s nothing to do with me.”

“I think I’m going to be sick.”

“Oh, Christ. Ron, take him out.”

One of the bigger drunks got up, grabbed him by his coat collar and dragged him outside. Decker lay there, stunned, on the pavement for a moment before nausea forced him to move. He crawled over to the gutter and brought up his beer, to the audible disgust of two old ladies passing by.

The pain was still intense, and although the contents of the drawer could not distract him from it, they did help to give him some kind of focus. A rock to cling on to as the tides swept around him.

The next thing he took out was a folder of Zoe’s drawings. There were around twenty of them, all in crayon and faded by time. A couple were of the cottage on the moor, quite a lot were of Laura, one was of his parents, another two were of Laura’s parents and the rest were of him. She’d always been drawing, usually whatever was right in front of her. Perhaps she hadn’t been that imaginative but she had been accomplished for her age. Laura was pictured in that light green dress she often wore, and the chimney on the cottage was as crooked as it had been in real life.

It was easy to put the drawings into a rough chronological order. The earlier ones were pure chaos while the later ones were much neater and had the name of the subject written on them; something Laura had encouraged her to do in an effort to improve her writing. There was ‘Home’ and “Mummy” and “Daddy” and “Granny and Grandad”, all written and spelled with wildly varying degrees of accuracy.

He always found looking at them wonderful, but difficult too. Particularly the one picture because it was the last thing she did, on that very last day. It was him, with a bright pink face and a spiky black body, standing next to a sea of yellow and orange flowers – that horrible 1970s flowery wallpaper he had put up the day before. In the top right-hand corner, she had written ‘Dad’, or had at least tried to. The first two letters were well formed, possibly under Laura’s guidance, but by the third she’d lost patience and delivered a lopsided squiggle. What did it matter? Great artists didn’t need to write well.

Perhaps that’s what she would have become, he speculated. A best-selling artist, with paintings selling for thousands. Or a struggling artist, but with passion all the same. Or a graphic designer. Or something completely different like a scientist or a teacher or a businesswoman. It wouldn’t have mattered to him much. He would have been proud of her whatever she did. Unconditional love was what being a parent was all about.

“And we’re thinking of having a little fish pond put over there,” said Dave, pointing to the lawn.

Decker grunted, finding it hard to mask his lack of interest. He had only been half-listening for the last ten minutes while Dave had talked about his new fitted bathroom, and the shed he had just built from scratch.

“Sorry, mate,” said Dave, sensing his friend’s distance. “I’m being crass. I just thought a bit of normality might help. But there’s no normality for you, is there?”

“Not anymore. My world is just darkness and violence now.”

“I told you – after the warning I gave Brian and his mates, they won’t try anything again.”

“There’ll be others. This town is full of people like that.”

“You could have pressed charges.”

“What would be the point? It would just create more animosity with Laura’s family. The cops have totally poisoned them against me.”

“It’ll blow over. They’re never going to charge you – there’s not a shred of evidence.”

“That won’t matter to most people here – particularly while there’s no other suspects. Why aren’t the police looking at other people?”

“I think to some extent they have. The local nutters, you know.”

“But they haven’t arrested anyone else. Why can’t they see beyond me?”

“I’m sure they will eventually.”

“There’s some maniac out there who’s responsible. He could even have Laura and Zoe alive. Can’t you speak to your bosses and get them to see sense?”

“I’m just an ordinary beat officer. I don’t carry any weight.”

Decker started to protest but was interrupted by the front door opening.

“Hi Wendy,” said Decker glumly, as she walked in with a bag full of shopping.

Her face froze on seeing him. She shook her head, dropped the bag and headed straight upstairs.

“What?” He looked at Dave, who suddenly seemed uncomfortable.

“Aye… well. You know how close she and Laura were.”

“She thinks I did it? She thinks I murdered my own wife and daughter?”

“No, no,” said Dave. “Like everyone, she doesn’t know.”

“And what about you? Do you know, Dave?”

“Of course. I know you wouldn’t do something like that. But…”

“But what?”

“Well, it might be better if you didn’t come around here for a while. I don’t want Wendy upset. Or the kids either. And, well, I have to be careful myself you know. It doesn’t look good for me to be seen with a murder suspect. I could get into trouble at work.”

“Oh Jesus, I don’t believe I’m hearing this.”

“Try to understand, John. It’s difficult for me.”

Decker got up off the sofa. “Oh aye, I’m sure it is. But imagine how difficult it is to lose your wife and child. Imagine what it’s like, at the time when you most need help, to find the whole damn world is against you.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Aye, thanks a lot. I won’t embarrass you anymore.”

He stormed out the house without another word and slammed the front door behind him.

In the second drawer down there were other memories. Decker reached out, pulled it open and grabbed the first thing to hand.

It was a folder full of family photos. Some were old pictures of his parents before he was born, but largely they were a record of his childhood: paddling in the sea at Blackpool, eating an ice cream on the promenade, playing football in the back garden, sat on the coal bunker reading an *Eagle* comic.

Another world, lost in time. He found it hard to think that he had been there, and that person had been him. In his life there was a huge chasm that cut off the first couple of decades from the rest of it. He had become disconnected from his own youth and heritage. He couldn’t equate that happy and carefree young boy with the dour, obsessive man he had become.

It was as if they were utterly different people.

“You’re sacking me?”

“I’m letting you go,” said Ganley, not even looking up from the plug he was rewiring. “I’ll give you two weeks’ pay though.”

“But you can’t,” protested Decker, stood in the doorway of his boss’s office-cum-workshop.

“It’s my business – I can do whatever I like.”

“But I’ve told you. I won’t have any more time off.”

“It’s not just that though, is it?”, said Ganley, scrabbling about in his toolbox for the right screwdriver. “Think about it. People don’t want someone with a murder charge hanging over them coming into their homes.

“I don’t have a murder charge hanging over me. If they were going to charge me, they’d have done it by now.”

“That’s as maybe. I don’t know what the police are thinking. It’s what our customers are thinking that matters to me. Fact is, there’s still a cloud of suspicion over you as far as they’re concerned.”

Decker groaned in disbelief. He’d turned up for work after extended leave to be immediately greeted by this bombshell.

"And I’m also guilty as far as you’re concerned, I take it?”

“Me? No, I don’t think you did it for a second. Whatever your faults, you’re no killer. I feel sorry for you, if truth to be told.”

“And you’re showing it by sacking me?”

“I’ve got the business to think of! What good is it to anyone if this place goes bust and everyone loses their job? Look, don’t worry, I’ll give you a good reference.”

“Oh great.”

“Hey, I heard about you and that Ruby Bell woman, you know,” said Ganley, waving the screwdriver as if Decker was a naughty schoolboy. “I could sack you just for that. What man wants you coming to fix his telly if he thinks you might give his wife one?”

“That were a one-off!”

“Come on don’t give me that – I’m too long in the tooth. It’s a perk of the job, maybe, but not for you anymore.”

Decker strode right up to Ganley and glared down at him.

 “Listen, arsehole. My wife and child are missing. I don’t know what’s happened to them but I can only assume the worst – that they’re dead, and that they died in pain and fear and distress. And I’ll never ever see them again. Can you imagine, what it’s like for me? Can you, or any of the other thick-headed, narrow-minded wankers in this shitty little town imagine for a second what that’s like? Can you imagine the grief, the anguish? Can you put yourself in my shoes for just a second?”

He grabbed Ganley by the collar and shook him.

“Can you?”

Ganley pushed him away and grabbed a larger screwdriver in defence.

“Now, you’ve been threatening and abusive – so, you won’t get a reference. Or two weeks’ pay!”

“Stick it up your arse.”

“Get out my shop,” barked Ganley. “We’re open in five minutes and I don’t want anyone seeing you.”

“Fine! I wouldn’t stay in this dump another second.”

Decker stormed out. For a moment he was tempted to throw one of the TV sets through the shop window, but he wasn’t going to give Ganley or anyone in Sketby the satisfaction of seeing him prosecuted.

He marched off down the High Street, gripped by an overwhelming hatred for the whole town. The butchers with its rancid smell, the bakers with its shrivelled little pastries. All the nasty, old-fashioned little shops and the gossiping, spiteful women who scuttled between them. The stupid, brutish men who toiled for a paltry wage they didn’t have the imagination to spend on anything but the bookies or beer. Propping up bars, night after night, swapping tales of fear and prejudice, about the blacks, or the queers, or the southerners, or anyone else who didn’t conform to their narrow little view of the world. Decker hated them all.

This town was a dump. The steelworks and the canning factory were the definitive ‘dark satanic mills’, but worse still were the grubby little yards and warehouses that had blistered around them. All that oil-soaked ground and ugly, rusting metal.

He should have left here years ago and taken Laura and Zoe too. Then they would still be with him. Sketby had failed to keep them safe and now it was trying to destroy him too. But he wasn’t going to let that happen.

It was time to get out.

Decker picked out one of the photos – a black and white shot of him on his bike, at that age when he was old enough to go out on his own, beyond the confines of his street. Then the whole of Sketby had become his playground: Howard’s Hill, the Rec, and the old railway track, wild and abandoned, thanks to Doctor Beeching. Then, after a while, he had been allowed to the edge of the moor, with strict parental warnings not to stray too far. Sketby had seemed a large, exciting place then. The whole world, rather than a small, narrow place. Back then, a trip to Leeds or York had seemed like a holiday abroad.

A few years later, the town had become another kind of playground, full of pubs and clubs and girls. Even after the Army opened his eyes to a wider world, it had still seemed a good place to be. Because it had felt like home; somewhere he knew all the rules. Where to get a cheap pint or a good looker, and where to avoid if you didn’t want your head kicked in.

It was foolish, he felt now, to believe that any place could always be your home. It might turn on you in the blink of an eye and become your enemy. Like Sketby had done, after Laura and Zoe disappeared.

And like this house had done. His little sanctuary, now the perfect trap.

“You’re leaving?” said Mother, perched on the edge of the armchair.

Decker nodded. “I have to. I can’t stay here in Sketby any longer.”

“But people know you’re innocent now.”

“Do they? They know a witness came forward and said they saw me on my bike, but they probably think my solicitor just paid him to say it – and for all I know he did. There is something dodgy about him. And even if I were out on my bike, I could have killed them before I left, or when I came back. And then hidden the bodies somewhere on the moor.”

“But that’s nonsense.”

“Of course it’s nonsense,” said Decker. “The whole police case against me was nonsense right from the start, but they’ve never bloody looked at anyone else. Whoever took Laura and Zoe is going to get away scot free, thanks to those idiots.”

“Couldn’t Dave have a word with them?”

“Dave’s just a PC Plod – he’s got no sway with them. He probably thinks I did it anyway – Wendy certainly does. This whole town thinks I did it. I get abuse shouted at me in the bloody street.”

“Is there really no chance Laura just went off somewhere with someone?” said Father, who had been stood brooding by the sideboard.

“Oh Dad, we’ve gone through this. No, she loved me. She had no reason to leave. And even if she did, she wouldn’t have left without any of her things, or Zoe’s things.”

“Maybe so, but women do funny things sometimes. They’re not always rational.”

Mother rolled her eyes at that.

“But she wouldn’t leave the rest of her family behind too, would she?” protested Decker. “And she wouldn’t stay silent when her face was plastered all over the papers.”

“Well… maybe not,” admitted his Father, rather reluctantly.

“But you shouldn’t have to leave,” said Mother. “Just because people are being stupid.”

“It’s not just that. I can’t stay here – I’ve no job anymore and no-one’s going to give me one.”

“You could get one nearby.”

“No, what’s the point. It’s too painful to stay here. Too many reminders.”

“You don’t have to go back to the cottage. You can stay here as long as you want, pet.”

“It’s not just the cottage. It’s this place too. It’s every street, every shop, every corner. I see them everywhere I go. And I wonder what happened to them. What terror they went through.”

“But just moving town won’t stop you feeling like that.”

“I know, I know. But it’s my only chance to create some kind of day-to-day existence. Here, I can’t even think straight. And ultimately, I don’t want to live in a place I’ve come to hate.”

“Where you going to go then?” asked Father.

“I don’t know yet. As far from here as possible. It won’t be right away though – I need to put the cottage up for sale first. Though I’m not sure anyone will want to buy it after all this.”

Mother sighed and shook her head.

“I think you should have another think about it. I’ll put the kettle on.”

That was her answer to every problem, Decker knew – making a cup of tea. If only life were that simple.

7

Decker left early, when the streets were largely deserted, and the whole town seemed frozen in a depressing, gloomy twilight. The only people to wave him off were his parents, standing in their dressing gowns on the pavement. His mother tearful, as if he was joining the army all over again. His father putting on a brave but baffled face.

He hardly gave Sketby a glance as he drove out on the Leeds Road, past the canning factory and the reservoir. There was nothing bittersweet about this departure; nothing that tugged him back or filled him a sense of leaving home. These were the streets where he had grown up, where he had run and played, but they hadn’t the slightest hold on him now.

His life, at that moment, was in his Vauxhall Viva and nowhere else. On the back seat were two suitcases packed with all he needed for now: clothes, toiletries, a sleeping bag, a few basic kitchen items and a couple of books. The rest of his things were boxed up in his parents’ loft. Laura and Zoe’s things were there too, as he couldn’t bring himself to get rid of them, even though he knew they weren’t coming back. They were gone forever, and without them there was no reason to stay in Sketby.

He had no particular destination in mind. Just one simple word reverberated in his mind as he sped down the motorway.

South.

For some people in Sketby he knew that word was a kind of curse, something to be spat out with disdain. The South! It existed as a kind of nebulous, mythical scapegoat for all sorts of local ills. Every low wage, every closed factory, could be pinned on the door of the South and the people who lived there. Snobbish, rich, soft, Tory-voting Southerners, who didn’t understand what it was like to toil and get their hands dirty. They weren’t real, honest, salt of the earth people like Sketby folk, all of whom would proudly proclaim themselves to be working class, however much money they had. Admitting to being middle class was like confessing to some kind of sexual deviancy.

Decker had sometimes sympathised with those points of view, but now, so pathological was his hatred for his hometown that he saw his enemy’s enemy as his friend. If Sketby hated the South, then that was where he would make his new home. It was no promised land, and he couldn’t just start again as if nothing had happened, but it could be a sanctuary, a place to take refuge from the horrors. Life without Laura and Zoe would always be a struggle, especially while he had no idea what had happened to them, but with a change of scenery he might at least survive and carve out some kind of existence.

He drove on a kind of autopilot, hardly noticing anything of Yorkshire and the Midlands, and stopping only to fill up with petrol. Heading south became a fixation. He would go as far south as possible, until he could go no further. Warwickshire, Oxfordshire, Berkshire – he passed them by with little attention. All he knew was that they weren’t far enough away from Sketby for his liking.

England went by in a blur, until finally, after hours behind the wheel, he reached Bournemouth, which was as southerly as he could get, without taking a sharp swing to the west. He would do that tomorrow, but for now he would stop for something to eat and what passed for a good night’s sleep these days.

Bournemouth town centre was much as he had expected. A bright, bustling seaside resort, with hordes of holidaymakers swarming between the beach and the shops and the parks. Rows of hotels gleamed invitingly in the sun; as it was the peak of summer he guessed they would all be full. It didn’t matter – for one night he could kip in the car or even on the beach. He would be okay with a couple of drinks inside him.

He drove on along the cliff road, until he found a pub. Inside it was busy with locals and tourists but he soon got served.

“What can I can get you?” beamed the barmaid.

He had forgotten what that was like – to be smiled at. To be treated as a normal human being, not some monster who had escaped justice.

“A pint of bitter please. Do you serve food?”

“We do.”

“Fish and chips? I always like fish and chips when I’m at the seaside.”

“Of course, love”

“Marvellous. I’ll be sat over there.

“Having a good holiday?” asked the barmaid, as she poured his drink.

“Oh, I’m not on holiday. I’m just passing through.”

“Well, enjoy passing through then.”

He took a seat amid the tourists, not paying them much attention but enjoying the background chatter and laughs. He felt tired but nowhere near as tense as normal. Sketby seemed a million miles away, which as far as he was concerned was where it should be.

When the food came, he wolfed it down. Though it was nothing special, it was the first time he had enjoyed a meal in a long time. He had another pint and relaxed even further; enjoying being among people - without feeling they might turn on him at any moment.

He was tempted by a third pint but, still feeling stiff from driving all day, he decided to stretch his legs instead. He walked over the road to the cliff’s edge and looked out at a scene that no picture postcard could ever do justice to: a vast stretch of Jurassic rock, lined by golden sands and clear blue seas. To the left, the Isle of Wight and the Needles, to the right, the Isle of Purbeck. He breathed in the fresh, clean air, felt the evening sun on his face and -for a fleeting moment- remembered what it was like to feel alive.

Could he stay here? In a happy holiday town? He had been aiming for some isolated little fishing town or country backwater in Devon or Cornwall. Some place where the world would forget him, and he would forget the world.

But in a remote spot like that there would be little to distract him from his despair, and there would always be the risk that he would become the victim of small town gossip all over again. Bournemouth might seem an unlikely sanctuary but at least here he could get lost among the crowds. He might always feel incongruous amid the sunshine and smiles, but, on the other hand, he wouldn’t think that the whole damn world was cursed.

Also, he needed work, and he would definitely find some here. Not just a job, but wealth. There was clearly a fair bit of money in this town, and he needed a share in it if he was going to get justice for Laura and Zoe.

He wouldn’t be driving on tomorrow, he decided. He had found his new home.

He pulled out another folder – this one containing assorted memories of the shops he had owned. There were leaflets and brochures, promoting the shiny delights of the latest technology: video recorders (VHS or Betamax), portable sets and satellite dishes. It all looked out of the ark now, but back then it had been cutting edge.

There were a few photos too. He picked up one that showed the exterior of the original store, the one in Bournemouth, from before he had taken it over. It looked so dull and old-fashioned, like something from the 1950s rather than the 1970s. He’d landed a job there only a few days after arriving in Bournemouth, and thrown himself into it, desperate for a sense of normality as well an income. At first, he had just been a deliveryman and repairman, as he had been in Sketby. Those had been strange times. Though still devastated by all that had happened, he had found some kind of comfort in driving round those sunny streets and coast roads, delivering the latest model of TV set or fixing one that had broken. There was genuine pleasure in fixing things, making things right.

Why had he moved out here to the Forest instead of staying in Bournemouth? Yes, the town became horribly clogged when the tourists arrived, but it was a bustling, lively place where he wouldn’t be in his current predicament.

He knew why. It was more than a need for isolation. It was more than his failure to engage with people, or truly trust them. It was because the Forest, for all its beauty, was also a hard and forbidding place, especially in the winter. It was like the moor, calling him back.

Decker turned the sign on the front door to ‘Closed’ and switched off all the sets. He had suggested leaving a TV on, maybe one of the latest PYE models, so that evening passers-by would still see the quality of the picture, but Mr Gold had vetoed the idea, saying it would use too much electricity and pose a fire risk, even if they used a timer. His boss was a nice man, but he had no vision. Decker knew he could do so much more with the place.

Still, it had been a good day. He had sold two sets and set up lucrative rental contracts for a couple of others. His transition from mere repairman to salesman had gone without a hitch. And he enjoyed work. It stopped him thinking about things too much. It was only in the evenings, alone in the flat, that the ghosts really came back to haunt him, which is why he worked as late as possible, always finding something to do. He gave the shop a good tidy, dusted the tops of the sets and polished the screens. The fluorescent sale signs were looking a bit limp, so he drew up some new ones with a marker pen.

When he ran out of jobs, he went into the back office where Gold was poring over the books, a worried expression on his pudgy, sunburnt face.

“Oh, it’s you,” said Gold, looking up. “Still here?”

“Still here, Mr Gold.”

“I hope you’re not expecting overtime. We can’t afford it, not the way we’re going.” To emphasise the point, he slapped the back of his hand down on the accounts book.

“This drought isn’t helping,” said Decker. “Who wants to stay in and watch the telly when the sun’s shining?”

“It’s more than that. Things have been bad for a while.”

Decker pulled up a chair and sat down.

“Mr Gold, why don’t you retire? Your heart’s not in it anymore.”

“Oh, I’d love to, John, believe me. There’s nothing I’d like better than to be sat in my beach hut all day, rather than here. But I can’t afford it – not unless I can find a buyer for the business.”

“I’ll buy it off you.”

“You?” snorted Gold in disbelief. “You couldn’t afford it.”

“I could. I’ve saved a lot and I’ve finally sold my house up north,.”

“But why do you want to? You can see this shop doesn’t work – we’re in totally the wrong spot.”

“We’re not. We just need to be a bit cannier that’s all. Promote the place better.”

“Oh, think you can the job a lot better than me, do you?”

“With all due respect, Mr Gold, yes.”

Gold took off his glasses and rubbed his sore eyes.

“I should be offended really, but I’m not. If you were speaking from youthful arrogance, I might be, but that’s not how it is with you, is it? You’re a hard worker, Decker, and a decent salesman too. But there’s something odd about you. Something dark even. It’s not like you’re ambitious in any conventional sense. I don’t think you work hard because you want a nice house and nice things, though I’m sure you still appreciate all that. I don’t think it’s pride or power that motivates you either. No, you work in the same way that an alcoholic drinks. To forget, perhaps?”

“Perhaps,” admitted Decker.

“I always remember that first day you came in here, asking for work. I sensed it then – that you were running away from something. Something that happened where you come from. I almost didn’t give you a job because of it, but you were cheap and you seemed to know your stuff, so I did. And I’ve not regretted it, but you still worry me somehow. I know little about you and seemingly nobody else does either. Do you have any friends?”

“Not close friends. Not anymore.”

“And what about a girlfriend? Why’s a good-looking guy like you single? You’re not gay – I know that. I can spot a fellow queen a mile off.”

“I’d just rather be on my own, that’s all.”

“Maybe. But is that really the way you want to live your life? Running this business, working all the hours God sends just to try to make it work? Never relaxing? Never spending any time with anyone who isn’t a sales rep or a customer?”

“This business is just what I want, Mr Gold. What I need. I can’t really explain why.”

“Okay, okay,” sighed Gold, closing the accounts book and handing it to Decker. “It’s yours if you want it and if you’ve got the money. Good luck to you – you’ll need it.”

Decker shook his boss’s hand and thanked him, agreeing to discuss the financial details the next day.

As he walked home to Boscombe, the area of Bournemouth where he lived, Decker felt in rare high spirits, buying a bottle of wine and a bag of chips to celebrate. Even his unhomely flat didn’t fill him with the usual sense of gloom. He put on some music, crashed down on the sofa and relaxed.

Usually his nights were far less chilled. He’d be sat at the table writing countless letters to politicians and the police, calling for the reopening of the case. Most of the time he got replies but they were always useless. He didn’t even bother filing their polite excuses any more. He just threw them in the bin, and fuelled by rage, wrote a letter to someone else instead.

It was a different story during the day, when he never mentioned anything about Laura and Zoe to anyone. Nobody among his small group of acquaintances down here in Bournemouth knew anything about what had happened. It wasn’t just a matter of wanting to avoid the pointing fingers he had experienced in Sketby. It was also the need for some kind of normality in his life, even if was only a pretence. He just wanted to feel like an ordinary man earning an honest living. If anyone asked about wives or children he changed the subject as quickly as possible. Perhaps he was living a lie, but it helped him cope. He couldn’t bear living with the grief and anger all the time.

He topped up his glass of wine and kicked off his shoes. It was an odd, disjointed kind of existence, but soon it would change. He knew he could make the business a success. It was just a question of the right deals, better marketing and staying up to date with the latest trends. In a couple of years, he would be a wealthy man.

Money for its own sake didn’t interest him anymore. He wasn’t after flash cars, a big house or expensive holidays. All that he wanted was enough money to hire private detectives to investigate the crime properly.

He would find out what had happened to Laura and Zoe, and he would catch the person responsible.

The next photo showed the shop soon after he had taken it over. A lick of gold paint, a modern looking sign and a revamped display to show off the portable TVs and more of the latest sets. A few simple moves that had transported the shop to the present day. However, he had kept the name – *Gold TV and Radio*, as for all its economic failings, the business still had a good reputation, and it also saved the cost of rebranding the van and all the stationery.

Success had been steady rather than overnight. Slowly, but surely, he had attracted younger families keen to purchase the latest in home entertainment. Because he had offered the right prices and good customer service, they had come back, or told others about the store. Gradually the place had become a highly profitable business.

He had worked round the clock to make that place work, never satisfied that things couldn’t be even better. For a while, his campaign for justice had come to a standstill as he focussed entirely on the shop. But all the while, in the back of his mind it had ticked over, ready for the time when he was ready to act again.

“Oh God, sorry I’m late,” said Luke, as he hurried in, breathless and windswept.

“You’re fired,” said Decker, without even looking up from the TV he was connecting.

“What?”

“I told you last time – be late again and you’d get your cards.”

“But I couldn’t help it, Mr Decker. You see, Gail wasn’t feeling well and I – ”

“I’m not interested in excuses. You can have your pay up until yesterday and that’s it.” He started taking the money from the till, while the young man stared at him pleadingly.

“Please, Mr Decker. Have a bit of pity.”

“This is a business, not a charity.”

“I know but it’s only twenty minutes.”

“Twenty minutes in which we had a customer. I had to serve them when I had other things to do. And half these sets haven’t been switched on.”

“Please,” begged the young man. “It won’t happen again, I promise.”

“Let me tell you something, sonny. When I started working here, this place was on its knees. Now it’s a big success and I’ve opened a second shop. One day there’ll be a third. I didn’t get here by sentiment, or by letting the staff take the piss.”

“I’m not taking the piss.”

“Really?” scoffed Decker, counting out the money. “It sometimes seems like everyone is. Everyone wants an easy ride. People have become soft, flabby. Half of them expect the state to wipe their arse for them.”

“But I want to work. I can’t afford to lose my job, Mr Decker. Not with a new baby. You’ve no family, have you? You don’t know what it’s like to have to support a wife and daughter.”

“Don’t I? Oh, you’d be surprised what I know…” For a moment he drifted off into memories of another life.

“Sorry…” said Luke, puzzled. “I assumed you’d always been a bachelor.”

“No, I had a family once. A long time ago.”

Suddenly, in the spiky-haired, gawky young salesman he saw a reflection of his former self. Feckless, naïve, struggling for money and never quite getting things right. Full of shit, but full of hopes and dreams too. The fashions might have changed but not much else had.

Decker gave a wry chuckle. “You know Luke, I look at someone like you and I’m not sure whether I want to hug you or clout you one.”

“I’d rather you didn’t either. I’d rather just let me keep my job.”

“Oh, you can keep your job,” said Decker, chucking the notes back in the till. “Though I’m not sure you’ve any idea how much hard work is involved. Everything is hard work. Wealth, happiness… even justice.”

“I’ll work hard, I promise. Thanks, Mr Decker. I won’t let you down.”

“Don’t let your girlfriend down, or your daughter. “They’re special – remember that.”

“I know.”

“Good. These days are the golden days, you see. You probably don’t realise that now. You’ll moan about the baby crying or the lack of money, or the fact that you don’t get out for a drink with your mates so often anymore. But none of that matters. What matters is that you have love around you. You have a family. You have… *joy.* But it won’t last forever. Sometimes it doesn’t last long at all.”

A tear was rolling down his check.

“Are you okay Mr Decker?” asked Luke, baffled by his boss’s behaviour.

“Yeah… yeah. I’m okay. You know what – take the day off.”

“The day off?”

“Yes, the whole day. Don’t worry, you’ll be paid. Be with your girlfriend and daughter. Take them down the beach or something.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure. Now piss off before I change my mind.”

Utterly confused, Luke hurried out, while Decker busied himself with switching on all the sets, to stop himself breaking down completely.

Along with the photos, there were a couple of newspapers articles – advertising features from the *Bournemouth Echo*. He unfolded one and looked at the picture of the staff lined up outside the shop. Standing next to him was Luke, the absent minded and unpunctual kid he had almost sacked. A couple of years later Decker had given Luke the running of the Poole shop, and on retirement he had sold the business to him. How things changed.

He unfolded another article. It was from a few years later and again pictured the staff lined up outside the Bournemouth shop. Standing next to him this time was Penny, looking incredibly smart and pretty.

Wonderful Penny. What a mess he had made of all that.

8

Everything was as Decker had anticipated: the shrivelled little sausage rolls, the tasteless triangular sandwiches, the bowls of peanuts and ready salted crisps, all arranged with pride by his Aunty Beryl. A positively exotic half of grapefruit had been ritually impaled with cheese and pineapple on cocktail sticks. He plucked one out and ate it while he watched his mum darting around, making sure everyone had something to drink. She was too busy worrying about trivialities to properly grieve. That would come later, when everyone had disappeared.

There had only been a small group of mourners at the funeral, but most of them had come back here to the house. They were largely relatives and a few old family friends, plus a couple of his dad’s old workmates. Decker was annoyed, because he knew that years back this would have been a much bigger affair. His father had been a popular man, known to half the town. He could have walked into any pub here and someone would have bought him a pint. But for the last five years, things had been different. Harold Decker had no longer been the salt of the earth, the life and soul of the party. As the father of John Decker, he had, at best, been treated with a degree of unease, while some had shunned him altogether.

This town, thought Decker hatefully. This stupid, small-minded little town.

It was the first time he had been back to Sketby in a long time. Rather than come up here, he had always paid for Mum and Dad to come and visit him in Bournemouth. He couldn’t bear the thought of walking down a street and meeting all those looks and whispers, and possibly even threats. Just coming up here yesterday afternoon, and driving down all those bleak and miserable streets, had brought back far too many bad memories.

Today Decker had tried to put all that behind him so he could say a proper farewell. His father had been a good man, of simple beliefs and pleasures, who had never really got to grips to what had happened. He had been kind, supportive, never for a second believing the worst of his only child, but nonetheless, the tragedy had put a distance between them much greater than the few hundred miles from Sketby to Bournemouth. His humble outlook on life just didn’t equip him to fully comprehend something so random and devastating, so he stood apart a little, offering sympathy but not empathy. But still, Decker knew that was more than most people gave.

He helped himself to another spear of cheese and pineapple before doing what was expected of him – mingling with the mourners, making small talk and thanking them for coming. People asked him how he was, how his business was doing, and all the time he saw the look at the back of their eyes. He knew what they were thinking. *Did you really kill them? Did you murder your wife and daughter? After all, they never arrested anyone else.*

He brushed it off and moved on to the next guest, until he reached the person to whom he really wanted to speak.

“Hello, Dave. Sorry we’ve not had a chance to speak properly yet.”

“No worries, John,” said his old friend, placing a comforting hand on his shoulder. “It’s good to see you again, though I wish it weren’t in these circumstances. He were a great man, your dad. A great man.”

“Yes, he was. Thank you. How’s Wendy?”

“Oh, she’s fine thanks. Still a right nag but I couldn’t cope without her.”

“And the kids?”

“Aye, all good too. Sarah’s at senior school now and Kevin starts there next year. He’s a great little footie player, you know. Plays centre half. He’s had a couple of scouts from Leeds look at him already.”

“Really? Where did he get that from then? You could never kick a ball to save your life.”

“Hey, I were better than you, man!” laughed Dave. “Anyway, I hear things have perked up for you?”

“Yes. Well, financially speaking they have. I own two TV and electricals shops, down in Dorset. And I’m hoping to open my third.”

“Blimey, I never saw you as a businessman. But good luck to you – you deserve it. Mind you, I see you’ve lost your accent. You sound like a right southerner.”

“Oh yes, I even say ‘dinner’ now instead of ‘tea’. I’ve sold out completely, mate. Look, Dave, can we go out into the garden for a sec – there’s something I want to ask you in private.”

“Er aye, okay,” said Dave, rather apprehensively. “I could do with a smoke anyway.”

They stepped outside into the chilly April air.  Decker declined Dave’s offer of a cigarette and waited silently while his friend lit up. The familiarity of the tiny little back garden, with its coal bunker and tatty shed (formerly an outside toilet) depressed him, even though it should have brought back good memories.

“Remember playing here as a kid?” said Dave, as if reading his mind. “We had some cracking games of footie. And cricket.”

“Yeah,” said Decker, without quite the same enthusiasm. “And tag.”

“And soldiers – remember? We pretended we were parachutists by jumping off the coal bunker.”

“I remember – I twisted my ankle. Yet I still wanted to join the bloody army.”

“Oh, they were good times, man. Good times.”

“Yeah, maybe” said Decker, who found nostalgia rather depressing. All it did was remind you how things died and broke apart.

“Well, I thought they were, anyway.”

“Still on the force?” asked Decker, steering the conversation towards what he wanted.

“Aye,” said Dave, taking a drag. “I’m a sergeant now.”

“CID?”

“No, no. Uniform.”

“But you have access to records?”

Dave’s brow furrowed. “What do you mean? What kind of records?”

“The ones to do with Laura and Zoe.”

“Possibly, aye. Why?”

“I can’t have been the only suspect, surely? There must have been other people on the radar, even if they weren’t properly investigated.”

“Well, aye. There’s always the usual suspects when something like that happens.”

“I want to know who they were. I want their details.”

“I can’t tell you that,” said Dave, outraged. “Come on, you must realise that – it’s totally confidential.”

“Oh, don’t give me that. You coppers give information to the press all the time, and take backhanders for it.”

“I don’t – I can tell you that.”

“Okay, then break the rules just this once – for an old mate.”

“I could get the sack.”

“You won’t. You’re too smart, Dave. You always were.”

Dave paced over to the fence and stubbed his fag out, even though it was barely spent.

“I can’t believe you’re asking me this. And what are you going to do with the information when you’ve got it?”

“Don’t worry. I’m not going to kill them or anything like that. I’m just going to have them properly investigated, that’s all. Do the job that the police should have done.”

Dave stared down at his shoes, unsure what to say. Decker understood the man’s dilemma, but the information on those other suspects was vital. He had to know.

“Come on Dave. Please. I need to find out what happened to my wife and child. Imagine if it were Wendy and your kids.”

“Alright,” Dave relented with a sigh. “I’m not promising anything but I’ll see what I can do.”

“Great. You won’t regret it, Dave. I promise you.”

“I hope not, I really do. Come on, let’s go back inside and drink a toast to your dad.”

“Yes, let’s do that.”

He put an arm around Dave’s shoulders and the two old pals went back into the house.

Decker considered the third drawer down. Lying on his back he couldn’t see it, but he knew he could still just about reach down to open it. There were more memories inside, but ones that had nothing bittersweet about them. It contained the notes on the people he had investigated and other documents relating to the disappearance of his wife and daughter.

His initial thoughts were to leave them, knowing what feelings those old papers would stir up. Feelings it was probably best to avoid at an already distressing time like this.

However, once the idea entered his head, it was hard to let it go. Did the answer still lie in the information he had gathered? Had one of those people really been the killer? Perhaps, if the end of his life was really near, he should look at those documents again, one last time.

Ultimately, the temptation proved too much. He stretched out his arms behind him, reached down and pulled at the drawer. It was stiff and he had to gradually work it open, inch by inch, on each side. The tension in his arms travelled down to his legs, making him growl with pain, but after a few more tugs he got the drawer open wide enough to grab the files.

Unseen for a few years, the folders smelled horribly stale and musty. Which was fitting, thought Decker, given the grim nature of their contents.

Decker impatiently drummed his fingers on the steering wheel and stared out across Sketby Moor. Up here at Hallerby Point there was a grand view of its wild desolation. Were Laura and Zoe buried out there somewhere in a shallow grave? The police had combed the area, of course, and he’d spent days wandering around there himself, but the moor was so vast that their bodies could still be there undiscovered. The thought made him shudder, though once it would have made him cry. He was a hard man now, as cold and bleak as this countryside.

A Ford Cortina pulled up and Dave emerged, in plain clothes. He looked tense, his eyes darting about in search of anyone who might be watching.

Decker leaned over and opened the passenger door to let him in.

“Hello, Dave.”

“Bloody hell, John – I can’t believe I’m doing this.”

“It’s okay – don’t worry.”

“It weren’t easy getting this, you know,” he said, handing him a plastic carrier bag.

“I’m sure it wasn’t, but I’m very grateful.”

Inside the bag to find a large padded envelope containing around 30 pieces of A4 paper. Decker had expected a lot more.

“Is this all there is?”

“Yep.”

Decker flicked through the documents, which had obviously been photocopied in a hurry as much of the text was lopsided. There were various mugshots and statements but he couldn’t believe that this represented every avenue of enquiry.

“How many suspects is this then?”

“Four. There were more obviously but I couldn’t copy everything.”

“But I need everything, Dave.”

“Look, when a crime like this happens, all kinds of people get questioned – formally and informally. Every local nonce, flasher or weirdo we know about. But some of them would never have abducted a woman and child. We knew that at the time, but we still spoke to them because that’s just what we do. It’s like a ritual. We get to find out what all the headcases have been up to, and we get a chance to put the shits up them, which might keep them out of bother for a while.

“And then there’s other people who might have done it but have got genuine alibis. I’ve not included them either. What you have there is the believable suspects with no real alibis, or alibis that are a bit dubious.”

“I see. Well, I suppose it’ll be easy to investigate four people than hundreds.”

“And how exactly are you going to investigate them? You’re hiring a private detective, I take it?”

“Yes.”

“Do you know who?”

“Not yet.”

“Well, be careful. Some of them aren’t much better than criminals themselves. And I doubt if many of them are up to investigating a case like this.”

“Can they do any worse than the police have?”

“Quite possibly, yes. And if they go steamrollering over these suspects it’ll come back to bite you – and me too.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll make sure they play by the rules. And nothing will ever be traced back to you, I promise.”

“It had better not. But to make sure, do me a favour and transcribe those notes, then burn the originals.”

“Okay.”

Decker looked at the first mugshot – an emaciated and pockmarked face, lined by lank and greasy hair.

“Neville Bayley.”

“Horrible specimen,” said Dave. “Abducted a four-year-old girl from her bedroom and molested her. Not sure he’d have it in him to abduct a grown woman too, but he’s worth looking at.”

“Okay.”

“Then you’ve got Colin Quill, another paedophile with a long record. He’s got form for crimes against adults too so he’s a better shout perhaps.

“So is William Melksham. He abducted and raped a woman. Posh background, loads of money, and fancies himself as a bit of an intellectual, but basically he’s just another sicko.”

“Sounds lovely. And who’s the fourth suspect?” He flicked through the papers to try to find out for himself.

“Patrick Bell,” said Dave.

“Bell?”

“Aye. The bloke whose wife you shagged. Got quite a bit of form for GBH and wouldn’t have been keen on you messing about with his missus. I’m not sure he’s the type to hurt a little kid but he did give a 12-year-old boy a real good hiding. He’s certainly worth looking at – he’s got no solid alibi.”

“Right…” said Decker, unsettled by the thought that his own infidelity might have brought about the deaths of Laura and Zoe.

“Of course,” continued Dave, “it’s probably not any of them. It could be someone we don’t know about at all, or it could be someone from outside our patch just travelling through. There’s not enough cooperation between forces as there should be unfortunately. But still, those four are certainly all worth another look.”

“And there’s a fifth,” said Decker, slipping the documents back in the envelope.

“Who?” said Dave.

“Brian Wheelwright.”

“Brian? Your brother-in-law?”

“Yep. There’s something not quite right about that bloke – and he had a thing about Laura.”

“Really?”

“Yes, she said he used to look at her in a funny way. And ‘accidentally’ touch her.”

“That hardly makes him a killer.”

“He almost killed me, remember?”

“Well, aye. I still don’t see it though.”

“Maybe not, but he’s going on the list.”

“Okay, do as you see fit. As long as none of this comes back to me, I don’t really care. And this is it, John – this is the last you’ll get from me. I owe you this favour as an old friend, but nothing more, you understand? I can’t even see you.”

“I understand and I’m grateful, Dave. I really am.” He offered his hand and Dave shook it, slightly reluctantly. Then, with a curt farewell, his old pal was gone.

Inside the folder were the documents Dave had given him, plus his own notes on Brian, and Fenham, another suspect who had emerged later.

He looked at the police documents first. It was no ordinary rogues’ gallery. Only Bell really fitted the description of a conventional criminal. The other three were far worse: a trio of monsters, of varying degrees of guile and intelligence, but all capable of committing the vilest of crimes. Even their mugshots were repellent, as if their rottenness had somehow bubbled to the surface. Some books could be judged by their covers.

Despite their long records of depravity, from the start he had doubted that any of them was the person he sought. As Dave had suggested, more than likely it was someone else, off the police’s radar, at least in Sketby. But the names had been something to go on, when previously he’d had nothing at all.

Immediately, he had begun looking for a good private investigator, not realising how difficult that was going to be.

“Don’s Detection Agency?”

The woman, an attractive brunette in a low-cut top, smiled and pointed to the door from which she had just emerged.

“In there, darling,”

“Thanks,” said Decker. He carried on down the corridor and knocked on the door lightly as the glass pane had a crack in it. There was no sign to say Rodgers worked here. Was that a matter of prudence or just amateurism he wondered? The crack seemed to suggest the latter.

“Come in,” said a gruff voice from inside.

Decker entered and saw a fat man taking his feet off the desk. He rose to shake Decker’s hand, giving off a strong aroma of cheese and onion crisps.

“Mr Decker, I presume?”

“Yes. Mr Rodgers?”

“Don, Don – everyone calls me Don. Take a pew.”

Decker sat down and peered around the cramped little office. Apart from the desk and chairs, the only furniture a rusty filing cabinet, and the only decoration a girlie calendar nailed to the wall. It was hardly 221b Baker Street, but then its occupant was hardly Sherlock Holmes. Rodgers was a sweaty-looking man, bursting to get out of his shirt and sporting a terrible combover than began from an inch above his left ear.

For a moment Decker considered walking, but then reminded himself how far he had come. Now he was here, he might as well have the conversation.

“Drinkie?” asked Don, taking a bottle of whisky and two glasses from his top drawer.

“No thanks.”

“Sure?”

“Sure.”

“Suit yourself then.” Rodgers put one of the glasses back in the drawer and poured himself a generous amount. “Did you see her outside? Right little cracker, isn’t she?”

“She’s memorable, certainly. Who is she?”

“An employee of mine. A lot of my clients are women, you see. They want to know if their husbands are faithful, so Mandy puts them to the test. A honey trap, they call it.”

“Entrapment? Is that ethical?”

“Yeah, why not? If you can keep your cock in your pants, you’ve nothing to fear have you? Mind you, I’m not sure who would keep their cock in their pants with Mandy. I certainly wouldn’t.”

He took a large gulp of whisky and shuddered.

“Jesus, that’s good. You can’t beat the cheap stuff. Now, what can I do you for?”

“I’m not sure you can do me for anything, Mr Rodgers.”

“Don, please.”

“Don, I need a detective experienced in criminal matters – not just someone who goes after cheating husbands and wives. I’ve already spoken to several other detectives and with most of them that seemed to be the total range of repertoire.”

“We all have to pay the bills, Mr Decker.”

“Of course, but do you have any other experience?”

“Let me put it this way,” said Rodgers, leaning back in his chair. “I’m a people person. I understand people and what makes them tick. And when you know that, you can find out all sorts of things about people.”

“Could you find a killer though?”

“A killer? I could find you loads. There’s a least a couple who drink regularly at the Saracen’s Head down the road.”

“I mean an unknown killer. If I gave you a list of suspects, could you find out which one was guilty?”

“Possibly. Can you tell me more?”

Decker opened his briefcase and took out the documents that Dave had given him.

“One of these people may well be responsible for the abduction and murder of my wife and child.”

He handed the papers over to Rodgers, who spent the next few minutes scanning them with a disgusted look on his face.

“Jesus, they’re a nasty bunch of bastards, aren’t they?”

“That’s putting it mildly. Could you find out if any of them had done it?”

Rodgers dropped the papers on the desk with an air of bluster.

“Like I said, Mr Decker, I know what makes people tick. And I know how to get them talking – even about things they wouldn’t normally talk about. No-one can truly keep a secret, you see. There’s always that itch to tell someone. You just need to know how to lever it out of them.”

“And how would you do that?”

“I have my ways, Mr Decker. I have my ways. Mandy, for example – she can get any man talking.”

“A couple of those suspects are paedophiles. I don’t somehow think they’d be interested in her.”

“Oh, yeah, that’s a point. Maybe we could get her to dress up as schoolgirl?”

Decker rolled his eyes. The man didn’t fill him with much confidence, as had none of the other detectives he had spoken to over the past few weeks. The last guy he had interviewed had even suggested that Laura and Zoe might have been abducted by white slave traders. But he needed someone to do the job, and at least Rodgers had some idea of an approach. It was true that the only hope was to get these suspects to talk.

“But do you really think you can do this?” he persisted. “This is a big job – it’s more than luring some errant husband into bed, it’s getting someone to confess to a double murder.”

Rodgers pushed back his chair and stood up, rather defiantly, his beer belly jutting out.

“Mr Decker, I know I don’t look like much, and this may not be the most impressive of offices, but it remains that I have qualities you won’t find in any ordinary detective.”

He went over to the window and looked out on the street outside.

“Take the police – they seem impressive, don’t they? But they didn’t find the killer, obviously, or you wouldn’t be sat here. All those resources, yet they couldn’t work it out.”

“No,” said Decker. “They thought I did it.”

“Of course, they thought you did it. You see the Plod may have many qualities but the thing that holds them back is that they don’t have any imagination. They’re an organisation at the end of the day, and organisations don’t have imaginations. Expecting imagination from the police is like expecting poetry from Leeds City Council. Or romance from the Gas Board. And the other problem with the filth is – oh shit! It’s them.”

“Who?

“Who I’ve just been talking about. Outside.”

Decker joined Rodgers by the window and saw a plain clothes man and two constables get out of a police car and head towards the tatty office block.

“They don’t want you, do they?”

“I fear they may. Business has been a little poor, you see. I’ve had to send Mandy out touting for business.”

“You’ve been pimping her?” asked Decker, dumbfounded.

“I hate that word – it’s so American. I’m just a businessman, that’s all. Supplying a public need.”

“Oh for fuck’s sake – if the police find those case files I’m screwed. I’m not supposed to have them.”

“There’s another way out, come on.”

Rodgers grabbed a plastic bag from his bottom drawer while Decker stuffed the documents back in his briefcase. He followed the detective outside into the corridor and up the stairs.

“How the hell can we get out by going upstairs?”

“There’s another stairway – disused. But we can only get to it via the roof.”

They reached a stairwell with a metal door. Panting heavily, Rodgers drew back the bolt and pushed, but the door wouldn’t budge.

“Come on, you fucker.”

Decker joined him in putting a shoulder to the door and eventually it opened. They scurried across the roof, sending pigeons scattering, and reached the other door. It was locked but Rodgers produced a key from his pocket and quickly opened it. They descended a flight identical to the one they had come up, but half-obstructed by hundred of boxes.

“Christ, what’s all this stuff?” asked Decker.

“Just a side-line,” gasped Rodgers, sounding like he was going to die of a heart attack at any moment.

Decker didn’t stop to take a look. He hurried on, though he would have been a lot faster without a fat man in front of him. Eventually they reached the ground floor and emerged into a grubby little yard – one of those strange little urban voids that exist forgotten amid clusters of large buildings.

“Down here.”

Rodgers waddled off down an alley. It took a turn to the right and then ended in a wooden door. A huge brown rat was lurking by it.

“Get lost,” said Rodgers, swinging his carrier bag at it. The creature squealed and hurried off down a drain.

The detective quickly unbolted the door and they were out into a quiet side road. But the pair didn’t stop until they were several streets away in a residential area.

“Phew, that was a close one,” wheezed Rodgers, slumped against a wall. He quickly lit up a cigarette, as if was the perfect cure for being out of breath. “Not that I think they’ve really got anything on me, but I didn’t want them finding what’s in this bag. Sorry about it, anyway. I hope it won’t affect our business arrangement.”

“What arrangement?”

“Me finding out who killed your family.”

Decker stared at the man in disbelief.

“Rodgers, there’s nothing more important to me than finding out what happened my wife and daughter. Frankly, it’s often the only reason I get up in the morning. I won’t rest until I know – and until I see the bastard responsible face justice. Do you really think I’m going to entrust that job to some dodgy pimp like you?”

“Look, I may be a bit dodgy, I admit – but that makes me the perfect person. I understand the underworld, see. I know what makes criminals tick.”

“Maybe you do, but I’m not handing over something so vital to someone so unreliable.”

“You won’t find anyone better.”

Decker laughed, without humour. “The awful thing is, you may be right. No, you’ve made my mind up. Not only am I not going to pay you to do the job, I’m not going to pay anyone.”

“What are you going to do then?”

“What I always should have done. Investigate the crime myself.”

Without another word he walked off, leaving Rodgers to shrug his shoulders and catch his breath.

9

Decker leafed through the case notes. How many hours had he spent on these people? He had hired a private detective, not Rodgers, to help him locate a couple of the suspects but otherwise he had carried out all the investigations himself, largely at weekends but sometimes during the week. That was just one of the benefits of being his own boss.

To make things easier, he had investigated the suspects one by one, putting Bell and Brian to one side at first, as they seemed far less likely than the other three. Melksham and Quill had seemed the most probable candidates, but uncertain about his detective methods, Decker had targeted Bayley first, as he seemed a far less daunting prospect.

He looked at the mugshot of Bayley, which was unprepossessing to say the least. A thin bird-like face, a chiselled nose and pockmarked cheeks. Lank, greasy, shoulder-length hair. The man was a sad, pathetic figure, with a long history of offences against children. It was easy to imagine someone like him taking Zoe, but could he really have abducted Laura too?

The arcade was much the same as the last three. Lights pulsed hypnotically to a rhythm of bleeps and whistles, interrupted every now and then by the sound of falling coins, more likely from one of the change machines than anyone hitting the jackpot. Children screeched as they scurried between the pinball machines and video games. Decker imagined the hell of working in a place like this and trying to get to sleep every night with the noise still ringing in your ears, and the lights still flashing at the back of your eyes. Sometimes he got sick of TV sets and their flickering glow, but their invasiveness was nothing compared to this.

He wandered slowly, loitering for a moment at the claw machine, trying to appear like just another bored punter after a chance to lose some money, but all the time looking for the man he had come so far to find.

The police files said the arcades on this stretch of northern coast were a regular haunt of Neville Bayley, especially during the school holidays, but after three days of trying, Decker had drawn a blank. The man was nowhere to be found – perhaps he was working in another part of the country, or had found a different hunting ground for his sick pleasures.

Feeling depressed, Decker went back outside and shuffled along with the crowds along the promenade. There were countless tacky gift shops, cafes and chip shops, but seemingly no more arcades.

It was an almost like being back in Bournemouth, though this place was a little earthier and not blessed by such a good climate; a lively breeze was coming across the North Sea, blowing off hats and billowing skirts. However, the faintest glimmer of sun was enough to bring people out, and even for some of them to start exposing flesh. The woman in front was wearing an unflatteringly short skirt, while a man passed by with his shirt proudly open, exposing his beer belly.

On the other side of the road, people were pouring on to the sands. A crowded beach was Decker’s idea of hell. He often went down to the shore in Bournemouth, but never when it was full of tourists. He enjoyed early morning runs, all the way from Boscombe to Hengistbury Head. It helped to keep him sane as well as fit.

Bayley!

Decker came to a sudden stop, earning an irritated grunt from the woman behind.

It was him, definitely, the man from the mugshot, emerging from the beach and heading in the opposite direction. In his tight-fitting white T-shirt and mismatched black suit trousers, he stood out a mile, like some weird nocturnal animal intruding into the daylight. Decker turned and followed him, walking in the road to avoid the crowds, and then into one of the arcades.

At the tuppenny falls, Bayley pulled a plastic bag of coins from his pocket and shovelled them one by one into the slot without even bothering to look if they were landing in the right place. His eyes darted about predatorily, looking for opportunities. Lost kids, stray kids, vulnerable kids. Children who needed a bit of spare change and could be promised greater treats if they just came back with him.

Decker hovered by a one-armed bandit, rehearsing his approach one last time. He was no actor, and just the thought of the pretence sickened him, but he knew he had to win Bayley’s confidence to get him away from here.

Steeling himself, he went over to the falls. He put in a coin but like Bayley he wasn’t bothered where it landed.

“There’s nothing here,” said Decker.

“What?” answered Bayley.

“There’s nothing here. No chance of winning the jackpot.”

“Oh… right. Well, it’s just of a fun, isn’t it?” His voice was whiny and wobbled in pitch, as if he wasn’t used to speaking.

“Maybe. But the prizes here are all old tat. Wouldn’t you prefer to win something new? Something fresh? You know what I mean, don’t you?”

“Do I?” Bayley paused with a coin half way in the slot, unsure where the conversation was going.

“I’m sure you do. I watched you looking around to see what prizes were on offer. But I’ve got a much better prize back at my caravan. A really beautiful prize – and only five years old. Wouldn’t you prefer to have that?”

“W-what kind of prize?”

“A doll,” said Decker, his voice just loud enough to be heard above the noise. “A doll with realistic hair and realistic skin.”

Bayley released the coin.

“And tears? Does she cry realistic tears?”

Decker wanted to smash him in the face but he kept up with the act.

“Oh yes. She’s realistic in every way. But she’ll cost you.”

“How much?”

“£50, for an hour.”

“I haven’t got that kind of money.”

“How much have you got?”

“Thirty, at most.”

“Then that’ll buy you half an hour.”

“Is that all?”

“Yep. Take it or leave it – it’s up to you.”

Bayley stared at Decker, obviously fearful of what he might be getting into, but also intrigued and excited. After a moment’s thought, the hunger won out, as it had always done..

“Okay,” he said. “Let’s go.”

Decker smiled and led the way down the road to the car park and the rusty Fiat he’d hired, as his own Rover didn’t exactly fit the act. As Bayley slid in to the passenger seat, Decker got a whiff of stale sweat and cigarettes. He wound down the window and drove in silence to Sunshine Vale Caravan Park, a couple of miles away.

It was not an appealing place – rows and rows of near-identical little metal boxes lodged on grubby sand. Decker had to think twice about which little box was the one he had hired.

“Here we are,” said Decker, as he parked up outside his caravan. Bayley said nothing but Decker thought he saw a reptilian lick of the lips. The man hung uncomfortably close behind him, trembling with impatience, as he unlocked the caravan door.

 “Where is she?” asked Bayley, as he peered around the cramped interior, not seeing any sign of what he wanted.

Decker closed the door.

“Nowhere,” he said, and shoved Bayley over to the cushioned seats at the far end of the caravan.

Bayley ran back, trying to make an immediate escape, but Decker easily pushed him back again.

“Please. Please don’t hurt me,” cried his captive.

“I won’t. Not if you talk.”

“Talk? What about? Who are you?”

“I’m John Decker – husband of Laura Decker. Father of Zoe Decker.”

“Who?”

“You know.”

“I don’t,” he sobbed. “I honestly don’t.”

“The woman and child abducted from Sketby Moor The police questioned you about it.”

“Oh yeah – that. Look, the police question me about all kinds of bloody things. It’s crazy – I wouldn’t do something like that.”

“You abducted a five-year-old girl from her bedroom.”

“Yeah, but not a grown woman. I wouldn’t be able to take an adult. Look at me – I’m just a streak of piss. And anyway, I had an alibi. I told the police that. I was staying in a hostel in Huddersfield at the time.”

“Yes, and the last time they saw you was 1pm. That gave you time to get over to Sketby before 3pm.”

“I’d have to have sped all the way. And how? I didn’t have a car.”

“You could have nicked one.”

“Nick a car? I wouldn’t have had a clue. And why would I have sped to Sketby?”

“You knew the area – you used to live near there. Maybe you knew there was an isolated cottage where a little girl lived.”

“How would I have known? I’d been in jail for seven years and I’d only been out two weeks.”

“That’s enough time to case somewhere,” maintained Decker. But for all his firmness he wasn’t quite convinced.

“I don’t case places. That’s not how I work. I’m just an opportunist. I hang around places where I know there will be kids.”

“Don’t lie to me. That wasn’t how it was with that little girl you took.”

“That was different – I only lived down the road from her. I knew her parents left her alone all the time. Oh, they screamed for my head afterwards, but if they cared for her so much why did they leave her? She was easy pickings.”

Decker stepped forward threateningly.

“You little shit. You disgust me.”

Bayley snorted with derision. “Of course, I do. I disgust everyone, even myself.”

“Then stop hurting kids.”

“Oh, you think it’s that easy, do you? Could you control your urges? Could you stop being attracted to women?”

“Don’t compare yourself to me. My tastes are normal.”

“I bet they are. I bet your whole life has been wonderfully normal. A normal childhood with a normal mum and dad who loved you. My Dad used to take me down to the shed to rape me while my mum drank herself to death. So, ask yourself – what chance did I have? It’s like a disease – like vampirism. My Dad passed it on to me, and I’m passing it on further. I can’t help it.”

Decker gave him a hard slap to the face.

“Don’t give me that – you have a choice. Everyone has a choice.”

“Do they?  And what’s your choice? To beat the pulp out of me until I confess to something I didn’t do? Or just to beat me up anyway? Well, you won’t be the first, or the last. You’ll just be another part of the mob.”

Decker looked down at Bayley with utter contempt. The man did have an alibi of sorts, and probably neither the gall nor the guile to have taken Laura and Zoe, but he still wanted to give him a good kicking.

However, he had promised Dave he wouldn’t take the law into his own hands. And also, deep down, he knew it was wrong to beat anyone up, however vile they were. He remembered his own beating at the hands of Brian and those morons in Sketby. He didn’t want to be that kind of man. Some mindless vigilante.

“No, I’m not going to beat you, whatever you deserve. But if I see you hanging around the arcades again, I’ll call the police – understand?”

Bayley nodded.

“Now get out. Get out of my sight, you horrible piece of shit.”

Without a second’s delay, Bayley scurried away, out of the caravan.

Decker crashed down on the seats, emotionally exhausted. His quest for the truth had only just begun but it had already taken a lot out of him.

One down, four to go.

10

Sat in his car, Decker stared at the terraced house across the road and wondered what on earth he was going to do next. The last known address on Quill’s file was here in this rundown Bradford street. But just five minutes ago he had seen a young Asian couple and their toddler enter the house. Quill was gone, obviously. Decker supposed someone like that moved around all the time, partly to avoid detection, but also because there couldn’t be any stability in such a squalid lifestyle.

He had to find the man, who seemed a far more likely prospect than Bayley. Quill had a long and depressing record, mainly crimes against minors, but also a couple of cases of burglary, countless incidents of petty theft, and most relevantly, the abduction and sexual assault of a woman.

Decker’s original plan had been to put Quill under surveillance, of an admittedly amateur kind, to get a better idea of the man. Then, armed with more information, he would lure the paedophile into some kind of trap as he had done with Bayley. But what now? Get in contact with Dave again and see if the police knew of a current location for Quill? No, Dave had said he couldn’t help again, under any circumstances. That particular avenue was closed for good.

But how the hell did you find someone in a country of 56 million people? Someone who particularly didn’t want to be found, and wasn’t going to be in any phone book.

The only thing he could think of right now is that the man might have left a forwarding address. It was unlikely but it was a worth a try.

He got out of the car and rang the bell.

“Hello,” he greeted the young man who answered the door. “I’m looking for a Mr Quill, who used to live here.”

“Quill? There’s no Quill here,” said the man. Behind him, his little girl, dummy in mouth, was tugging playfully at his leg.

“Yes, I know, but I was wondering if he had left a forwarding address.”

The man shook his head resolutely, as if the idea was preposterous.

“No, not here sorry. You can ask the landlady.”

“Oh, right – do you have her address?”

“She’s just down the road. Number 49.”

“This road?”

“Yes. Mrs O’Rourke.”

“Oh, that’s great. I’ll ask there, thanks. Sorry to trouble you.”

Decker walked a hundred yards and rang the bell. After a strangely long wait, the door opened to reveal a small, withered woman in a dull brown dress. At his initial glance, Decker guessed she was in her sixties or seventies but then he realised she was probably younger. There were remnants of her natural black in her straggly perm, and enough firmness left in her face to reveal that she had been an attractive woman once. She struck him as someone who’d had a hard life.

“Mrs O’Rourke?”

“Yes,” said the woman, rather deadpan. As she spoke there was a boozy, pine-like smell. Gin, thought Decker.

“Ah, hello. I wonder if you can help me. I’m trying to find one of your former tenants. Colin Quill.”

She laughed.

“Him? You’ll be lucky.”

“You’ve no idea where he might be?”

“Look, come inside, I’m not talking about that bloody monster on me own doorstep.”

“Okay, thanks.”

Decker followed her in, unsure what to expect. They entered a tiny living room, pleasantly decorated in a rather old-fashioned way, with its red chintz suite, lace-covered table and display cabinet of china crockery. Hanging above the fireplace was a flowery painting of the Eiffel Tower. On the mantlepiece, next to a set of Pierrot figurines, were half-empty bottles of gin and tonic water.

“Take a seat.”

“Thanks,” said Decker, planting himself on the sofa.

“You’re not police, are you?”

“No.”

“Then who are you?”

“My name’s John Decker. I’d like to speak to Quill about the disappearance of my wife and daughter.”

“Oh, I see.”

She eyed him curiously and then picked up the gin bottle.

“Drink?”

“No thanks.”

She took a glass off the table and poured herself a generous amount, and just enough tonic to take the edge off.

“I’m French, you know,” she said proudly, nodding to the Eiffel Tower painting. “I know you wouldn’t think it with a name like O’Rourke, but I am, on my mother’s side. Her family came from Paris.”

“Oh, I see,” said Decker, feigning interest out of politeness. “Do you ever go?”

“Go?”

“To Paris.”

“Oh no, I’ve never been. Maybe one day.”

She took a big gulp of gin and sat down in the armchair.

“So, you want to find that monster, do you?”

“Yes,” said Decker, glad to get to the point.

“You know, they smashed the windows in down the road. And kicked the door in, when they found out what he’d done. They gave him a right good hiding too. Would have killed him if the police hadn’t intervened. Cost me a fortune in repairs. Those louts should have been made to pay for it.”

“Surely it was criminal damage?.”

“It were, definitely – but police did nowt. It were that sod Kennedy down the road. Got a conviction for armed robbery, he has. But still thinks he’s better than some pervert. I mean, how can a man who points a sawn-off shotgun at some terrified post office girl suddenly get all high and mighty?”

“It’s a hierarchy of criminals, I suppose,” said Decker. “Everyone has to look down on someone.”

“I suppose. I mean, I’m not saying he didn’t deserve the kicking. We all reap what we sow, don’t we?”

“Perhaps.”

“Bloody sickening creature, I’m glad to see the back of him. They can say what they like about the coloureds, but I’d rather have them renting the place than that evil little bastard.”

“Quite. I don’t suppose you know where he is now?”

“I haven’t a clue.”

“He didn’t leave a forwarding address?”

“He did but I doubt if he’s there now. It were four year ago he moved out.”

“It’s something. Have you still got it?”

“I think so. Hold on a sec.”

She disappeared upstairs and after a couple of minutes of banging about, returned with a piece of paper.

“Here it is,” she said, handing it over. It was an address in Kentish Town. In London

“Thanks. Can I take this?”

“Feel free, I don’t want it. I forwarded his mail for a while but then it all dried up. And like I say, I doubt if he’s there anymore. He’ll be hiding under some stone.”

“Probably, yes. But it’s a start. Anyway, I won’t bother you any longer. Thanks a lot.”

She saw him out. But as he stepped on to the pavement, he stopped for a moment, puzzled by something.

“If you thought he was a monster, why did you forward his mail?”

“Why? Why did I do anything for him? Why did I lie for him and lend him money? Because he’s my son.”

And with that she shut the door, leaving Decker standing dumbstruck on the pavement.

The night buzzed with neon and chatter. Gaudy signs screamed temptations such as ‘XXX’, ‘GIRLS GIRLS GIRLS’ and ‘LIVE NUDE SHOW’. Lone men hurried head down through doorways, while younger groups, full of beer and bravado, laughed and pointed, daring each other to indulge in the various lurid delights. Women stood languidly on thresholds, issuing invitations in tones more bored than erotic.

Decker blanked it all out and kept his focus on the figure a few yards in front, who was weaving through the crowded streets with an ease he found hard to replicate. For a moment he lost him, but then spied him again beneath the glow of a street light. Longish hair, tight jeans and a brown leather jacket. A face that might almost be considered handsome, enough perhaps to give him a certain charm to some people. However, there was also something creepy and vulpine about him. Something predatory that Decker was sure he would have recognised even if didn’t know the man’s history.

Mrs O’Rourke had been wrong. Her son had been still living at the address in Kentish Town. After waiting outside all day, drinking endless cups of tea in the café over the road, Decker had finally seen Quill emerge at just after 5pm. He had followed him all the way to Tottenham Court Road on the Northern Line, and then through the side streets here to Soho. It seemed a predictable destination.

His quarry slid out of the main streets, with their dazzling strip joints and erotic book shops, and into a half-forgotten backstreet, where there was just one grubby little sign proclaiming ‘ADULT MAGAZINES’. Quill headed inside while Decker hesitated, unsure what to do. He needed to win the man’s confidence somehow and ‘befriend’ him, but he didn’t think a shop was the right place. However, there was also the risk that Quill might see him when he re-emerged and realise he was being followed.

Better to go inside and try to stay unnoticed, thought Decker. Tentatively, he descended a flight of steps, illuminated in blue. A horrible smell of mustiness wafted up from below and thickened as he arrived in a dingy cellar. This was a lot less swept up than the other shops in Soho; there were no ‘marital aids’ or erotic lingerie on offer, just shelves full of magazines, many much harder than those sold elsewhere. He suspected the place was a temporary affair; flitting from basement to basement to escape the watchful eye of the vice squad.

A couple of men were pawing at the magazines, while Quill was talking to the fat guy sat behind the old desk that served as a counter. Decker feigned an interest in the goods while trying to overhear what they were saying, hoping he might gather some details that would help him get acquainted with Quill later. He picked up the first magazine to hand, the cover of which featured a pneumatic blonde pulling an orgasmic face while a moustachioed hunk pushed his penis into her behind. Decker was no prude; he had enjoyed the magazines passed around the barrack room as much as anyone. But he found something sadly ridiculous about this. Comical, even.

Unable to hear what Quill and the fat guy were saying over the sound of Tubeway Army on the radio, Decker moved closer and looked at another magazine, whose cover star was grinning inanely with ejaculate all over her face. The man standing nearby gave him a wary glance and shuffled slightly to the left, as if worried his secret tastes were being exposed. Decker wondered if these people were married and seeking thrills they couldn’t find at home. Or were they alone, and were these magazines their only real exposure to the pleasures of the flesh? Perhaps they had never known the real touch of a woman, the tenderness as well the excitement, and had to make do with these ersatz, two-dimensional passions. Decker was glad to have known the reality, even though it was a long time ago now.

He listened attentively as Quill and the fat guy discussed mutual acquaintances. There was a talk of a man called ‘Uncle Blood’ and a pub called ‘The Three Feathers’, both of which Decker banked to his memory.

“Here you are, bud” said the fat man. “See you later.”

“Yeah, see you.”

Decker spied Quill slipping a brown envelope inside his coat jacket as he left. Something from under the counter, presumably.

He waited a moment before exiting too. Outside, there was no sign of Quill. He hurried around the corner and to his relief saw his quarry a hundred yards off, walking swiftly in the general direction of Oxford Street. He followed, trying to keep a discreet distance as the man took a curiously winding path through the busy backstreets. Everyone seemed to get in Decker’s way: the groups spilling out of pubs, the couples hovering outside restaurants, and all the lone, dead-eyed people, marching in search of unknown pleasures. It seemed to him that you needed insect-like qualities to exist in a big city like this; an ability to move with grace amid the swarm. All he ended up doing was sidestepping people awkwardly as he tried to keep sight of Quill. Fortunately, everywhere was so lit up that the man couldn’t disappear into the darkness.

Then the crowds thinned out. The route took a sudden turn into a quieter street, and then sharply down another road, so narrow that it was little more than an alley. Decker found himself in a square, surrounded by offices. The place was deserted, with the distant sound of music and traffic the only clue that they were at the heart of a heaving metropolis. And Quill was nowhere to be seen.

“Oh, where are you now?”

“Here,” said a voice from the shadows behind him.

Before he could turn, Decker was shoved to the ground and booted hard in the stomach. He glimpsed a rodent-like face, contorted in rage, as the kicks smashed into him. He tried to protect himself with his hands, though it did little good until he caught hold of his attacker’s ankle. An awkward struggle ensued until Quill managed to wrest free his foot and continue the attack.

“What you after then, arsehole? Why you following me?”

Winded, Decker had no chance of replying. He rolled over to protect himself and was booted hard in the back.

“Leave him!” came a shout.

Quill put in one last kick and then hurried off. Crawling to his feet, Decker saw his rescuer: a middle-aged man with a clipped moustache and impeccably parted hair. He wore a brown Crombie over a pinstripe suit. There was something quaintly old-fashioned about him; a suggestion of the Empire and gentlemen’s clubs.

“Are you alright?” The received pronunciation was perfectly tailored to the man’s appearance.

“I think so,” said Decker, clutching his stomach. “It’s mainly my pride hurt – I’m obviously not very good at following people.”

“You’re not, no. I’ve been watching you tail Quill for the last couple of hours and you couldn’t have made it more obvious.”

“You’ve been watching me?”

“I’ve been watching him, but now you’ve probably ruined that for me. Thanks.”

“You’re police?”

The man shook his head.

“What then?”

“Come on, I’ll buy you a brandy and I’ll explain.”

They found a pub a just around the corner. The Good Samaritan went to the bar while Decker sat nursing his bruises and mulling over his uselessness as a detective. His injuries attracted the odd glance but no-one said a word. No-one wanted to get involved.

“There you go, Sherlock,” said the man, returning with a generous cognac for Decker and a pint of stout for himself.

Up close and in the light, Decker saw his rescuer was not quite as immaculate as he first thought. The Crombie looked a little threadbare in places and the man’s skin was pale and drawn. He reminded Decker of a faded flag. Someone who could only look back on past glories.

“So, what’s your interest in Quill?”

“What’s yours?” countered Decker, still suspicious that the man was a policeman.

“Alright, I’ll go first then. Quill’s a child molester, as you no doubt know – he’s also part of a paedophile ring that I’m actively trying to expose.”

“You’re a journalist?”

“No.”

The man took out and his wallet and removed a photo. It showed a smiling young boy in a cricket kit.

“My name’s Anthony Hale and that’s my son, Peter. He was just eight years old when he went missing while playing in the street one day. They found his body on wasteland 40 miles away a couple of weeks later. The police never found the culprits, so it’s up to me to do the job.”

He said it in a matter of fact way, as if he it had said it a thousand times before. Suddenly, he was no stranger to Decker, but someone who understood. He was another like him; an everyday story of tragedy and grief.

“I’m sorry,” said Decker, before taking a large gulp of brandy. “And you think Quill’s responsible?”

“To some degree. He likes little girls, not little boys, but he’s also a procurer, with connections to the people I think killed Peter. Now, why are you interested in him?”

“Similar reasons. There’s a possibility he was involved in the disappearance of my wife and daughter.”

“When was this?”

“Six years ago, up near Sketby.”

“Oh, I remember the case… no bodies were ever found. What were their names again?”

“Laura and Zoe Decker.”

“Yes, strange case. You were the main suspect, weren’t you?”

“Yes. But I didn’t do it.”

“I don’t imagine you did, if you’re chasing after Quill. What makes you think he’s involved?”

“Information came my way. He was living only 20 miles away when Laura and Zoe disappeared.”

“But it’s not his type of crime,” said Hale. “Not at all. He’s scum but I doubt he’d abduct and murder a grown woman. I doubt he’d have it in him.”

“He had it in him to beat me up.”

“That’s different – any animal will fight like hell when it’s provoked. You see, I’ve been trailing Quill for months now, and I’ve also managed to gather a lot of information about his past. Just rumours perhaps, and all of them pretty vile, but there’s been nothing to suggest that he’s been involved in anything like that.”

“But you can’t know.”

“No,” accepted Hale. “I can’t know.”

He sipped at his Guinness and pondered the matter for a moment.

“Is Quill your only suspect?”

“No, I’ve a few more.”

“Then concentrate on them and leave Quill to me. I’ve begun to realise that the only way I can progress with my investigation is to conduct an interview with Quill. As part of that interview, I can ask about the disappearance of your wife and daughter. I’ll try to get you an answer.”

“What kind of interview?”

Hale smiled. “Well, let’s just say, it’s unlikely to involve buying him a cognac. A degree of coercion is bound to be involved.”

“I don’t know,” said Decker, unsure about handing over his investigation to someone he had only met twenty minutes ago. He was also concerned how far the man might go to get his answers.

“Look, you can trust me,” said Hale calmly. “I’m one of the few people you can really trust, because I understand what it’s like. I know. There’s not a second that your wife and daughter are truly out of your mind, is there? Not just the thought of them, but what happened to them – the horrors they might have known. Nothing can truly distract you. You can’t look at a sunset and think that’s a beautiful thing. You can’t find a joke funny, or a song anything more than meaningless fluff. You’ll never really get into a film or a book. If you’ve got a hobby, it’s something to stop you screaming at the walls, rather than something you truly enjoy.

“Everything is a reminder, even though you need no reminding. The pain is always there, seared into your bones. And everywhere you go, you take it with you, spoiling everything you touch.

“Look at me – I’ve lost everything. My career, my marriage, my home. I live in a dingy flat, do bits of piecemeal work, but spend most of my life pursuing people I’d rather not know existed. Because if grief wasn’t enough, I have to fight for justice too.”

Decker nodded. It was a brutal but accurate description, put more eloquently than he ever could.

“That’s it, more or less,” he admitted. “Though curiously, one part of my life is flourishing. My business is going strength from strength.”

“Does it help?”

“A little. It helps fund my enquiries certainly.”

“Good. But you’re not the greatest detective, are you? So why not leave Quill to me?”

“Okay. But you’ll keep me updated?”

“Of course.”

“And you won’t go too far? In interrogating Quill, I mean. I don’t want to be party to anything criminal.”

“It depends what you mean by criminal. There’s no getting away from the fact that both of us have decided to take the law into our hands. To a certain extent that will always mean breaking the rules. But I’m not going to do anything stupid, don’t worry.”

“Okay. I’ll trust you.”

“Then we have a deal?”

“Sure.”

They shook on it. Decker still felt slightly nervous about handing over part of his enquiry, but he was glad to have an ally at last. Not just someone who could help, but someone who could understand.

“So,” said Hale, “if I’m looking at Quill, who will you be looking at?”

“Next on my list is a man called William Melksham.”

“Melksham!” Hale gave a sharp intake of breath.

“You’ve heard of him?”

“Unfortunately, there’s not many monsters in this country that I haven’t heard of. But Melksham’s particularly dangerous – and also very clever. Be careful.”

“Don’t worry, I will be.”

“This little club of ours – it’s a club that no-one wants to belong to. But it’s still better with two people instead of one.”

“Definitely. Same again?”

“Of course.”

Decker limped to the bar, still feeling sore all over but with the good feeling that he was at last making some kind of progress.

Paper-clipped to the police file on Quill was the letter Hale had sent him, just a couple of months after that meeting in Soho. In that short time, a kind of friendship had developed between the two men, based on mutual understanding of each other’s problems and a shared determination to find justice. They had never actually met in person again but had spoken regularly on the phone, swapping updates on their progress and much-needed words of support.

However, some things were hard to say over the phone, which was perhaps why Hale had written the letter. Decker had read it countless times but felt compelled to look at it again. It was written in the slightly old-fashioned way that Hale had lived his whole life.

Dear John

I hope this letter finds you well.

You’ll remember that when we met, I said it would probably be necessary to conduct an ‘interview’ with Quill at some point. That interview has now taken place and I must tell you of the results. Not only because it pertains to your own search, but also because I need to tell someone. And you’re the only person I know who will truly understand.

The interview took place at an isolated industrial unit in the countryside. I won’t bore you with the details of how I lured Quill there; suffice to say that it is not overly difficult to lure someone of his nature.

When he arrived, I quickly overpowered him and tied him to a chair. Though eager for answers, I left him to sweat for a while. There was tape over his mouth, so he couldn’t scream for help – unlikely as it was that anyone would hear him out there in the middle of nowhere.

After a couple of hours, the interview began. He was very resistant at first and it became necessary to use a great deal of physical and verbal pressure to get him to talk. Eventually he confirmed that he and another man did abduct my son, after being paid by other people to do so. I have the names of those people, who are of ‘the higher echelons’, if such a phrase can be used to describe those vermin.

I didn’t let the interview rest there. I carried on exerting force until he confessed to all the other crimes he’d been involved in, many of which I already suspected.

However, I’m afraid the abduction of your wife and daughter was not among them. He denied any involvement in that and I believe he was telling the truth, given the vile crimes to which he did confess. Crimes so vile that I couldn’t contain myself and eventually boiled over into unrestrained violence. I punched and kicked him, and even hit him with a metal bar. By the time I’d finished, he could speak no more. He was nothing but a bloody and battered pulp.

Not wanting a corpse on my hands, I dragged him into the back of my car, drove 20 miles and then left him by a quiet roadside for someone to find. I later learnt that he survived but with such severe brain damage that he will be a total vegetable for the rest of his life.

Many might say that’s a good thing as he’ll no longer be able to ruin any more lives. And I obviously have very good reasons for wishing the man harm. But despite all that, I find it impossible to live with what I’ve done. Once I was an innocent man, whose worst crime was speeding. I worked in insurance and lived an ordinary, safe, happy life. Now I have tortured a man to a living death. The monsters have made me a monster too.

I’m not suspected of any involvement in his injuries. I leave it up to you what you choose to do with my confession. I will understand totally if you decide to tell the police and will not hold it against you.

I’m not sure what my next move is, and you may be similarly uncertain over yours. I’m sorry I could not give you the answers you seek. However, my main worry for you is that your hunt for the truth will take you down the same dark paths as me, and you will lose all that’s good and kind and decent about you. Please don’t. Be a better man than me, I beg you.

Regards

**Anthony Hale**

Decker had been shocked by the letter but never even considered telling the police. He saw nothing that would be gained by it, given that Hale’s life was already ruined. He couldn’t condone the violence but he had little sympathy for Quill. Though he felt some pity for his poor mother, Mrs O’Rourke. Had she wept at the news? Had she felt pain? Relief? Or had she just poured herself another large gin and carried on dreaming of Paris?

He had tried to tell Hale that he wouldn’t inform on him, but the man’s phone had just rung out, day after day. Then a week later, Decker had opened a newspaper and read the article that was now clipped to the file.

**MURDERED BOY’S   
DAD DIES IN CANAL**

The father of boy killed in an horrific sex attack has been found dead in a canal, seven years after the tragedy.

The body of Anthony Hale, 52, was found at 5.45am yesterday in the Grand Union Canal, Brentford, by a man walking his dog.

Mr Hale’s eight-year-old son Peter, was abducted from outside his Chelmsford, home in December. His naked body was discovered 16 days later on wasteland 40 miles away.

Despite a high-profile police investigation, no-one has ever been charged with the crime.

Mr Hale had continued to campaign for justice for his son but was said by friends to have increasingly struggled with the tragedy. His marriage to his wife Annette, 47, broke down several years ago.

A police spokesman said there were no suspicious circumstances but investigations are continuing. An inquest is due to be open today at West London Coroner’s Court.

Decker had always wondered what had happened. Had those people in the ‘upper echelons’ had Hale killed to shut him up? Decker wasn’t a fan of conspiracy theories but he had to admit it was a possibility.

Or had Hale simply committed suicide, unable to live with what he had done? That perhaps was more likely, given what he had said in his letter.

Whatever the truth, the death of Hale had been devastating. The one person who had truly understood him was gone, destroyed by his own need for justice.

Fearful that he might meet a similar fate, for a couple of years Decker dropped his investigations and instead concentrated on his business and moving house. Until the irresistible need to find the truth rose up in him again.

11

“I’m off then,” said Penny, the new saleswoman, popping her head round the office door.

Decker, his head in the accounts, mumbled something.

“Goodnight.”

“Oh, yes, goodnight,” he said, looking up for a moment.

She laughed. “Don’t you ever go home?”

“Occasionally. But there’s a lot to do. A business doesn’t run itself, you know.”

“I suppose not. But don’t you want to see your family?”

“I don’t have a family,” he said pointedly.

“Oh… I see.”

“This keeps me busy enough.”

She came over to his desk. “You should give yourself a break every now and then though. Everyone needs a rest. You don’t work at weekends too, do you?”

“No, no, not then. Well, not this work, anyhow.”

She picked up an old leather-bound book that was sat incongruously on top of a couple of lever-arch files. “*120 Days of Sodom” – The Marquis De Sade!* Interesting reading.”

“It’s horrible,” sneered Decker, and then felt rather priggish. “But it’s not for me.”

“Christmas present?”

“It’s a means of extracting information from someone, that’s all.”

“Oh, I see,” said Penny, though she plainly didn’t. “I usually find a glass of wine does the job.”

She put the book down and headed for the door, realising she wasn’t going to get any decent conversation.

“Well, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Oh, Miss Harris,” he said, just as she was leaving.

“Penny, please.”

“Penny. These sales figures, they’re really good.”

“Yes, thank you. It’s going well, I think. I like working here.”

“Good, good.”

There was a slightly awkward pause. For the first time since he’s given her the job, Decker really noticed her. She was small, curvier than ‘his type’ (if he had a such a thing anymore), but undeniably attractive. Black bobbed hair framed a roundish face, with persuasive dark green eyes.

“See you,” she said, breaking the silence.

“Yes, bye. See you tomorrow.”

After she had gone, Decker found it hard to concentrate on his books. She intruded on his thoughts, unsettling him. He tried to shake her away but those eyes were burned into his mind.

There had been no-one since Laura. At first it had been out of the question – he had still thought of himself as married, despite knowing beyond doubt that his wife was dead. He would have seen any new relationship as an act of betrayal. Time had eroded that belief, but now he had neither the courage or the energy to pursue anyone. He still had physical needs but they could be temporarily sated with the pull of his hand.

He did worry sometimes that he was becoming a born-again bachelor, and with it was cultivating that innate oddness that bachelors sometimes had. He remembered his father’s bachelor friends, who had all been a bit eccentric and not always in a likeable way. There had been Jack Tolhurst, who looked like a five-year-old who had dressed himself and always had a strange smell of dampness about him. And Clive Carter, who said wildly inappropriate things because he had no other half to kick him under the table. Spinsters were no better, judging by Great Aunt Edith, who had a house full of birds in shit-encrusted cages. Loneliness could be a corrupting force. Most people needed someone else, to smooth off the rough edge. Someone who could make you compromise with the world and rid you of your worst excesses.

Without a soulmate, was he in danger of becoming an oddball? Perhaps, though curiously, it was one aspect of his oddness that stopped him going fully off the rails. If he threw something on the floor, he heard Laura telling him to pick it up. If he hadn’t washed up or had failed to shave, he heard her reminding him. He’d never turned to the bottle or descend into squalor. He had a ghost to keep him on the straight and narrow.

And maybe a ghost was all he had time for. The business took up so many hours, and now he was picking up his detective work again, he would be even busier. He allowed himself a bit of leisure time, which he spent working on the moonscape in the attic, but beyond that there was no time for romance. It was out of the question.

However, as much as he tried to dismiss the idea, he found he just couldn’t concentrate on the accounts. His mind wandered back to Penny and what she might look like underneath that blouse. He imagined unbuttoning it and feeling the warmth and softness of her skin.

Giving up, he closed the ledger and turned his attention to the De Sade book. It was a rare edition which had taken some time to acquire and had cost him a small fortune from a dealer in London. Hopefully it would be worth the price. It was bait to trap a rat, and a particularly foul one at that.

“Show me,” said Melksham.

Decker removed the book from the padded envelope and handed it to the man on the other side of the desk. Melksham held it up to the light, searching for signs of wear and tear. Filling out his tweed suit and waistcoat, he reminded Decker of Mr Toad.

“Hmm,” croaked Melksham, as he opened the book. He licked a fat finger and began slowly leafing through the pages.

Decker’s eyes wandered around the study. Thick oak shelves housed hundreds of books, mostly antiquarian, along with several stuffed animals: a fox, a cobra and a hawk, all frozen in savage poses. In other circumstances, the room might have seemed quaintly English and eccentric, but knowing everything he did about Melksham, he found the place slightly disturbing.

Despite coming from a wealthy background, Melksham had flirted with crime from an early age. After being expelled from two private schools, he had stolen money from his parents and drifted around Europe, where he had found himself in trouble with the police on a number of occasions, mainly for the theft of old books. On returning to England, Melksham had soon progressed to more serious crimes, burning down a Catholic church and telling a judge that he was proud to do it, as it the building didn’t even have the redeeming factor of being attractive. After his release from prison he had turned to more vicious crimes – GBH, indecent assault and a particularly horrible kidnap and rape, for which he had served a bizarrely short sentence. Then he had seemingly gone quiet, though probably only because he had learned not how to get caught.

“I already have a copy, of course,” said Melksham. “But it’s not quite as old as this. How much do you want?”

“It’s not a question of money,” said Decker.

“Don’t be ridiculous. Everything’s a question of money.”

“Not everything. There are other forms of payment.”

Melksham gave a knowing smile. “Go on.”

“I have similar attitudes to yourself, Mr Melksham. I’m seeking new experiences, new sensations. Things that society forbids.”

“I’m not a pimp, Mr Roberts. I’m sorry to disappoint you.”

“I’m not asking you to procure anything. It’s your knowledge I want. Your experience. I want to know what you’ve known. Every sin, every pleasure. Every secret delight. Recount them to me and the book is yours.”

“Why not go and seek those pleasures yourself? Don’t you have an imagination?”

“Of course, but there’s so much to be gained from the histories of others. In the book you’re now holding, the four protagonists gain as much satisfaction from the stories recounted by the prostitutes as they do from their own acts of perversion.”

“True. There is something to be said for vicarious pleasure.” Melksham leaned back in his chair and pulled a contemplative face. “I’d have to be careful, mind. There are things it wouldn’t pay to reveal.”

“I’m not asking you to incriminate yourself – you can leave out the names and the places. They’re not important anyway – it’s the sensations that matter. And ultimately, what you tell me may be just fancy, or it may be fact. I can only guess the truth.”

Decker grinned his sickliest grin. He felt disgusted having to act like this but so far it seemed to be working.

Melksham heaved himself out of his upholstered leather chair and went to the window. It overlooked an expansive back garden, where creepers had taken a stranglehold on his statues of nymphs and cherubs.

“Where to begin, Mr Roberts? Where to begin? I’ve done so much. Of course, it helped that I was born into money. I never had to waste my time on tediously honest toil. But I like to think that I would still have got here eventually.”

“And where is here?”

“Here is staring the world in the face – its true face. Like I’ve ripped off the mask to see the disfigurement beneath. I’ve torn away all the pretensions, all the artifice. All I see now is the truth. Which is this: there’s no good, no evil. The real conflict is between the individual and the group, between the man and the mob. Or society if you like, which ultimately is just the mob in clean shirts. The individual needs to be free, to do whatever he wants. But society will always try to stop him, by every means possible. Every law is an injustice, every moral a handicap.”

“But not to you?”

“I’m still bound by the law unfortunately. But I find ways round it, sometimes.”

Decker wanted to cut to the chase and ask Melksham about committing murder, but he didn’t want to push things too far too soon and make the man suspicious.

“You’ve been in prison though.”

“When I was younger and reckless – then I just said ‘damn the consequences’. I couldn’t do that these days. I value my home comforts too much.”

“But if you thought the law couldn’t touch you, or would never find out, how far would you go?”

“How far? Well… let’s see…”

He refilled his chair and smiled cruelly at Decker.

“… about thirty miles? As far as Sketby?”

Decker winced while Melksham roared with laughter.

“Oh your face, Decker! Did you think you were a good detective? Did you really think I was fooled by your Mr Roberts routine? This whole silly exercise is just your feeble attempt to discover if I was responsible for the abduction of your wife and daughter.”

“How did you find out?”

“By a bit of research – it’s always a good idea. Maybe you should have researched me a bit better to find out what kind of man I am. I could have poisoned your tea.”

Decker looked down in panic at his cup.

“Don’t worry, don’t worry, I haven’t,” chuckled Melksham. “You’re far more entertaining alive.”

He wiped away a tear of mirth while Decker nervously pushed the cup away and tried to regain his composure.

“Well?” demanded Decker. “What’s the answer?”

“The answer to what?”

“Are you responsible for the disappearance of my wife and daughter?”

“You think I owe you a confession? Or a denial? Sorry, not playing. But just ask yourself this – why would I have abducted them? For what reason? Because I wanted an attractive young blonde? They’re not exactly hard to come by. Nor for that matter are little girls if you have enough money. There’s a man in London who can get you whatever you want for the right price.”

“You’ve abducted a woman before.”

“Yes, but there was a reason for that. She wasn’t just some random tart I plucked off the street. She was someone I wanted to teach a very specific lesson.”

“You raped her.”

“Repeatedly, yes – that was the lesson. She was a prison reformer, you see – someone who believed in forgiveness and rehabilitation. Someone who believed that bad people weren’t really bad but had just been made that way by society – by poverty, or a lack of love or education or understanding. And that by showing them kindness and respect, or maybe teaching them carpentry or basket weaving, they could be made better. I showed her the error of her ways. I showed her that evil is ingrained and unchanging, and that it will take whatever it wants, again and again. There is no sentiment that can be appealed to. No conscience that can suddenly flower. She understands that now. She has no forgiveness and no mercy. She’d happily pull the lever herself.”

“You’re a fucking monster.”

“No, I’m all too human – that’s what’s really unsettling.”

“You think you’re smart, don’t you? Some kind of intellectual just because you’re sat at a desk with a load of old books behind you.  Look at me, I’m the great esoteric because I’m wearing a tweed fucking suit and I’m surrounded by a load of stupid stuffed animals. You’re just another sad little pervert, that’s all. Someone who can’t form normal relationships so you get your kicks by hurting people. You’re no better than the other pathetic fuckers I’ve been investigating.”

“I’m not pretending to be. My only superiority is being intelligent enough to understand my own baseness. And to know that at heart we all share that baseness.”

“Don’t flatter yourself.”

“It’s true, Decker. We’re all gripped by primal urges – to feed, to fuck, to fight. If there is any brotherhood of man, it is in that, not in any supposedly noble sentiments. Take you – you’d like to smash my face in, wouldn’t you? You’d like to beat me to a bloody pulp, whether I killed your wife or daughter or not. You’d like to kick me until I cried. But you won’t, will you? And it’s not just a fear of the law that’s holding you back – it’s your boring sense of ‘decency’. So, you’ll leave here disappointed, unfulfilled. You stopped yourself doing what you really wanted to do.”

“Maybe. But don’t tempt me.”

“Tempt you? Decker, I’m all about temptation – you should have realised that by now.

“Now tell me, who else have you been investigating? Give me the names and I’ll tell you if you’re getting warm.”

“Neville Bayley,” said Decker, who saw no harm in telling him.

“Bayley? Name rings a bell.”

“He’s a child molester.”

“Oh, yes – I know. Minor league, definitely. There’s no way it would be someone as measly as him.”

“I’ve also looked at a guy called Colin Quill.”

“Quill! Oh yes, he’s more likely. Though you won’t get any confession out of him – the man’s a cabbage now.”

“It doesn’t matter. I’m pretty sure he didn’t do it.”

“Who told you that? Hale?”

“What do you know about Hale?”

“Enough. Now who else?”

“A couple of others I haven’t pursued yet. Not well-known offenders but people closer to home. One with a possible obsession with my wife, the other with a reason to hold a grudge against me.”

“Really? Well, it’s not impossible I suppose. But I’d surprised if it wasn’t someone with some kind of record.”

“A record like yours?”

“I told you, Decker, I don’t owe you a confession or denial. What I will give you though is another name – someone you should look at very seriously.”

“Who?”

“There’s a price, I’m afraid. The book.”

“Okay, it’s yours. Now, tell me. Who?”

“Paul Fenham.”

“Tell me more.”

“He’s a bit of a wanderer, a drifter, and nasty piece of work. He has a long record – violence, sex offences, burglary. All relatively minor but I’m pretty sure he’s actually done far worse. He hints as much in his letters.”

“His letters?”

“We were together in Parkhurst. We formed what he thought was a friendship but for me was just a temporary amusement. Now he sends me badly written and largely incomprehensible letters in which he raves about his various fantasies and his admiration for Hitler. I mean, really – Hitler! The man was a dreadful pleb. Let’s see, I think I have one of his scrawls here. Fenham’s, that is, not Hitler’s.”

He sorted through the pile of papers on his desk and pulled out a rather grubby-looking letter.

“Yes, here we are – this is his last effort. Quite a while ago now as I never bothered to reply. But he may still be at the same address.”

He handed the letter to Decker, who tried to decipher its rather infantile script and bad spelling.

“Cambridge?” he said, seeing the address.

“Yes, but he did live up in Yorkshire when your wife and child went missing. I’m not saying it’s him, but he’s definitely worth a look. I can give you a letter of introduction, if you like.”

He scribbled a brief note on a scrap piece of paper and tossed it across the desk.

“Thanks, but don’t think that means I’m going to stop looking at you.”

“Look at me all you like,” sighed Melksham, “but where do you think it will get you? You’re not exactly Hercule Poirot, are you? Now, if you don’t mind, I’d like to enjoy the book you’ve brought me.”

“Stick it up your arse,” grunted Decker as he headed for the door.

12

Penny was busy unplugging the sets by the window and didn’t even notice Decker standing there. He coughed clumsily to capture her attention.

“Oh, hello,” she said. “Didn’t see you there. Just finishing off.”

He smiled gormlessly, the words still stuck in his throat

“It’s been really quiet today,” she informed him, while giving one of the screens a quick dust.

“Really?” Normally that would have been such a concern that he would have started thinking about moving things around and lowering prices. But right now, he wasn’t bothered.

“Doing anything interesting this weekend?” he asked.

“No, not really. I did have a friend visiting but she’s sick. So, it’ll just be housework, I suppose. And gardening. Not very exciting.”

“Oh, shame.”

“What about you?”

“Nothing much, no,” he said, scratching his chin. “But I thought I might go to the Bengal Prince on Saturday night. You know, that curry house down the road.”

“Sounds nice.”

“It is, yes. I was… er… wondering if you fancied coming with me.”

“Me?”

“Yes. I just wanted to thank you for all your hard work.”

“Do you always take employees out to thank them?”

“No.”

“Have you ever taken an employee out before?”

“Erm, no, never.”

“But you want to take me?”

“Yes,” he gulped, growing more embarrassed by the second.

“Well, that’s very nice of you. Thank you.”

“You’ll come?” He was genuinely surprised – his confidence was so low that he’d expected a polite ‘no thanks’.

“Yes, I’ll come.”

“Marvellous. I’ll see you on Saturday night then. About seven?”

“Sure. I’ll meet you there.”

“Great, great. See you then.”

He retreated to his office, grinning like an idiot all the way.

Thinking of Melksham and Fenham, and of that strange time in his life, made him think of Penny again. He felt around on the bed for that newspaper picture of her outside the shop.

Bizarrely, it was the only photo he had of her – that faded, slightly blurry and monochrome picture. There were pictures of Laura all over the house, but nothing to say that Penny had ever been part of his life.

Yet he had loved her just as much. Admittedly, it had been a different kind of love than with Laura. Not the intense feeling of youth, but something slower and thoughtful, though still with a healthy undercurrent of lust. It had been grown-up love.

Unfortunately, it had been all too brief and when she had gone, he hadn’t dwelt on her, or let thoughts of her haunt him, because he was far too haunted already. He had put the memory of her to one side, like one of these items in the drawers, to be taken out and pored over every year or so. She deserved better, but what was he to do? There was only so much loss a man could take.

He looked at the picture again. However faded and blurry, her beauty still shone out. She had been some woman. Smart, sexy, and the best bloody salesperson he’d ever met. And most importantly, she had at least tried to understand.

For a while it had been alright, he recalled. He had almost forgotten Fenham and Melksham and all the other vile creatures. He had concentrated on Penny instead and, in doing so, he briefly became a different man. One full of hopes and dreams rather than bitter memories.

If only it had lasted.

“Lime pickle,” purred Penny, spooning some on to a shard of poppadum. “Lovely.”

Decker felt a strange rush of joy. He had forgotten what this was like: being out with a woman, and a beautiful one at that. Just talking, laughing, getting to know her.

“You ever been married then?” he asked, keen to know everything about her.

She nodded. “Briefly, when I was young – too young. It took us a year to realise we had nothing in common. The split was fairly amicable but I doubt he ever wonders what I’m doing now. I certainly don’t wonder about him.”

Decker dolloped some mango chutney on to his plate. “I see. But there must have been fellas since?”

“Oh, hundreds. Absolutely hundreds.”

Decker laughed.

“No, just a few. One who drank too much, one who went all weird on me, and one who was really nice. He turned out to be gay, of course.”

“Of course.”

“You’re not gay, are you?”

“I’m afraid not.”

“And have you ever been married?”

Here it came – the inescapable. But he thought it better to get it out of the way.

“Well… I still am I suppose.”

“Oh, I see. When did you separate?”

“Separate? I suppose that’s one word for it. No, my wife disappeared, along with my five-year-old daughter. They were abducted.”

Her mouth dropped. “What?”

“Eight years ago now. I don’t know who took them. They both must be dead obviously, but their bodies have never been found.”

Tears welled in her eyes. “Oh my God…. That’s awful. I’m so sorry. I can’t imagine what that must be like.”

“It’s a living hell. But I carry on – running the business helps.”

“What happened? I mean if it’s too difficult to talk about…”

“No, no. I don’t talk about it often but obviously I go over in my head every day.”

He gave her the potted history. The disappearance, the suspicion falling on him and his attempts to investigate the crime himself. She was clearly appalled but he showed little emotion, as if it was someone else’s sorry life and not his own. It was easier that way.

Then the waiter came with the main course. They sat in an uncomfortable silence as he dished out the bhunas and pilau rice.

“I don’t think I’ve much appetite now,” said Penny,

“Sorry. Maybe I should have kept it for another time.”

“No, no. I’m glad you’ve told me. It makes me understand you.”

“Why I’m such a miserable sod, you mean?”

“Why you’re a workaholic. And why you always wear black I suppose – you’re in mourning.”

“That’s true, I think. I never used to wear black before it happened. Used to wear these awful garish shirts. Looked like an explosion in a paint factory.”

“You’ll have to show me the pictures.”

“I will. Now, tuck in, please. I’ll be upset if you don’t. It’s really good stuff.”

To please him, she ate. He turned the conversation to lighter, more mundane things, and she responded with all the right words, but he knew the night was changed beyond repair. Perhaps the same could be said of their whole relationship. What woman would want to get involved with someone so damaged?

“Does it bother you?” he asked, when the meal was finished. “You know, what’s happened to me.”

“No, of course not,” she insisted. “Well, it’s hard not to be bothered. But it doesn’t put me off you, if that’s what you mean.”

“Good.”

“And I didn’t hurt my wife and daughter, if you’re worrying about that.”

“I know you didn’t. The police must have been idiots if they thought that.”

“They were. But I suppose it was the easiest solution. Enough murders are committed by husbands and boyfriends.”

“That’s true.”

He saw in her face that she really didn’t believe he could have done it. He’d spoken to enough people with doubt in the eyes to know when someone genuine trusted him. It was no naïve acceptance either, but rather a canny understanding of people. She was smart, as well as beautiful.

“Do you really think you can find out who did it though?” she asked.

“I don’t know. Possibly not, but I know I have to try.”

He signalled to the waiter for the bill.

“All I have is a short list of possible suspects, but in all likelihood it’s not any of them.”

“And if that’s the case?”

He shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t know. I really don’t.”

The waiter came with the bill and Decker took out his wallet.

“Let’s go halves,” she insisted.

“No, it’s my treat. I’m thanking you for being such a wonderful employee, remember?”

“Okay. But next time I pay.”

“So, there’ll be a next time, even after everything I’ve told you?”

“Of course.”

She reached across the table and squeezed his hand. In that moment, for the first time in years, Decker suddenly believed that everything was going to be alright.

“You’re showing me your attic?” laughed Penny, as Decker reached up with the hook and pulled down the hatch. “Is that where you keep your etchings?”

“Better than that.”

On tiptoe, he put the hook round the little loop at the end of the metal ladder and pulled it down.

“There’s no spiders up there, is there? I can’t stand spiders.”

“Spiders are from Mars, not the moon.”

“The moon?”

“Come on, I’ll show you.”

He climbed up the ladder and pressed the light switch on the floor before disappearing inside. Penny followed and was amazed by the sight that met her: a huge plaster of Paris recreation of the moon’s surface, mounted on a table. A third of the way along was an incredibly detailed and hand-painted model of a lunar base.

“What on earth?”

“Nothing on Earth,” he said with pride. “It’s my moonbase. Like in *Space 1999,* you know. Or *UFO*.”

“Blimey, so this is what you do in your spare time – play about with this.”

“It keeps me occupied, certainly I’m always tweaking something, here or there. Every crag and crater has had a lot of thought put into it. Every little detail. And it’s real dust, look.”

He picked up a pinch of lunar soil and rubbed it between his fingers as proof.

“Impressive,” she said, gripping one of the table’s sturdy wooden legs. “What’s it built on?”

“An old full size snooker table. I had to saw it to bits to get it up here and then bolt it back together. Bit of a job but I wanted something robust.”

She squeezed through the narrow gap between the edge of the table and the wall, to get a better view of the moonbase.

“And this is where all the astronauts live, is it?”

“Yep, take a look.”

He leaned over and carefully lifted up the central dome to show its interior: rooms full of tiny silver-clad figures sat at computer consoles, working in labs or lying on recliners watching video screens.

“Wow, all that detail – it’s like a doll’s house. Sorry, is that insulting?”

“No, not really.”

“Some of those women aren’t wearing particularly much, are they? Silver bikini tops and miniskirts - is that really what they wear on the moon?”

“Well, I dunno,” he blushed. “I just think people might be a bit more broad-minded in the future.”

“I’d have thought they’d want something warmer. A nice cardie, probably. Ooh, look, there’s even a little buggy.”

“Oh aye, that’s the best bit. Let me show you.” He put the dome back in place and picked up a radio control unit, which he used to make the buggy move forward across the surface. Penny chuckled with delight.

“That’s wonderful. Much more fun than model trains.”

“This is where we should be, you see – on the moon. Exploring, reaching out. You know when the last moon landing was? 1972! December 1972 – Apollo 17. Ten bloody years ago. All that time wasted. We should be putting all our effort into getting properly up there – having a base like this. Lots of bases like this.”

“But it costs a lot of money, doesn’t it? Billions and billions of dollars when there’s people starving down here on earth. Shouldn’t we get things right here first before we worry about the moon?”

“No, no, no. We can’t get things right without the moon, you see. Chucking money at people – what’s that going to achieve in the long run? The population of this planet is getting bigger and bigger all the time. Where are all the people going to live? How are they going to be fed? Our only chance is to have people living on the moon. And then on to Mars and beyond, out into the stars. We’ve grown too big for this tiny little planet.”

“Perhaps,” she said.

He could see she disagreed but didn’t want to make a big thing of it. Ultimately, she was one of those people to whom the realities of life mattered, rather than any grand philosophies. That was one of the reasons he found himself loving her, when he wasn’t sure that he wanted to love anyone.

“It’s good you’ve got a hobby. It must help I suppose.”

“Yes, in a way,” he said, running his fingers wistfully through the lunar dust. “Someone I once met, who’d been through a similar experience, said that to people like us, a hobby was something to stop us screaming at the walls, rather than something we really enjoy.”

“I’m sure that’s not true. You must enjoy it.”

“Perhaps. I suppose what I’m really doing here is creating another world. A better world, without the cruelty.”

“It’s not always cruel, John.”

“Isn’t it?” he said, unconvinced.

She gave him a reassuring smile and they stood there silently, on opposite sides of the moon’s surface, wanting each other but still a world apart.

The film was awful but it didn’t matter. The wine flowed and the barriers slowly melted. By the end, they were nestled up against each other on the sofa.

“Blimey, look at all those people,” she laughed, as the credits rolled on for an eternity. “You wouldn’t think so many people could make something so bad, would you?”

Decker put an end to it with the remote control. For a moment they just sat there in comfortable silence. She toyed with his hair and he looked into her deep green eyes. They seemed like doorways to another world; a place where you could hide.

“I haven’t… you know. Not since Laura.”

“Not with anyone?”

“No, ten years. That’s a long time.”

“That’s a very long time.”

“It’s not that I haven’t felt the need. I’m only human. But I haven’t done anything about it. I’ve never pursued anyone. Though there were a couple of times I thought about hiring an escort. Does that shock you?”

“Not really.”

“I thought it might be okay, you know. Sex without love. But I couldn’t even accept that in the end.”

“It’s not a betrayal, you know – to have sex or love. Laura would want you to be happy.”

“I know. It’s just fear really. Fear of having those feelings again.”

She ran her hand across his face. “There’s no need to be afraid,”

“Anyway, I’ve already done the betrayal. I wasn’t faithful to her. Oh, it was only once, and I regretted it straight away, but it was enough. I’ve always wondered, you know… maybe that’s why I lost her and Zoe. Because I didn’t deserve them.”

“Don’t be silly. The world doesn’t work that way. There’s no karma or divine retribution. And even if there were, it’s a punishment out of all proportion to the crime.”

“I suppose.”

“Any why should they be punished just because you were a stupid boy?”

He put his arms around her and squeezed the soft flesh of her midriff below her blouse.

“I won’t be unfaithful to you,” he said. “I promise.”

“You’d better not be,” she whispered, running her hand up his leg. “Or I’ll chop them off.”

They kissed, and ten minutes later, hurried upstairs to bed.

13

Predictably, he wasn’t an appealing sight. With his bony frame, pale skin and long, matted hair, there was something wraith-like about him. Tufts of wispy hair sprouted from his prominent chin. His stained T-shirt clung to his ribs and finished too short, exposing a sunken stomach.

“Mr Fenham?” asked Decker from the doorstep, though he knew the answer.

“Yeah,” said the spectral figure, cagily. His expression was one of dopey mistrust. Decker could almost hear the cogs of the man’s brain grinding as he tried to work out who his visitor might be. Too smartly dressed to be anyone from his milieu, but too casual to be CID or Social Security. But then there was the briefcase – a symbol of officialdom if ever there was one. And officialdom always meant trouble.

“Sorry to bother you. My name’s John Roberts. I’m a friend of William Melksham.”

Decker handed over the introductory note that Melksham had written. It only described Decker as “this gentlemen”, so he could comfortably use the false name. Any mention of “Decker” might put the man on the immediate defensive.

Fenham read it but still looked puzzled.

“I’ve just moved to the area, you see. And I have an interesting little business opportunity I’d like to discuss with you.”

“What kind of opportunity?”

“Not out here. Can we talk inside?”

“Yeah, alright,” said Fenham, still wary. “Come in.”

He led the way into his flat. The place was a hovel, with black damp creeping up the walls and a thick layer of dust on the carpet. Everywhere there was stuff – newspapers, magazines, books, takeaway boxes and unwashed plates. The air was thick with a stench of mildew and decay.

“Take a seat,” said Fenham, sweeping a heap of litter off the sofa.

Decker sat down on the edge of the cushion while Fenham took the armchair.

“Melksham, yeah,” said Fenham. “I was in Parkhurst with him. I wrote to him for a while but he stopped replying. Uppity twat.”

“He’s a busy man,” said Decker. “But he hasn’t forgotten you. He recommended you as a man of….” He paused while he searched for the words. “…unique interests, shall we say.”

Fenham shrugged. “Yeah, kind of.”

“He also said you had a strong nerve. Which may mean you’re the person I’m looking for. You see, there’s something I need. I’ve a particular fantasy I need to fulfil.”

“Right… what’s that?”

“A woman and a girl. A little girl.”

“What? At the same time?”

“Yes. Ideally mother and daughter. Both should be unwilling to play. And both will have to be disposed of afterwards, of course.”

Fenham whistled and pulled a face. “No, not me, guv. I ain’t getting involved in anything like that.”

“Why not?”

“Abducting a kid? Risky, but okay, yeah. Abducting a grown woman’s much harder. Getting both at the same time? It’d be a nightmare.”

“But not impossible.”

“No, not impossible. Just bloody dangerous – I ain’t keen on going back inside.”

“I’ll pay you three grand.”

“Three grand?” The size of the figure was clearly a surprise, but then greed overtook him. He hesitated while working out a figure. “No, I want five.”

“Three and a half, but you’ll get a share of the spoils – after I’ve finished with them.”

“I’d do it for four.”

“Okay, four.”

“I’d want half of the money up front – to show you’re serious. And there’s things I’d need to sort, obviously, like a van.”

“But can I trust you? How do I know you won’t just do a runner with the money?”

“I won’t. I’m a man of my word.”

“But can you do it?”, asked Decker, kicking an empty Corona bottle with his foot. “It needs organisation. Looking at all this mess, this chaos, I’m not sure you’re the right man.”

“I can do it, believe me.”

“Have you ever done something like this before? If I could be sure of that, I’d find it easier to part with my cash.”

Fenham suddenly looked distrustful.

“I might have.”

“Might’s not good enough. I need to know.”

“I’ve done things, obviously. That’s why I’ve been inside.”

“That’s hardly a selling point, if you got caught. It’s the things you got away with that I’m interested in. Have you abducted a woman before? Or a child? Or both?”

Fenham stood up. “Look, what is this? Are you really a friend of Melksham’s?”

“You’ve got the letter.”

“I want to check the handwriting.”

He hurried into his bedroom and began rooting through a heap of papers. Rapidly losing patience, Decker picked up his briefcase and followed him in.

“I’ve got one of his letters somewhere, here, I know I have.” Fenham chucked stuff everywhere before moving on to the next pile.

Decker noticed drug paraphernalia, including hypodermics, lying on the dirty sheets. If the man was an addict, that might be useful, in forcing information out of him. And it looked like a degree of force was going to be necessary. He’d realised for a while now that his methods of investigation were deeply flawed. Just talking to people, hoping he could win their confidence so they might let something slip – that was never going to work. It certainly wasn’t going to get him anywhere with this devious little wretch. It was time for action, not talk, and for that reason he had come prepared.

“Oh, where the fuck is it?”

Fenham felt a tap on his shoulder and span round to meet Decker’s fist. A second blow stunned him and he was dragged up on to the bed. By the time he had recovered his wits he found his arms and legs bound tightly with cord.

“What’s going on? Who the fuck are you?”

“Nemesis,” said Decker. He took the tape from his briefcase and stuck it down over Fenham’s mouth.

“Now, I want you to have a good think about all the vile things you’ve done, because there’s going to be a little quiz later. But for now, you can just sweat.”

Decker began searching, methodically and carefully, as he didn’t fancy getting a needle stuck in him. He rifled through the grubby clothes in the chest of drawers, not sure what he was looking for. Some memento perhaps – a prize such as jewellery or underwear that Fenham had taken from one of his victims. Perhaps something belonging to Laura or Zoe. He was sure that was the kind of thing this creature might do.

However, he found nothing, and a rummage through the wardrobe proved equally fruitless. He moved on to the items strewn across the floor, while Fenham looked on fearfully from the bed. It was a depressing search: piles of old tabloids with articles and pictures cut from them, pornographic magazines with the pages stuck together, food-stained letters from the DSS and final demands from the electric and gas. There were lots of books too, most of which seemed to be about serial killers and Hitler.

“Like the Nazis, don’t you? I’m not sure they’d be that keen on you somehow.”

He kicked the books to one side and returned to the living room. It was a similar story here, though as well as books, magazines and papers, there was all the food detritus to contend with.

“Jesus Christ,” he cried, on putting his hand in something black and squishy. He wiped it off on the front of an old copy of Fiesta, wondering how the hell anyone could live like this.

After twenty minutes of futile searching, he found a pile of scrapbooks. He opened the top one at random and a newspaper headline screamed out.

WOMAN RAPED   
AT KNIFEPOINT

There were others next to it, with their accompanying news stories.

GIRL FOUND DEAD

ON WASTELAND

FIVE KILLED IN   
ARSON ATTACK

On the next page it more of the same. Crudely cut and pasted articles on every aspect of man’s depravity. Murders, sex attacks, kidnappings, the torture of children and animals. He picked up the next scrapbook and it was more of the same: a vile testament to the cruelty which people were capable of inflicting on their fellow human beings. It would be easy enough to assemble. Take any newspaper and remove the politics, gossip and girlie pictures and this would be what you were left with.

He sat down and went through the books one by one, until he found what he was looking for: an article on Laura and Zoe’s disappearance. It was not from the time it happened but from much later, as part of a Sunday newspaper series on unsolved crimes. Decker remembered the article well as the reporter had tracked him down to his home in Bournemouth, expecting perhaps to have the door slammed in his face. But keen for anything that would put the case back in the public eye, Decker had co-operated fully. The journalist had probably returned to London disappointed with his interviewee’s lack of furtiveness, for he had hardly used anything of what Decker had said.

MOORLAND MYSTERY OF   
VANISHED MUM AND TOT

May 12, 1974: Attractive young mum Laura Decker, 25, and her five-year-old-daughter Zoe are enjoying a quiet Sunday at home in their isolated cottage on desolate Sketby Moor.

But later that evening they are both reported missing by husband John Decker after he returns home from his regular Sunday bike ride.

Despite an extensive search of the moors, the pair are never found and no-one is ever charged with their murder, despite suspicion initially falling on John Decker.

What did happen to Laura and Zoe? Crime reporter GARY BIDDINGS investigates one of the strangest cases of the last ten years.

Decker didn’t bother to read on. The story had just been a lurid retelling of what little was known, with nothing in the way of real investigation. It hadn’t led to any reaction, apart from a letter he received a week later from a UFO spotter, claiming aliens were responsible. The police certainly weren’t pressurised into re-opening the case.

However, it had obviously captured Fenham’s interest. Why was that? Just because it was another tale of criminality or because he had some special interest in it? Were some of these headlines more than just random cuttings and actually a record of his accomplishments?

Decker was determined to find out, but not yet. First, he was going to make the man sweat.

To kill time, he went into the kitchen and made a cup of tea (black, as the milk in the fridge had long since solidified). Then he cleared the mess off the sofa, switched on the TV and waited, watching two women discuss the latest trends in home design while a fly buzzed around the festering takeaway boxes.

It was an hour before he returned to the bedroom. Fenham, pale and sweating, was struggling against his bonds. Decker roughly pulled the tape from the man’s face, taking a clump of hair with it.

“You fucker!” cried Fenham, after spitting out his gag.

“I warn you – if you scream and shout, I’ll hit you again.”

“Look, what is this? You gotta let me go, man – I need my stuff.”

“Ah, your stuff. You know, I’ve always wondered what goes through someone’s head when they take heroin for the first time. It’s not like anyone can say they weren’t warned, is it?”

“It’s an experience, man. A stiff like you wouldn’t understand that. Life’s all about new experiences.”

“Really?” said Decker, pulling up a chair. “Well now you can add going cold turkey to the list.”

“Oh, come man, let me go! I don’t need this shit.”

“No shouting – remember?”

“Please, untie me. Whatever you want, we can talk about it.”

“Jesus, just look at the state of you. Look at how you live.”

“Who are you? You’re no friend of Melksham’s, are you?”

“I’m certainly not. And he’s no friend of yours, given how quickly he sold you down the river. That letter’s quite genuine.”

Fenham frowned. He looked genuinely upset that Melksham had betrayed him.

“What’s this all about then?”

“My name’s Decker. Does that mean anything to you?”

“Decker? No, don’t mean a thing.”

“Perhaps you’ll remember soon enough. We’ve got plenty of time. Time to talk about your whole life, Fenham. Your shitty, pointless life and all the vile things you’ve done.”

“Why do you care about my life?”

“Because I’m interested in how you think. I’m interested in what goes through your head when you do these things. Let’s start simple. What went through your head when you did those burglaries?”

“The burglaries? Not much. I just needed stuff, didn’t I?”

“Oh, you just needed stuff. But what about the people whose stuff it was? The people who came home to find it gone, and their windows smashed and a pile of your shit on their carpet. What about them? What about how they feel?”

Fenham shrugged his shoulders. “What about it?”

“Can’t you empathise with them? Can’t you understand how distressing it was for them.”

“Oh, fucking hell. They’ll live.”

“Yeah, they’ll live. As will the woman you assaulted. The woman you terrorised. But it’s not quite the same kind of life, is it? It’s a lesser life, a diminished life.”

Fenham said nothing. He was looking frightened now, wondering where this was going.

“What went through your head when you attacked her? Did you just not care about her fear, or did you actually enjoy it? Was that what it was really about, rather than the sex?”

“Oh, give me a break, man. Let me go. Please.”

“And what about this?” asked Decker, holding up the scrapbook. “What went through that diseased brain of yours when you put this together?”

“It’s just newspapers cuttings.”

“Just newspapers cuttings, yes. But there’s no football results, is there? Or flower shows. There aren’t even any Page 3 girls. It’s just viciousness and cruelty.”

“I’m interested in crime, aren’t I?”

“But there’s no bank robberies. No frauds. It’s just death and torture. Particularly of women and children. Like this.”

He opened the scrapbook at the story about Laura and held it close to Fenham’s face.

“Tell me, why did you put this in?”

“I dunno. I just thought it was interesting.”

“Interesting? For any particular reason.”

“No.”

“You don’t know anything about it? You don’t have any special knowledge of the case?”

“No, why should I?”

“Perhaps you’re responsible. After all, you lived near there at the time, didn’t you?”

“Sketby? I’ve never lived anywhere near there.”

“Melksham said you had.”

“I lived in York – that’s about fifty bloody mile away.”

“It’s not so far.”

“Look, I wouldn’t do anything like that.”

“You agreed to abduct a woman and a child. Remember?”

“I was just bullshitting. For that kind of money, I’d say anything. But I couldn’t actually do it.”

“But you hinted to Melksham that you’d done far worse things.”

“No, I was just trying to impress him, wasn’t I? I’m minor league, honestly – I couldn’t do anything really bad. That cutting’s there for the same reason as the others. I thought it was interesting.”

“Interesting?” Decker felt his blood boiling on hearing that word again.

“Yeah, you know. It’s just something to read. A bit of fun.”

“Fun?” he snapped, throwing the scrapbook to one side. “You think the abduction of my wife and daughter is ‘fun’?”

“Well, it was fun for whatever fucker did it, wasn’t it?” smirked Fenham, forgetting his predicament.

That was too much for Decker. He lashed out, his fist landing with a sickening crack on Fenham’s nose. He followed up with a couple more blows, before grabbing the man’s hair and pulling him to the floor. Then he kicked out savagely, to the balls and the face. Fenham squirmed in agony amid the piles of rubbish.

“Is this fun, arsehole? Are you going to stick this in your bloody scrapbooks?”

He continued putting the boot in, ignoring the man’s howls of pain. All the years of pent-in anger and disgust boiled over, in one unrelenting onslaught. Creatures like this deserved everything they got, he told himself. Every last putrid specimen deserved a kicking, a beating. They needed castration and locking away. Society needed to be rid of them.

It wasn’t just Fenham he was booting but all of them. All the vile, selfish, perverts. Melksham, Bayley, Quill.

Quill. The thought made him remember Hale and his letter.

*‘You will lose all that’s good and kind and decent about you.’*

Suddenly he stopped, as he realised what he was doing. He was going down that same dark path as Hale. Self-destruction by destroying others.

He looked down at Fenham, and behind the mess of blood and snot, he no longer saw a monster but a man. Pathetic and repellent but a man nonetheless. Once a child like any other child perhaps, with normal hopes and dreams, but now disfigured by life into this pitiful state.

“Why,” sobbed Fenham. “What have I ever done to you?”

“Nothing,” said Decker, overcome by shame. “If you didn’t kill my wife and child, you’ve done nothing to me at all.”

He went into the kitchen and came back with a pair of scissors. Fenham squealed in terror, but Decker just used them to cut the bonds.

“Here, clean yourself up,” he said, throwing over a towel that was lying by the bed.

Fenham wiped the blood from his face and looked hatefully at Decker.

“Yeah, you’d like to kill me, wouldn’t you?” sighed Decker. “The same way I wanted to kill you. That’s the thing about violence, you see – it’s contagious. Once, years ago, I got a beating far worse than the one you’ve just had – by a bunch of morons who thought I’d killed my wife and child. If I’d had a gun, I’d have shot every one of them. Maybe I still would.

“I also got a kicking from some horrible pervert a couple of years back. Then he ended up being beaten almost to death by someone else, whose son he’d taken. It’s just a horrible tit for tat really.

He sat down on the bed and stared at his blood-splattered shoes.

“And then there’s the worse violence. The kind you can only imagine. I have to picture what my wife and child were subjected to. The terror, the depravity. Every day that runs through my head. And I dream of what I’d like to do to the person responsible. Awful acts of pain and torture I’d like to inflict on him. It’s not a healthy way of thinking, is it?”

“I didn’t do it,” whimpered Fenham. “I’ve never been near that place where it happened.”

“Yes, strangely enough I believe you. Like you said, you’re just minor league, aren’t you? Though I don’t suppose your victims think of you that way. To them you’re still probably the greatest monster in the world. But what’s the point in damning you when you’re quite capable of damning yourself? You loathe yourself, even more than you loathe the world. That’s what the heroin is all about, isn’t it? Not an exciting new experience but just a way of hating yourself.”

Fenham sniffed and wiped away the blood that was trickling from his nose. “You don’t know me.”

“I wish that was true. I wish I didn’t know people like you existed. But unfortunately, I do.”

With a last look at the bloody mess he had made, Decker headed wearily to the door.

“I’ll let myself out.”

14

“You’re quiet,” said Penny, as she climbed into bed beside him.

“Aye,” he sighed, knowing it was useless to deny the fact.

“Aye? You’ve turned back into a northerner!”

“I do sometimes,” he said. “I’ve not entirely become a poncey southerner, you know.”

“Oh, I see. Are you going to show me your black pudding then?” She ran her hand teasingly down his chest but he failed to respond.

“What is it? Is it to do with that Fenham man?”

He nodded.

“What exactly happened?”

“I told you – it was another dead end. In all probability it’s nothing to do with him.”

“When you meet these suspects, you don’t… well… take the law into your own hands?”

“Everything I’m doing is taking the law into my own hands.”

“You know what I mean. You don’t do anything to hurt them?”

Decker looked at her uneasily. He didn’t want to lie to her but he knew he couldn’t tell her the truth about what he had done. She would be appalled.

“Let’s put it this way. Once I knew a man called Hale – he was a man in a similar position to me. He’d lost someone he loved and he was desperately seeking justice. Eventually he found one of the men responsible and he beat him to a pulp. Left the man a complete vegetable. He died himself not long afterwards but before he went he warned me not to make the same mistakes. Not to go down the same dark path. I try to live by his advice.”

“Good. I’m glad you do.”

“But it’s not easy. These people… they’re vile, disgusting.”

“I’ve no doubt. Maybe it’s not a good idea to meet them.”

“I have to. I have to find out who took Laura and Zoe.”

She pulled him towards her and kissed him on the top of his head.

“Oh, you poor thing. You poor, poor thing.”

“Yeah, that’s me.”

“So, who’s next?”

“Oh, we’re at the bottom of the barrel now, It’s Brian Wheelwright, my brother-in-law.”

“Your brother-in-law? Is he some kind of sex fiend then?”

“Not a convicted one, certainly. But he had this thing about Laura. Used to look at her weirdly and ‘accidentally’ touch her.”

“Really? Hardly makes him a murder suspect though, does it?”

“No, maybe not. But there’s something else about him. It’s hard to describe what it is. There’s something very false about him, somehow. I never really noticed it at the time. Back then I just thought he was an arrogant thug. But now, looking back, I can see it clearly. He was never quite what he made himself out to be. He was hiding something, definitely.”

“But to kill a woman and a child? Do you really think he could do something like that?”

“Probably not,” said Decker, switching off the bedside light. “It’s probably not him or the other guy left on the list. It’s probably someone I’ll never hear about and never meet.”

“So, what are you going to do with Brian? Go back up to Sketby?”

“No, not at first. I think I might hire a private detective, at least at first. I’d like to find out a bit more about what he gets up to.”

“I thought you didn’t like private detectives?”

“I don’t really, but getting them to do the groundwork saves time. Time I’d rather spend with you.”

He held her tightly, trying to forget about Fenham, Brian and the rest of them, and letting her warmth seep into his cold bones.

The night felt like the dead of the winter, even though it was only early October. A crisp veneer of frost was forming across the car park.

Sat in his Jaguar, Decker shivered while he hesitated over what to do next. Walters, the private detective had got him this far, discovering that Brian regularly came alone to Manchester for reasons unconnected to work. He always stayed at this hotel but curiously never left it until the following morning, when he drove straight back to Sketby. This suggested that he was meeting a woman, but in that case, why did he always book a single room? The detective hadn’t spied anyone else regularly staying here, apart from one brassy-looking blonde and she always left here early evening and didn’t return until late, so seemed an unlikely candidate. Perhaps it was a different woman every time. Decker could easily imagine his former brother-in-law having a penchant for call girls.

Decker had now taken over the reins of the investigation, not convinced Walters was going to get any further. But was he either? It was not like he could try to win Brian’s confidence as he had, admittedly badly, with Bayley, Fenham and Melksham. Brian knew him and despised him, so would never talk. And even if he discovered what Brian was up to here, what good would it do? It’s not as if he could use that information to lever any confession of murder. It all seemed hopeless.

He wracked his brain, until an answer suggested itself. A bizarre solution perhaps, and a risky one, but he had nothing else.

He would call Brian’s bluff. He would confront him and say, “I know you did it. I have evidence.” Done with confidence it just might work. He wasn’t expecting his brother-in-law to break down and confess, but he just might let something slip – if not a clue, perhaps some signal that he was the one.

Steeling himself, strode into the hotel.

“Ah, hello,” he said, approaching reception. “I’m here to see Mr Wheelwright. Brian Wheelwright.”

The young man checked the register but drew a blank.

“Sorry, we don’t have a guest by that name.”

Decker handed him the photo from his pocket.

“It’s him, with around 12 or so years added on.”

The receptionist showed it to his colleague.

“Is that…?”

She nodded. “Mr Kelly, yes.”

“He’s an old friend,” said Decker. “But he likes to be discreet.”

“Shall I call him for you?” asked the young man.

“No, thanks. I’d like it to be a surprise.”

“Right...” For a moment he hesitated about giving out the room number but his colleague nodded that it would be alright. “He’s in room 412. The lift’s over there.”

“It’s okay. I’ll walk.”

Decker headed up the stairs. It was a large, modern hotel: fashionably sterile, a triumph of beige. He knew what the rooms would be like; clean, comfortable and soulless, inhabited by bored commercial travellers. For Brian, or Mr Kelly as he was calling himself, it would be the perfect spot for furtive assignations. An easy place to hide, with no questions asked.

As he strode down the corridor on the fourth floor, he saw a buxom, brassy-looking blonde coming in the other direction, and wondered if this was the woman Walters had seen. She was wearing a bright red blouse and a short black shirt that hugged tight to broad, stockinged thighs. A thick layer of make-up covered heavy features, that somehow seemed familiar. But it was only when a look of alarm and recognition came over her face that Decker finally realised the truth. He came to a stop and burst out laughing.

“Oh, it’s easy to laugh, isn’t it?” said Brian, clearly shocked at meeting his brother-in-law for the first time in years.

“Very easy, yes,” said Decker, wiping a tear of mirth from his eye.

“You wouldn’t understand.”

“I’m not sure I want to.”

“What are you doing here, anyway?”

“Investigating you. At least I was – I’m not sure what to do now.”

“Come on, not out here.”

As Brian led the way back to his room, Decker couldn’t help noticing how well the man walked in heels. This was no one-off, obviously.

“I don’t bloody believe this,” said Brian, chucking his handbag onto the chair.

“I’m somewhat surprised myself,” said Decker. He picked up some lipstick from the table and played with it amusedly. “This is what you do, is it? Go around bars in Manchester all dolled up? What would the good folk of Sketby say? Brian the tough guy, hero of the rugby club, straight as a die, likes pretending to be a lady! Who’d have thought it? Say, does Debbie know?”

“What do you think?”

“No, she doesn’t, does she?”

“What do you mean anyway – ‘investigating’?” said Brian, sitting down on the bed next to his discarded shirt and Y-fronts.

“Laura and Zoe – I think you had something to do with their disappearance.”

“Don’t be fucking ridiculous. Don’t blame me for your vile crimes.”

“I didn’t do it. You know that. But you… well you had a thing about Laura, didn’t you? She told me how you used to look at her, and touch her ‘accidentally’.”

Brian laughed.

“What’s so funny?” said Decker, angry that someone could find humour in Laura’s disappearance.

“You really don’t get it, do you? Not even with me sat here, dressed like this?”

“What? You’re a queer?”

“No, I’m not gay. If I touched her, it was by accident. And the way I looked at her it wasn’t lust. It was desire, yes, but not lust.” He stared wistfully at the floor. “She was everything I wanted to be. So much grace and femininity. That pale smooth skin, that hair… She was perfect.”

“You could never be like her.”

“Maybe not. She was an ideal though.”

“She was a woman. You’re a big ugly man in a skirt, with badly put on make-up.”

“Thanks. And fuck you too.”

“See? You don’t even talk like a woman. Some transvestites are stunning, but not you mate. You’ll never have any grace.”

Brian stared hatefully at Decker, before tearing off his wig and flinging it across the room.

“Mind you, you fooled the private detective I’ve had trailing you. I won’t be hiring you him again.”

“You’ve had a detective trailing me? For fuck’s sake, why?”

“Because you’re a suspect.”

“Me? You’re the one that did it, you bloody sicko.”

“What happened?” asked Decker. “Did your envy of her turn to hate? Did you kill her because she was everything you’d never be?”

“Don’t be fucking ridiculous,” said Brian, taking a cigarette from his handbag. “I’d never have hurt her. And I’d never have hurt a child too. I ought to knock your block off for suggesting that.”

“You did that before, remember? Only then you had your mates with you, and you weren’t wearing stockings and high heels.”

Suddenly Brian looked worried. “What are you going to do? Are you going to tell folk in Sketby about me?”

“Tell them that Brian Wheelwright, the big tough macho man, dresses up as a tart and goes round bars in Manchester? Oh, you bet I am. What a fuss it will cause, eh? And then who knows what other dirt will come up about you. Maybe you’ll be incriminated yet.”

“Please don’t.”

“Sod off.”

“I didn’t take Laura and Zoe! That afternoon they went missing – I was here, doing this. I’ve been doing this for years. You have to believe me.”

“Why should I believe a man who lies to his own wife?”

“I love my wife,” he sobbed. “And it’ll kill her if she finds out about this. Please, please, don’t tell anyone about it.”

“You’ve made your bed, you can lie in it.”

Decker walked out, back down the corridor, with his brother-in-law’s desperate pleas echoing behind him.

“Do you think he did it?” asked Penny, throwing a stick. Bob, her Labrador, scampered off across the heath to retrieve it but wasn’t interested in bringing it back.

“No, not really,” said Decker. “He was always an unlikely candidate, I suppose, and now he seems more unlikely than ever. Though there’s still something against him.”

“What’s that?”

“Laura opened the door to whoever did it, and took the chain off too. That suggests she knew whoever it was.”

“Perhaps. But it would be equally possible for someone to lie their way in, wouldn’t it? They could have said there had been an accident on the moor and they needed to use the phone. She was kind, you say, so she’d have wanted to help.”

“Yeah, that’s true. She was cautious, but someone devious could always have wormed their way in.”

He stared out across the vast expanse of gorse and grass, the trees standing aloof in the distance. Was that what had happened? Had some predatory creature, wandering the moor, exploited his wife’s good nature?

“You know, these bits of the forest remind me of the moor.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Particularly now we’re getting into winter. There’s that wildness, that distance from civilisation.”

“Maybe it’s not the best place for you to live then. Perhaps it’s better not to be reminded.”

“Maybe. But I like the quiet.”

“But is it good to be alone out here?”

“I’m not alone anymore, am I? At least not when you come over.”

They gave way as a couple of riders came past on the path, their ponies’ breath clouding in the cold October air.

“Bob, come here,” shouted Penny as he scurried after them.

Reluctantly, he obeyed, and followed his mistress towards the trees.

“You’re not really going to tell people back in Sketby about Brian, are you?” asked Penny.

“Yes, I bloody well am.”

“Oh, why John?” she said, clearly disappointed. “Surely you don’t think a man wearing women’s clothes is wrong?”

“No, not really. Whatever turns people on.”

“Then why do it?”

“Because him and his mates beat me to a pulp, that’s why. They’d probably have killed me if the barmaid hadn’t stopped them.”

“Yes, but now you know why he acts like a macho idiot. It’s all a front to hide how he really feels. He’s over-compensating because society won’t let him be what he really wants.”

“Oh, spare me the social-psychological crap.”

“It’s not crap, John.”

“You’ve never even met the bloke – you can’t understand.”

She came to a sudden halt.

“I understand this, John: two wrongs don’t make a right. What’s the point of telling his wife and friends that he likes wearing dresses? What’s it going to make better? It’ll just be an act of petty revenge, that’s all. An act that will probably ruin several people’s lives.”

“If I wore women’s clothes, wouldn’t you like to know?”

“Probably, yes. But I’d want to be told by you, not someone else. I’d like you to be honest, in the same way I’d like you to have a bit of empathy. Even if the guy has been a bully.”

“Okay, okay, if it makes you happy I won’t say a thing. He can carry on wearing frilly knickers for the rest of his life.”

“But I don’t want you to do it to make me happy, John. I want you to do it because you know it’s right.”

She walked on, with Decker following sulkily behind and Bob teasing them both with the promise of the stick.

15

“The way they’re treating these striking miners is like something from Nazi Germany, it really is.”

Decker groaned inwardly and poked the food remains on his plate. He hadn’t been looking forward to tonight, and it was entirely fulfilling his low expectations. A dinner party was his idea of hell, but he’d agreed to it to please Penny. She wanted to show him off, he supposed, as if he was something worth showing and not just a great big slab of misery. He imagined her friends were quite disappointed at his taciturnity and dourness.

Socialising was not something he found easy anymore. He was okay if there was a prospective business deal at the end of it; then he could smile, say the right things, and show a polite if not always genuine interest in the lives of others. He would ask them how their families were, or more often than not, resort to that old standby of talking about football. Outside the world of commerce, it was different. People were no longer opportunities but human beings, whom he didn’t really want to get to know. All his reticence and mistrust came to the surface.

It didn’t help that he hadn’t taken a shine to Penny’s friends. Beth was bearable but Hugo was just about everything he couldn’t stand: a pseudo-intellectual prig. He didn’t really mind the man’s politics, even though they were far different to his own, but what riled him was the arrogance. It reminded him of that first time he’d met Brian and had been subjected to a long discourse on how wonderful the man was. Then it had been all about the flashness of his car and the price of his house. With Hugo, it was all about the size of his social conscience and the acuteness of his wisdom, but it amounted to much the same thing.

For Penny’s sake he bit his tongue while Hugo went on with his recipe for saving for the world, with a brief interlude about his recent holiday in Tuscany. But as the wine went back, Decker became increasingly less reserved, to the point where he was spoiling for a fight.

“It’s getting to the point where we’re demonising ordinary working people just for wanting to stand up for their rights,” said Hugo. “Or demonising them for not having any work. Some of the stuff in the media about the victims of our society is positively fascistic.”

Decker laughed.

“Is something funny?”

“Well… aren’t you sentimentalising these people somewhat?”

“No, I’m not. I just agree with them defending their rights.”

“That’s very good of you, but it all seems a bit misty-eyed. Down-trodden salt-of-the-earth working folk oppressed by the nasty, evil capitalists. I mean, have you actually ever met any of these people?”

“Working class people? Yes, of course I have.”

“Where? In Tuscany?”

Penny cast him a warning glance but Decker ignored it.

“I come from this place called Sketby. I’d like to take you to one of the pubs or working men’s clubs there. What do think you’d hear? Talk of justice, freedom and equality? Critiques of the latest Peter Greenaway film? No, I tell you what you’d hear. ‘Send the darkies back where they came from.’ ‘Dirty bloody gay bastards – they want locking up.’ ‘Spill my pint and I’ll kick your fucking teeth in.’”

“Of course”, said Hugo. “I’m not under any illusions. There’s an awful lot of bigotry out there.”

“But these are the people you’re championing.”

“These are the people I’m defending. There’s a difference.”

“Is there?”

“Yes, I know some people can be bigoted. People of all classes. They just don’t know any better, unfortunately.”

“Exactly,” said Beth. “it’s just a matter of education, that’s all.”

“What, you think you can just educate all that hate and violence away?”

“Of course, yes,” she insisted. “Poor education is just another symptom of poverty, isn’t it?”

“So we just chuck a load of money at schools and everything will be right. Everyone will be kind and tolerant?”

“Now, you’re just being flippant,” said Hugo. “Obviously, it’s not quite that simple. But ultimately, it is all about education. If people were properly informed, there would be far less bigotry, far less injustice. There’s be less crime too.”

Decker shook his head. “Oh, Jesus Christ.”

“Anyone for coffee?” asked Penny, desperate to change the subject.

“Listen,” said Decker, unwilling to stop, “The other day, in the news there was a story about a man who in a fit of rage put his child’s kitten in the microwave. Then he stood there and watched it die in agony.”

“That’s awful,” said Beth.

“Indeed. But why did he do it? Because he was angry, yes, but most angry people would never do anything like that. You can’t blame poverty as the man had a fairly well-paid job as a plumber. Because he was uneducated? Well, I’m sure he was no Bertrand Russell, but he knew enough to know what happens when you stick a kitten in a microwave. He knew the animal would suffer tremendous pain and terror. That’s why he did it.”

“I’m not denying that some people do terrible things,” said Hugo. “That’s obvious. But I can’t believe that anyone, if sane, can’t be made to understand the error of their ways. No one is beyond redemption.”

“Really. So, what would you do to redeem Mr Kitten Killer? Get him basket weaving? Talk to him about Jesus? Give him a better TV in his cell?”

“I’m sure if you treat people like human beings, they are more capable of behaving like human beings.”

“What? You think if you treat him nicely, he’ll suddenly experience some road to Damascus conversion? That he’ll come out and join the RSPCA?”

“So what would you do? Hang him?”

“No, I don’t believe in capital punishment. It’s hard to when you’ve almost been the victim of a miscarriage of justice. But I can’t say I believe in soft sentences either.”

“Just a mild flogging then?”

“I’m not saying that. You can treat these criminals with all the dignity and respect you like. But you’ll just be doing that for yourself – because it makes you feel wonderfully benevolent. It won’t change them. No-one’s going to suddenly transform these monsters into decent human beings. No-one has that power.”

“I should explain, sorry,” said Penny, eager to defuse the situation. “This is quite a sensitive subject. John’s wife and child were abducted. They’ve never been found and nor has the person responsible.”

“Oh God – that’s awful,” said Beth, genuinely upset.

“Yes, it is. And I doubt their killer is sitting there waiting to be redeemed. I doubt if he feels an iota of guilt. He just feels smug probably. He thinks he’s clever. That he got away with it.”

“Of course, it must be very distressing for you,” said Hugo.” I can understand the way you feel.”

“Can you? I’m not convinced you understand people at all. None of us, not just society’s monsters, are modelling clay waiting to be shaped into better human beings. You can engineer society to your heart’s content but you won’t create your precious utopia because you can’t change what people are. By nurture or nature, or just the crap that’s happened to us, we are what we are.”

“I’m sorry, I can’t believe that.”

Hugo turned to Penny and said he’d love a coffee, keen himself now to bring the discussion to a close.

For the rest of the evening the conversation continued in a stuttering, awkward manner, with the row hanging over the table like a black cloud. Beth made a polite effort at asking Decker about the abduction, but he wasn’t in the mood to go into detail over it. After a few strained pleasantries, Hugo and Beth made their excuses and left.

“That went well,” said Penny sarcastically, after waving them off.

“I can’t stand people like that,” snapped Decker, now quite drunk.

“Really? I’d never have noticed.”

“This country is full of tossers like him. Bloody do-gooders who are incapable of doing any real good as they don’t know who the real bad guys are.”

“Look, I know Hugo’s a bit of a prig sometimes, and no-one’s asking you to share his beliefs. For what it’s worth, I don’t share most of them myself. But it’s perfectly possible to have a debate with someone without being so personal, so vicious.”

“He was the one going on.”

“Yes, yes, and then so were you. It was a right little battle of the male egos, wasn’t it? I’m surprised you didn’t compare the size of your dicks. Or go out into the garden and slug it out with each other.”

“He’s a pacifist, remember? Another one of his thousand virtues.”

Penny sat down at the table and sighed.

“Oh, it’s partly my fault. They were the wrong people for you to meet right now. Or I should at least have warned them about your background. But I don’t want it to be like that, John, for your sake. I don’t want to introduce you to people saying: ‘This is John, his wife and children were murdered.’ Because I think you’re more than that. You’re more than just a victim, aren’t you?”

“Maybe, I’m not,” said Decker, sulkily.

“No, maybe you’re not. You could be if you tried, but maybe you don’t want to. Anyway, I’m going to do the washing up. If you’re capable, you can dry.”

She went into the kitchen, leaving Decker to stew in his anger, partly at Hugo, but also at himself. He shouldn’t have lost his temper. He should have stayed cool and aloof and dismissive.

He sank another half-glass of wine, and as with every other argument, ruminated on the things he wished he had said.

16

The pitiful look she gave him across the living room table told him everything. He knew what she was going to say and had known that it was coming. But he had no argument prepared, no line of defence. He was too busy fighting the world to fight this too.

“I can’t take any more, John. I’m sorry, I just can’t. I know you’ve good reasons for being like you are. If those awful things had happened to me, I’d probably be the same. Worse maybe.”

He shrugged his shoulders, rather pathetically.

“But it’s not just your loss, is it? It’s not the horrible way people in Sketby treated you either. It’s this investigation – it’s eating you away. You’re meeting people who are disturbed, or deceitful and you think that’s the world. That it’s a dark, vicious place full of liars and monsters. And that darkness is rubbing off on you, making you something you’re not. I know at heart you’re a good person, but you’ve become cruel and bitter. For your own sake, John, drop the investigation. It’s the police’s job.”

“The police never did their job, did they? They never saw beyond me being the culprit.”

“I know, I know. But for your own sake, John, let it go. I’m worried it might destroy you, if you don’t.”

“How can I let it go? How I can live not knowing what happened to them? And wondering if the person responsible is out there, walking around free to do it again. What are you asking me to do? Choose between them and you?”

She turned away for a moment, tears welling in her eyes.

“No, John. I’ve never asked you to do that – and you know that’s the case. I’ve only ever wanted to help you – to give you the happiness you deserve. But now I know that I can’t. You’ll just drag me into the darkness with you. And I don’t want to live in the dark. I want to live in a world where the sun shines and the air is fresh, and where people, for all their faults, seem basically good. That’s why I can’t be with you, John.”

“Okay,” he said. “If that’s how you feel, I won’t try to stop you. You’ve obviously made up your mind. What about work though? Can you still stand me as a boss?”

“No, sorry. Not because you’re a bad boss, but because it just wouldn’t work. I can’t see you every day. I love you John – that’s the worst of it. In many ways you’re everything I wanted in a man. You’re intelligent, creative, hard-working, and when you choose to show it, you’re kind and funny too. But I can’t live your life. It’s impossible, I’m sorry.”

She got up, kissed him briefly on the cheek and left without another word. And all the while Decker didn’t flinch; he just stared silently at the wall.

Alone again, he thought. Living my myself, fighting by myself. That was just the way things were meant to be, however much he loved her.

At first sight, Decker thought the man in the was bed was already dead. His dry and yellowed skin was pulled tight against his skull, his eyes closed and sunken. He looked like he would crumble to dust at the slightest touch.

“Patrick?” said the nurse. “Your friend’s here to see you.”

Bell’s eyes unpeeled slowly. They were grey and filmy, but with a faint spark of life. A tough old bugger probably, thought Decker.

“Well, I’ll leave you two to it. Shout if you need anything.”

Bell stared at her as she left and smiled weakly. “If I wasn’t dying, I’d bang the arse off that.”

Decker said nothing. He pulled up a chair and sat beside the bed. Finding it hard to look Bell in the face, he stared at the picture on the opposite wall. A beautiful country scene, like everything here intended to blunt the edges of dying. Or it would have the opposite effect and remind you of the world you were about to leave behind?

Not that had been much beauty in Bell’s world. His life had been one of motorways and warehouses. Bars, billiard halls and brothels. And occasionally a prison cell. His police file told a sorry tale of domestic violence against both Ruby and a previous partner, burglary, petty theft, receiving stolen goods and GBH against a 12-year-old boy.

“Do I know you?” asked Bell, his voice a faint, dry croak.

“Kind of. My name’s Decker. John Decker.”

“Decker? I know that name… where from? It’s hard to think these days.”

“From Sketby. I slept with your wife.”

“Oh, aye… that’s it.” He chuckled hoarsely. “Hey, your wife and kid went missing. They said you did it. Did you?”

“I was about to ask to you the same question.”

“What?” Bell pushed himself up with his remaining strength. “You think I’d do something like that?”

“I don’t know. Would you? To get back at me?”

“If I wanted to get back at you, I’d just have kicked your fucking head in. The only reason I didn’t was because I heard a bunch of other blokes had already done it. And if I wasn’t in such a state, I’d do it now. Coming in here, accusing a man on his deathbed. What kind of wanker are you? You think I’d kill a woman and child?”

“I’ve seen your record. You’ve knocked a couple of women around.”

“I just slapped ‘em down when they got out of line. I never murdered one.”

“And what about that 12-year-old you beat to a pulp?”

“Oh, he were no cherub, believe me. I’d have done the world a favour if I’d killed that little lout. But a defenceless woman and little girl. Fuck off! Go on, fuck off out of here – or I’ll have you thrown out.”

Decker stood up, feeling rather ashamed. Since learning that Bell was terminally ill and in a hospice, he had been dreading this. It was hardly his finest hour, making accusations to a dying man. But what was he do? Let the man pass away without at least asking him? He had to know, and there had always been the possibility of a deathbed confession.

“I’m sorry, I had to ask. And until you give me an alibi, I can’t rule you out.”

“I was at the other end of the country, driving a lorry.”

“No, you’d delivered your load in Birmingham the day before. I checked. You could have got back.”

“I was doing another run, weren’t I? But it weren’t legit – I were ferrying nicked stuff.”

“Can you prove it?”

“I don’t have to prove anything to you, arsehole. I don’t owe you anything. You owe me, if anything. You’re the one who fucked my wife. Not that you were the only one – bloody slag. I don’t even know where that cow is now. Not that she’d bother to come and see me here.”

He broke down into a coughing fit. Flecks of blood rained down on to his pyjamas.

“I’ll get the nurse.”

“No, no,” wheezed Bell. “I do this all the time.”

Decker poured the man a glass of water from the jug on the bedside table.

“Water? I don’t want water? I want a pint of best. And a whisky chaser.”

“I don’t think they’re licensed here somehow.”

“There’s a pub around the corner. You could take me.”

“I can’t do that.”

“In the circumstances, it’s the least you can fucking do.”

“But you might…”

“What? Feel ill?” He gave Decker a withering look.

“Well, yes. I take your point. Okay.”

“Great. There’s a coat in that wardrobe over there. Hand it over, will you?”

Fifteen minutes later, after an agonisingly slow shuffle, they were sat in the pub. Bell was dressed in an old donkey jacket over his pyjamas, and a pair of tatty slippers, but didn’t draw any odd looks from the bar staff. Decker supposed they were used to people popping in for a valedictory pint.

“Cheers,” said Bell and took a huge gulp from the lager Decker had bought him. “Look, if you really want to be sure, speak to a guy called Terry Colne – it were him I were ferrying the nicked stuff for. “

“It’s okay, I believe you. It’s just that I was a given a list of potential names and you were on it. For what it’s worth, I looked at you last. You never really seemed likely.”

“If I killed people because their husbands shagged my missus, I be Britain’s worst serial killer. Bloody slag. Mind you, it’s not as if I were faithful either.”

“I’m sorry, anyway.”

“What for? Accusing me or screwing my wife?”

“Both.”

“I can forgive you more for the screwing. She weren’t easy to resist. You enjoy it?”

“Not really.”

“Why not? What’s wrong with you?”

“Oh, I enjoyed it while I was doing it. But afterwards, I felt awful. I don’t know why I did it really – I loved my wife.”

Bell grunted, as if the idea was ridiculous.

“One thing puzzles me – who told the police about me and her? Was that you?”

Bell shook his head. “Probably her. She’s a vicious cow when she wants to be.”

He broke down into another coughing fit, this time without the blood.

“Tell me something,” he asked when recovered. “Are you frightened of dying?”

Decker gave the matter a moment’s thought. “I’m frightened of dying without getting the answers I want. Which seems increasingly likely.”

“I didn’t think I’d be frightened. I’ve been fearless all my life. Laughed in the face of the law… smacked people out of the way if they tried to stop me doing what I wanted. But now, here on the brink, it’s a lot different. I was brought up a Catholic, you see. They instil all that fear in you at school. Bloody nuns and priests – bastards the lot of them. But what they say stays with you, whether you like it or not. All that stuff about eternal damnation.”

“Just confess. They’ll forgive you.”

“For everything? I’ve forgotten half of the fucking stuff I’ve done. I’ve sinned for fucking England.”

“There’s no hell, don’t worry. No heaven either. This is it, for good or bad. Our one life.”

“How can you know? How can prove there’s no hell?”

“I can’t prove there’s no Never Never Land. But I’m pretty sure there isn’t.”

“Pretty sure? That’s not enough. Not when the end is creeping up on you.”

Decker wasn’t sure what to say. He had a natural human sympathy for someone dying but no glib words of comfort. It didn’t help that he found Bell so hard to like. The man might not have taken Laura and Zoe, but he had still lived a life of selfishness and cruelty. And now his only real concern was that he might burn for it.

“Maybe you’re looking at it the wrong way,” Decker suggested. “Maybe it’s not a question of guilt and confession. Or of sin. Maybe it’s a question of regret.”

“What’s the difference?”

“Sin is what society thinks you’ve done wrong. Regret is what you think you’ve done wrong. By your own standards, your own morality. Do you regret what you’ve done? Do you regret the way you lived your life?”

Bell shrugged his shoulders. “I dunno. Some of it, maybe. But you know what they say – life’s too short for regrets.”

“Or maybe it’s all there’s time for in the end.”

“I don’t get you. You’re speaking in fucking riddles.”

“It doesn’t matter. Want another one?”

“Oh, you’re a fucking gent. Same again please, squire.”

Decker went to the bar and ordered a bitter for himself and a lager for Bell. He hadn’t been sure what to expect today, but he certainly hadn’t imagined taking the man to the pub.

It wasn’t surprising, however, that it was another dead end, and probably the final one at that. He had no more suspects to investigate, no more leads to follow. What was he going to do now? Look at Melksham again perhaps – the man still had no alibi. Or maybe he could seek out other suspects. But where to start? And when to stop? Could he ever call it a day? Just accept that he would never know?

“£1.60”, said the barmaid, interrupting his thoughts. Decker gave her a big tip and took the drinks back to the table.

“Here you are,” said Decker, plonking the glasses down.

His drinking companion said nothing.

“Bell?”

Still nothing. The man looked oddly motionless, his chin resting on his chest.

“Patrick?”

Decker touched him on the shoulder and the man slumped down across the cushioned seats.

“Oh God.”

A quick check of the man’s pulse confirmed the worst. He’d gone, departing the world full of good old-fashioned Christian fear but not an ounce of regret.

17

Decker threw the case notes on Bell to one side. It had been all a waste of time back then, and it was an even bigger waste of time going over it again now, when he should be resting or thinking of ways to cope with the pain, which seemed to be getting worse again.

There was nothing to be learned except that it was highly unlikely any of those six people had taken Laura and Zoe.

Bayley? He knew the Sketby area but at the time he had been living in a Huddersfield hostel and would have had to have driven a breakneck speed to get from there to the cottage. Also, he seemed too pathetic a creature to have carried out such an audacious crime. The same could be said of Fenham – a petty criminal with delusions of grandeur, who had also been living quite a way from Sketby at the time.

Quill seemed a more likely prospect on paper but he had uttered a denial under duress, while confessing to other equally vile crimes. If he had been involved, the secret had gone to the grave with him. After years of being in a vegetative state, he had passed away nine years ago.

And Bell was dead too. He had never seemed a likely candidate, as Ruby’s infidelity just wasn’t a strong enough motive. As a matter of course, Decker had hired a private detective to check out the man’s alibi, which turned out to be watertight, even if it did rely on the of account of another criminal. If Bell was responsible, he had hired someone else to carry out the abduction, which seemed even more unlikely.

Brian was an even more improbable suspect. He had no motive at all, unless Laura had somehow discovered his little secret and he killed her to keep her quiet. But how would she have found out? And would he have seriously gone so far just to hush her up? It seemed doubtful. The truth was that he had been rather blinkered when it came to Brian. The man might have been an occasional thug but he was no killer.

That just left Melksham. Undoubtedly that monster was capable of anything, but for reasons he found hard to specify, Decker still didn’t think he quite fitted the bill. A suspicion that was reinforced by their second meeting.

The sun was out and Bournemouth was swarming with holidaymakers, flitting between the gardens and the beach. A churning mass of red flesh, beer bellies and flip-flops. Pensioners lapping ice creams, children running excitedly, and gangs of teenage boys and girls strutting around, making desperate efforts to impress each other.

Decker weaved through them impatiently as he made his way back from his solicitor’s office to the shop. He didn’t have much time for the tourists, or Grockles as they called them down here, for the simple reason that you could hardly sell them a TV. Though he knew the prosperity of his business still depended on them indirectly.

Not that he’d be selling any more TVs soon. In fact, he’d be little more than a holidaymaker himself. In his briefcase were the legal documents which would hand the shops over to Luke, leaving him as nothing but a stakeholder. Luke – the young lad he had almost sacked for being late, but was now an even sharper businessman than him. It made Decker feel quite old and decrepit.

He wouldn’t miss running the shop. For the last few years it had been merely a matter of routine. With no need of the money anymore, his heart wasn’t in it. In fact, he had begun to see selling televisions and DVD players as ridiculous, given that he never actually watched anything anymore. The output of Hollywood and the TV channels appalled him.

He wondered what he was going to do with all the spare time he would now have. Wander down to the beach with everyone else and shrivel in the sun? Not likely. He’d go for walks in the forest, where it was a lot quieter. Or spend time in the attic, observing the stars or developing his moonscape. He had already started building a whole new refuelling station for trips to Mars.

“Decker!”

He turned and saw an old man he vaguely recognised sat outside a café. He rifled through his memories of business dealings in search of a name. Who would dress in a white linen suit and panama hat, like some old colonialist? There were saggy folds of flesh around the neck and chin which suggested rapid weight loss, so maybe he had known him as a much fatter man. Then he noticed the beady eyes and realised who it was. It was Melksham, older and thinner, but still as repellent. He was basking in the sun like some malevolent lizard.

“Remember me?”

“How could I forget?”

“Exactly. Though foolishly, I had forgotten you lived around these parts – if I’d remembered I might have looked you up. I’m down here for a little holiday with the hoi polloi. My health hasn’t been good of late so I thought I’d get some sun and a bit of fresh air. Why don’t you join me for a drink?”

“Why the hell would I want to have a drink with you?”

“Because you’re interested in me, obviously.”

Decker stared at him for a moment. Then without a word, he pulled up a chair and sat down.

“And how are you, Decker?”

“The same as always.”

“Oh, I see. Full of all that suppressed rage. You never found your killer, did you?”

“No. It certainly wasn’t Fenham.”

“I never thought for a second that it was. To be honest, I just wanted the little shit out of the way. I was hoping that you might kill him.”

“I almost did.”

“Well, life is full of might-have-beens. Waitress!”

The young woman came over and Decker ordered a half of lager. Melksham eyed her covetously as she disappeared back inside.

“There’s something about a woman dressed in black, isn’t there?”

Decker said nothing

“And you’re in black too, while I’m in white,” remarked Melksham. “Don’t you think that’s curious?”

“Not particularly.”

“I do. Afternoon ladies.” He doffed his hat to two passing young girls wearing skimpy shorts and bikini tops. They gave him an odd look and sniggered.

“So much flesh on show. These days everyone thinks they’re so open-minded. But they’re not, really. I’d like to properly open their minds. They wouldn’t be laughing then.”

“You’re still revolting, I see,” said Decker.

“And you’re still so pious. So, what about finding your killer? Have you given up?”

“Not as such, but I’m not actively looking at the moment.”

“You’ve given up.”

“Let’s just say I’ve realised what I am. I’m a good businessman, but I’m no detective. But I have been pressing the police to reopen the investigation. With all this new DNA science, they might be able to find an answer now. Though I doubt it. I don’t think there’s any easy, neat solution to this.”

“Oh, you disappoint me, Decker. I never had you down as a defeatist.”

“I’m a realist, that’s all.”

“But there has to be a solution. I know, from a life of study, that if you look long enough there’s always an answer.”

“Look, I don’t need advice from someone like you.”

Melksham laughed. Decker’s drink arrived and for a moment they sat there in an uncomfortable silence.

“You shouldn’t be so hostile to me, Decker. You and I have so much in common.”

“I’ve got nothing in common with you.”

“Really? What would anyone walking past think if they looked at us? That we were two old friends or associates having a catch up. Two successful men, they’d probably think. And they’d be right, in a way. You’re the businessman, I’m the scholar. We’re both accomplished people. Both of us a have a definite veneer of respectability. But beneath it there’s something altogether different. Hearts of darkness. Because we’ve both danced in the fire – myself by choice and you due to an unfortunate twist of fate. We know what hell feels like, don’t we?”

Decker stared at Melksham as if he was something stuck to his shoe.

“No, Melksham, you don’t know what hell is. You’ve no idea. Bringing pain to other people doesn’t make you understand it. Whatever my faults as a person, I still have empathy. If one of these people passing by collapsed, I wouldn’t just try to help them, I’d feel for them. You can’t do that – however much you inflict suffering, however much you take pleasure in it, you’ll never understand it. You don’t have the imagination. Ultimately, you’re just not that smart, are you?”

Melksham’s grin vanished. He leaned over the table and glared threateningly at Decker.

“I’d remind you, Decker, that I’m a very dangerous man.”

“No, you’re an old man. A sad, dirty old man with nothing left to do but ogle young women. Why don’t you go down to the beach – there’s plenty of them there.”

Melksham laughed and leant back with his glass of wine.

“Perhaps, you’re right. That’s another thing we have in common – we’re both yesterday’s men. You think I’m a monster but really, what am I in an age when men can do what they did on September 11. What the point of evil when so much harm can be done by the good?”

“Good?”

“They thought they were, yes. They really believed that by flying airplanes into tower blocks and killing thousands, they were making the world a better place. Scary, isn’t it? Scarier than anything I might do. And it’s only the beginning – I see a grand future for the pious. A future of murder, oppression and censorship – all in the name of good. People like me have no place in a world like that.”

“Well that’s something,” Decker added.

“And then there’s you. You’re rather passé too, aren’t you? A wealthy white man is hardly a fashionable victim. No-one’s going to shed many tears over you. Face it, Decker, we’re both dinosaurs. Not that I mind so much, as unless my health improves my time will be short anyway. I may go down the beach like you suggested and slowly die there. It’ll be like Death in Venice. I’ll sit there in my deckchair, transfixed by some young lovely as I shuffle off this mortal coil.”

“Well don’t let me stop you,” said Decker. He sank the rest of his lager and got his wallet out.

“Please, Decker. Let me pay.”

“I don’t want your money.”

“Maybe not, but humour me this once. I can assure you Decker that I didn’t kill your wife and daughter.”

“Why should I believe you?”

“Because I’ve no reason to lie. If I had done it, I would tell you. I would sit here calmly, and between sips of my glass of wine, I would explain in exact detail exactly what I had done to them. I would tell you how they had reacted and how good it had made me feel. And you would sit there, in impotent rage, unable to do anything to hurt me in this busy Bournemouth street. And despite what I had told you, you would never be able to prove that it was me, which would only make the joy of telling you even greater. But unfortunately, that pleasure can’t honestly be mine because I really, really didn’t do it.”

If his comments were meant to make Decker bite, they failed.

“Do you know who did?” he asked simply.

“No. Why the hell should I know that?”

“Because you’re interested in other people’s depravity, rather than just your own.”

“True, but whoever did this is never going to let it slip. He won’t be the type to brag about his deeds, or collude with others. It’ll be his little secret from the world. But that doesn’t mean it can’t be solved. There always some kind of clue left behind. Perhaps the answer has been staring you in the face all the time.”

“Perhaps it’s staring me in the face right now.”

Melksham sighed. “No, I’m afraid not. You’ll have to look elsewhere for your Big Bad Wolf. Now, go away – you’re starting to bore me.”

“The feeling’s mutual,” said Decker.

He gave Melksham one last contemptuous glance and strode off to the shop.

“I’m really sorry, Mr Decker,” said DCI McDonald, closing the folder and pushing it slightly across the desk, as if to emphasise its worthlessness. “It’s a no-goer right now.”

“Oh come on,” protested Decker. “The murder of a woman and young child – you can’t just let it lie.”

“I know, I know,” said McDonald. He was a slightly chubby figure with a lilting Edinburgh accent and a reassuring manner that made him ideal at dealing with distressed relatives.

“Believe me, Mr Decker, there’s no case I’d rather solve than this. It’s a stain on this force, it really is.”

“Then why not fully reopen the case?”

“Because there’s nothing to go on. We’ve gone over all the old evidence to see if anything was missed but it wasn’t. There’s not one thing – not one rogue bit of forensics, not one overlooked statement. There are no new leads at all, I’m afraid. And without new leads, we just can’t justify it.”

“You mean you still think I did it?”

“No, Mr Decker. In fact, if there’s one thing we did learn by reassessing the evidence, it’s that you almost certainly didn’t do it. I’m sorry the finger was pointed at you, but in so many cases it is the husband who’s responsible.”

“But If the police had done their job properly. they wouldn’t have spent so much time on me. They’d have concentrated on finding the real culprit.”

“Perhaps,” admitted McDonald. “I’m not denying mistakes were made. Things were different back then. They didn’t have all the techniques and procedures we have now. I know it’s no comfort to you, but if this happened now we’d get the bastard, believe me.”

“So why not use those techniques and procedures now?”

“Because as I’ve explained, it’s pointless without any leads. We have reread every statement that was taken at the time and there is not one thing that warrants further investigation.”

“Then take new statements.”

“What would be the point? If people couldn’t remember something back then, they are hardly likely to remember it now, are they?”

“Okay, what about the forensics then. You have all that DNA evidence now – why not use that?”

“We have. We still had a few fibres and things that were collected on the scene so we sent those off for analysis. There’s nothing that can’t be traced back to you, your family or the officers who were at the scene. Unfortunately, we don’t still have the old bedsheets or carpets so we can’t test them.”

“What about the fingerprints that were taken?”

“Again, we can identify all of them. They were yours, your family and friends, or those of the officers themselves. Whoever did this must have been very clever – he wore gloves certainly and he was in and out of that house as quickly as anything, without leaving any trace.”

“So that’s it then? You’re just going to let him get away with it?”

McDonald’s expression was one of total sympathy. “Not if we can help it, Mr Decker. But we need something to go on before we can go any further with this. We’ve scores of other cold cases to look at and in most of them there’s at least something we can work with – some new line or witness. We’ve limited resources, I’m afraid, so we have to direct them where they’re most likely to lead to an arrest. We’re doing good work, believe me. We’ve already put away several killers and rapists who thought they’d got away with it. And we’ll catch plenty more too.”

“That’s good,” said Decker, despondently.

“And, if anyone we arrest fits the bill, we can ask them about your wife and daughter. You never know, we might just find the culprit that way.”

“But that’s unlikely isn’t it?”

McDonald shrugged his shoulders, admitting that it was. Decker thanked him curtly for all his hard work and left, feeling things were more hopeless than ever. It was going to be a long and depressing drive back down to Hampshire.

18

Sometimes Decker just sat down with a blank piece of paper and scribbled down theories and ideas. There was one such note among the case files. A vain attempt to get to the nub of the crime. To understand why it had happened and who might have done it.

**MOTIVE**

**Zoe – sexual motive**

The killer wanted Zoe. But why also abduct Laura? Because she was a witness? If so, why not just kill her there?

**Laura – sexual motive**

But why take Zoe too?

**Laura and Zoe - sexual motive**

The killer wanted them both. Doesn’t fit standard patterns of sexual offending but not impossible.

**Revenge**

No-one with a possible revenge motive against me except Bell, and his motive is weak. Plus he had an alibi.

Laura didn’t have an enemy in the world.

**PLANNED/UNPLANNED?**

Had someone cased the cottage beforehand? Hard to do that without being seen.

Did they know I would be out on my bike? Had they seen me out riding?

Was killer a random opportunist? Someone targeting isolated houses?

**WHY ABDUCT THEM?**

Why not carry out the crime there and then? Because they knew I would be back soon?

Or were they already dead and killer didn’t want to leave incriminating forensic evidence?

Or to implicate me?

Or maybe the killer wanted to keep them alive for a while?

**DID LAURA KNOW THE KILLER?**

She must have opened the door and taken it off the latch to let them in. Suggests she trusted whoever it was.

The only suspect she knew is Brian, but he seems highly unlikely.

Someone else could have bluffed their way in, by saying they needed help e.g saying they needed to use phone after an accident. Laura was cautious but she would always have tried to help.

Alternatively, the killer got in via an open window. But why shut the window afterwards?

**WHAT KIND OF PERSON IS THE KILLER?**

Insane? Unlikely – at least not of the totally out of control kind.

But probably impulsive – prone to sudden tempers or dangerous desires.

Sexually abnormal.

Controlling.

Devious, secretive.

Worthless scribbles, thought Decker. All they told him was that he was utterly out of depth in trying to find who had taken his wife and child. He would never find the answers he sought, however hard he tried. Sometimes he could scream at the unfairness at it all. But that was life – it was unfair. Dictators died in their beds after long, untroubled lives, while the good died randomly and young. Justice was rare. Karma was a myth.

Decker looked at his watch. It was just after 1pm. He knew would have to go downstairs soon for food and drink, but he had been putting it off, given how difficult getting up the stairs had been. He wasn’t sure the descent would be any easier. Nothing was simple now; every move he made involved a series of complicated and distressing mechanics.

Before going anywhere, he needed to tidy up all the mess. Lying strewn around him on the bed were all the documents, keepsakes, photos and drawing he had pulled from the three drawers. He wasn’t going to start living untidily, not even now, at the probable end.

Stretching out slowly, he started collecting the items and putting them back in their proper folders. Perhaps for the last time, he thought. What would happen to all these things after he had died? He’d made no will, as there was no-one in his life to inherit. Presumably the house would sit here abandoned until some solicitors found some distant relatives to take it. Then it would be stripped of all its contents and sold off. All these mementoes would probably end up in a bin bag or a skip, and with that all his efforts to find the truth would be forgotten.

He picked up another piece of paper and froze.

It was something he had looked at a thousand times, but now, in an instant, it was different. He saw the answer that had always been there, right in front of him. How could he have not noticed it before?

At last, after so many years, he knew who had taken Laura and Zoe.

*He knew.*

How could he have been so stupid not to have seen it before? He knew why. Because through the fog of pain and grief he had seen what he wanted to see. It was only now, surrounded by so many memories, that for the first time he could see the whole landscape of his life, not just isolated moments in his past. It was if he was looking down on it all from some great height, seeing points that had once seemed remote and unconnected were in fact linked by paths where someone had trod.

Ultimately, all that mattered was that he knew. The hopeless aching of not knowing was gone forever. His family would have justice at last.

The sense of relief was enormous. He wept uncontrollably, his tears splashing on the faded piece of paper still clutched in his hands.

The emotion was so intense that it was a few minutes before the truth dawned on him. He still might die here. His injuries, or the sheer stress of them, might kill him before anyone came here. Then the killer would never be exposed. The monster would get away with it.

Decker panicked. What the hell was he going to do? Write it all down perhaps, in precise detail, so if he did die, at least the police would still find the solution and act on it. But no, that wouldn’t do any good. He knew the truth beyond doubt, but it was solely based on his own experience. He had no smoking gun. There was nothing that definitely pointed the finger at the culprit. Anyone who found his note would just think it the ramblings of a man driven mad by pain.

The only way he could expose the killer was to get out there and prove it. Besides, he needed to see justice done. He couldn’t leave this world without witnessing that bastard pay for his crimes. He couldn’t just wait here for days either, uncertain as to whether he would survive until the cleaner or the postman came. He had to get out, now, and get help and medical attention.

However painful it was, he knew he was going to have to make it down those stairs and out of the house. His only hope was to reach the road and flag down the first passing car, even if that did mean crawling a few hundred yards up the track. He was sure the effort wouldn’t kill him, if he took it slowly enough.

The first thing he had to do was turn back over onto his stomach. He did it as quickly as he could, hoping it would minimise the pain, though it still proved agonising. Next, he put the piece of paper in one of the plastic wallets which he folded and stuck down the back of his trousers, where he hoped it wouldn’t get damaged. Then he manoeuvred himself so his head was poking over the edge of the bed. It was a drop of around a foot and half to the floor but in the circumstances even that was daunting. He grabbed a couple of pillows and chucked them down so they might cushion him. Then he started sliding off the bed, using his arms to pull himself forward and dreading the moment when his legs would fall. When it happened the pain was excruciating, even with the pillows to soften the blow. For a second, he thought he might black out again, but he held on.

He only gave himself a moment to recover. Time was precious – he had to get out of the house and to the road before darkness fell, which was only a matter of hours. At night he might not be spotted on the road. That’s if there would be any motorists to see him. It wasn’t a busy road at the best of times. On Christmas Day there might be no-one.

He couldn’t worry about that now. The road was his only chance and that was all there was to it. He crawled forward, as fast as he could manage, out of the bedroom and to the top of the stairs.

The next problem was the descent. Going down head first it would be hard to get a proper grip, but as he had no space to turn, he had no alternative. He would just have to be careful.

Negotiating the bend at the top of the stairs proved as agonising as before, and he was forced to take another breather while hanging on firmly to the baluster, facing the steep hill beneath him. With his other hand pushed hard against the stairs, he eased forward and grabbed the next upright. Then the same again. And then…

He lost purchase and slid, the edge of each step smashing hard into his legs as he thumped his way down with an almighty screech. The hallway came rushing towards him and as he met it, he blacked out.

19

“Be careful, you are treading mud all over kitchen”, said Magda, as Decker came into the kitchen via the back door.

“It’s my kitchen,” he pointed out.

“Yes, and I have just cleaned floor. Don’t get it dirty.”

Decker muttered his displeasure and took off his shoes, wondering who was paying who. He padded over to the kettle and switched it on.

“Be careful,” said Magda, straining out the mop in the bucket. “The floor is wet. You will slip and break your leg.”

“I won’t, don’t worry,” he said, taking the milk from the fridge. “I broke my leg when I was a young man and I’ve no intention of doing it again. Tea?”

“I don’t drink tea, I already tell you. Coffee please. Two sugars.”

“Okay, coffee. I’ve got soggy socks now – lovely.”

He took two mugs from the tree and poured out the drinks.

“There you go,” he said, pushing her coffee across the work surface. “Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas,” said Magda, without enthusiasm. Her clipped Slavic tones and abrupt manner made her seem rude sometimes, but Decker liked her. There was no side to her, as there seemed to be so many people these days.

“You know this is my last week before Christmas and New Year.”

“Yes, I know. Going back to Poland?”

“Yes. I am not looking forward to it.”

“Why not?”

“Because I take Robbie, my boyfriend.”

“I don’t understand – what’s wrong with that?”

“He’s black. My parents are old-fashioned.”

“Oh, I see. Well, just remind them Jesus would have been a bit swarthy.”

She pulled a contemplative face, wondering if that was as an option.

“What about you? Where are you going for Christmas?”

“Me? Nowhere.”

“You have people round?”

“Nope, no-one.”

“You spend Christmas on your own? That is awful.”

“No, it’s not. I always spend Christmas on my own. It’s fine.”

“You not have family you can visit?”

“No. I haven’t got any brothers and sisters. I’ve a few cousins but I haven’t seen them in years. I don’t even know which ones are still alive.”

“Friends then?”

“No, no-one close. No-one who’d want an old fart like me hanging around. And anyway, I’m more than happy on my own. I like my own company.”

“You should find yourself woman.”

“A woman?” He thought for a moment of Penny and that wonderful Christmas he had spent with her. “No thanks. I tried that before and it didn’t work.”

“But what you do? On your own?”

“I don’t know. Nothing special. I’ll probably work on my moonbase.”

“What if you fall on those attic steps and break your legs?”

“You seem to be obsessed with me breaking my legs. I’m not an imbecile.”

“No, but you are old man.”

“I know I’m an old man. I see myself in the mirror every day. And I think like an old man – that’s why I’m such a reactionary.”

“A what-anary?”

“A reactionary. Someone who doesn’t like change or modernity. Someone who doesn’t like comedians who think they’re politicians. Or politicians who think they’re comedians. Graffiti vandals hailed as artists. People being offended on Twitter, whatever that is. Kids spending all day playing mindless computer games. People queuing up for the latest mobile phone and then staring at it like a zombie. I could go on.”

“No, don’t.”

“So yes, I know I’m an old man.”

“But you still think you can do everything like cut lawn and go up to attic. You need to understand what being old is – you should not be out here on your own. Anything might happen to you. You could fall, have heart attack or stroke.”

“Well, that’s me told,” said Decker, before taking a sip of his tea. “Is the advice free or do you charge extra?”

“You are crazy. But at least you are not dirty old man like other guy I clean for. Two times now he has pinched my ass.”

“Arse.”

“What?”

“In England we say ‘arse’, not ‘ass’.”

“Arse, ass – what does that matter? It matters that he pinches it. I tell him, if you do it again, I will kick you in balls. ‘Balls’ is okay, yes? You say ‘balls’ in England?”

“Yes.”

“Good. He is dirty old man but he is not stupid like you. He will spend Christmas with his sister.”

Decker laughed and shook his head. Magda picked up a bottle of surface cleaner and waggled it at him.

“You laugh, but I know what will happen. I will come back after New Year and find you dead!”

Decker came to and immediately looked at his watch, fearful that he had lost hours. To his relief he saw he had only been out five minutes. He still had enough time. He’d lost his glasses on the stairs again, and the pain was worse than ever, but there seemed to be no further damage to his legs.

He started crawling forward but stopped almost straight away on seeing the front door. How could he have forgotten? It was locked!

He’d locked it as he always did when he was working up in the loft – even though there were security gates and a fence to keep unwelcome people out. Understandably perhaps, his life had made him slightly paranoid about intruders.

The keys were in the same coat as his phone. There was a spare set though, which he kept in a drawer in the kitchen. Which meant making the same difficult journey as yesterday, only this time he would need to be much quicker.

He moved forward and screamed again as his legs dropped on to the hallway. Then he reversed, as quickly as he could, biting into his jumper. It took him a couple of minutes to reach the kitchen but it seemed like a sprint compared to the day before.

The keys were kept in the drawer he had pulled out yesterday, which was now lying near the back door with most of its contents scattered round it. Decker made another awkward 180-degree turn and started frantically scrabbling through the mess of batteries, candles and light bulbs, worried that the keys might somehow be lost. But he soon found them.

While summoning the strength to turn around again, he realised he didn’t have to. He also had the key to the back door, so he could go out that way and around the side of the house. It was a slightly longer distance but it would be easier, given that crawling was less distressing than turning.

He sat up to unlock the door and slithered outside into the garden. A wall of bitterly cold December air hit him but he didn’t have time to think about finding a coat. He just had to hope that the exercise would keep him warm.

It was gloomy too, and he fretted for a moment that the darkness would fall earlier than he had thought. He looked up and saw an explanation in the black ominous clouds obscuring the sun. Almost certainly it was going to rain, which was the last thing he needed. He wondered if he should go back inside and wait until tomorrow before attempting the journey. But what if his heart gave way tonight? What if it rained all day tomorrow? No, he had to move now, without further delay.

He slithered like some huge slug, over the path and then in an arc across the lawn so that he was facing the right way. He wondered what anyone would think if they could see him. A mad old man, crawling around the garden with a broken mop tied to his legs, the cloth head collecting dirt and leaves on the way. It was utterly ridiculous.

He carried on, past the wheelie bins at the side of the house, keeping to the grass as it was softer underneath, though there was a horrible dampness that soaked into him. He dug his fingers hard into the ground to pull himself forward, no more than a foot at a time. By the time he reached the front garden, his arms were aching and he was already exhausted. The constant throbbing pain beat like a piledriver in his head.

How far to the front gates? Ten yards? Twelve? And how far after that down the dirt track to the road? Another few hundred yards? Did he have the stamina to make it that far? He told himself he did.

After another agonising five minutes he was near the far side of the lawn. He edged sideways on to the driveway and reached the steel-barred security gates. They could be opened automatically from the car but otherwise he needed to key in a security code. He pushed himself into a sitting-up position next to the left-side post and stretched up to enter the four-digit number on the keypad. 1-6-1-1, Zoe’s birthday.

The gates began to slowly swing open, towards the house. Decker panicked as he saw the problem he now faced. The left-side gate was now blocking his way out, meaning he would have to crawl round it, when there was only a limited amount of time before the gates automatically closed. There was more than enough time to drive through in a car or walk around when you were on foot, but crawling around with two broken legs would be impossible.

Nevertheless, he tried, scuttling as fast as he could. But as he turned to face the exit, the gates started to close again. He started crawling forward but then checked himself, realising he would be crushed.

He screamed and thumped the ground with frustration. There was no way he was ever going to be able to move quick enough through those gates. He vaguely remembered the salesman telling him there was a way of changing the delay settings via the keypad, but as it was something he had never needed to do, he hadn’t the slightest idea how, and he doubted he would be able to work it out, especially in his present condition.

He couldn’t use the car. Even if he could drive it somehow, he didn’t have the keys. He couldn’t climb over, obviously, and the perimeter fence was absolutely impenetrable. He was trapped, a prisoner of his own obsessive need for security.

He wracked his brain, desperately trying to think of a solution. Block the gate, that was it! Stop one of the doors from shutting after it had opened. But what could he use? He looked around the garden and saw the old stone birdbath in the middle of the lawn. That would be perfect, if he had the strength to move it.

He crawled back across the grass and gave the thing a shove. It was incredibly heavy but he thought he stood a chance of getting it to the gates if he could topple it. He sat up and used all the force of his arms. It refused to budge. Uttering a stream of obscenities, he tried using his shoulder instead. After much exertion the thing lifted a couple of inches, and he was able to use his hands to fully upend it.

As the birdbath had a square base and a hexagonal top, there was no easy way of rolling it, so he had to slide it, inch by inch. With so little strength left, and no purchase from his legs, it was an horrendous task. It was twenty minutes, without stopping for rest, before he had it in what he judged was the right position, just beyond the farthest outreach of the left-side gate.

He went back to the keypad and entered the number again. As the gates whirred open, he moved as quickly as he could. With all his might he pushed the top of the birdbath against the now closing left-side, bringing it to a grinding halt while the right-side continued unabated.

Decker crawled through the gap while behind him steel fought against stone for supremacy. With the power of hydraulics behind it, the gate soon won, spinning the birdbath out of the way. Decker looked nervously over his shoulder and saw a huge wall of metal bearing down on him. If it hit the back of his legs, what further damage might it do? He outstretched his arms and pulled himself forward, ignoring the pain. And then again, until he was safe on the forest track. The door clicked back into place just inches from his heels.

He lay there, gasping for breath, exhausted. So much energy spent, and so much time taken, with two hundred yards or so left to go. He would never make it to the road in daylight now. But he couldn’t stop, and there was no turning back either. He just had to carry on and hope someone would see him in the darkness.

After a five-minute rest, he began crawling again. Even slower, this time, as he had so little strength left, and it was hard going. The track through the forest was an uneven mix of soil and stone. Pebbles and lumps rubbed against his legs, aggravating the pain. He veered towards the side where the ground was a little smoother, from years of being compacted by his car tyres, but it was only marginally less agonising.

On and on he crawled, through the descending gloom. It seemed to him there was still an eternity of track ahead and he was little nearer the spot where it made a sudden turn towards the road. He’d driven down here thousands of times, and walked it almost as many, but never had it seemed so long. What had once seemed a beautiful spot was now a monotony of dirt and trees, every yard undistinguishable from the next.

He let out a yelp of pain. His trousers were torn on one side and a sharp piece of rock had scraped against his bare skin. The stones were ripping at his socks too. threatening to tear his feet to ribbons.

He stopped for a moment, desperate for another breather. He wondered if there was any easier way of doing this. Could he push himself forward while sat up? No, that required far more energy and was just as painful. Could he go into the trees and crawl along the softer surface of the forest? No, the place was a maze, and would require constant twisting and turning. Crawling along this path was the only way.

Suddenly, he heard a faint rustling ahead of him. He looked up and saw that a lone stag had emerged from the forest and was standing on the path just ten or so yards ahead. The creature was young; its antlers barely formed, its fur still glossy and a glorious mix of red, gold and brown. For a moment, it stared at him, wariness burning in its small dark eyes. He was surprised it didn’t flee straight away, but perhaps he no longer looked quite human. Perhaps he was being taken for a rotting carcass or a heap of vegetable matter.

“Merry Christmas, Rudolph,” croaked Decker, just to prove that he was alive. “Santa went that way.”

The deer ran off into the trees, while Decker laughed and broke down into a coughing fit.

Survival, thought Decker. That was what it all boiled down to. The stag knew it, like all animals knew it. Keep alive, keep going. Brave the elements and be on the constant look out for predators. People, wrapped in the warm blankets of civilisation, thought it was different for them, but with just a few wrong steps, those comforts were blown away. For him, right now, there was no civilisation, no society. He was just another wild animal faced with a series of grim realities. The pain in his limbs, the hard ground, the bitter cold and the night, falling like a guillotine.

With a bestial grunt he dragged himself forward again.

He tried to blank out any thoughts to how far it was to the road, or what would happen when he got there, and just focus on the next few feet of ground he had to negotiate.

For an animal that was easy perhaps, but not for a human being with an imagination. When you could begin to calculate how much pain you might have to bear. When you could picture reaching the road only after hours of this torment, and then waiting in vain as not a single car passed. Or perhaps a car would come but the driver wouldn’t see him. Or maybe they would see him but drive on because they just didn’t want to get involved. There were plenty of people who might do that.

He couldn’t think just in the moment, however much he tried. There would always be more than just the next few feet. There was a destination in mind, an end point. More than just a road. More than just a hospital even. There was justice at the end of this crawl. He would see that murderer standing in the dock. See the bastard sobbing. Or maybe he wouldn’t bother with all that. Maybe he would just kill him and save the British taxpayers the expense.

That was what he needed to drive him forward – that hate. Every bruising, bone-crunching push was worth it because it would take him closer to the day when that man would suffer for what he had done.

His hate was so strong that for a while it almost numbed the pain. He ignored the constant stabbing, the aches and the grazes, and focused on his most violent, vengeful thoughts. For the next ten minutes they kept him going but then fatigue kicked in again and he came to a wheezing halt.

He looked up to see how long he had left to go and it still seemed like forever. All that emotion and exertion had been for little, it seemed. He was stuck in a perfect storm of pain and exhaustion. And now the coldness was seeping into his bones, chilling him to the core and making the tiredness worse. He was seriously beginning to wonder if he could make it. But he knew he had to. It was do or die now.

He pushed on again, telling himself it was just a question of mind over matter. With each tree he passed he was a step nearer to the road and safety. It was not impossible. After all, he had already made it up and down the stairs, across the garden and through that bloody security gate. If he’d done all that, he could do this too.

A raindrop splashed on to his hand.

He looked up and saw the clouds had turned blacker, bringing a premature night. This was going to be no light shower. This was going to be a downpour. The perfect storm was about to get a little more perfect.

What should he do? Make for the trees? They weren’t evergreens here so the canopy wouldn’t offer much in the way of protection at this time of year. And he had already decided going that way would only slow his progress. No, he had to keep to the track, but just be quicker. He summoned up all his remaining strength, dug his fingers in hard and dragged himself along as fast as he could.

The rain began in earnest, though it was not as heavy as he had expected. It was a major annoyance but he saw no reason why it would stop him.

He crawled on, but after just a few more feet the tempo of the rain suddenly changed and it began hammering down. Cold and hard, it felt like ball-bearings smacking into the back of his neck. Within a minute his trousers and jumper were soaked, weighing him down and causing him to stick to the surface of the track, which was rapidly turning to mud. As he hauled himself along with increasing difficulty, he dislodged more stones that scraped against him.

Progress became tortuously slow. He was a huge sodden weight, barely able to move an inch at a time. Delirious with pain and exhaustion, he veered off towards the trees, until, in a fleeting moment of awareness, he corrected himself and moved back fully on to the track.

He soon lost all sense of time. It seemed to him that he had always been here. A whole lifetime spent crawling along this track and wallowing in dirt. He closed his eyes and continued blind, so at least he didn’t have to see the horror of it all. It was enough to feel it – the constant, sickening ache, not just from his legs now but from every muscle of his body. To move just a finger now was a tremendous effort. His advance stuttered, until finally he came to a complete halt.

For a minute he just lay there, his face in the mud, the rain continuing to hammer mercilessly down. He felt as if he was dissolving. As if he would be washed away with the dirt and leaves, to seep into the soil.

Eventually he looked up. The darkness was near total but he could just about work out where he was. He was at the turn in the track! It was only a matter of yards now before he reached the road. He could still do this.

But when he tried to crawl on, but found he couldn’t. Again and again he tried, but he couldn’t move, not even a fraction of an inch. There was nothing left in him. His muscles were dead, his strength totally gone. It didn’t matter how near the road was, or how much he wanted to get there. It was impossible to even shuffle along. He was immobile, his limbs as stiff as welded steel.

He had failed.

All his effort was to no avail. At the last hurdle he had fallen, so near and yet so far.

He started to cry. Working out who had killed Laura and Zoe hadn’t been some kind of redemption. Instead, it had been the final indignity, because no-one else would ever know. The killer would probably pass away in a warm bed, smug at the thought that he had got away with it. While his final victim would die here on this track tonight, as the water froze around him. They would find his body here in a week or so, half eaten by foxes and badgers, and think him insane. A mad, lonely old man who had gone out crawling in the rain with two bits of mop tied to his leg. Perhaps they would be right. After all, if he’d stayed in the house, he might have survived until somebody came.

There was nothing left to do now but die. He just hoped that it would be quick. Nothing long and drawn out, but swift, efficient death.

He closed his eyes, willing the end to come.

A moment later, he opened them again, aware of a presence. Two figures were standing in the rain, seemingly oblivious to it. They were vague, blurry, but it was a clearly a woman and a child. Slowly they came into focus. A beautiful woman with long blonde hair and a young girl who looked incredibly like her, both dressed in the fashions of another era, and as bright as day, even though there wasn’t a light in the sky.

“Laura? Zoe?”

They smiled and held out their hands to him.

He knew they weren’t real. There was just enough left of his sanity for him to know that it was madness. His mind was now as broken as his body.

They were illusions and nothing more. But he didn’t care. All that mattered to him was that they were there. His wife, his child. And if he had to die, he would die with them.

All it needed was a few more feet. From somewhere deep at the core of himself he found a last reserve of strength. He pushed himself up with both arms and crawled forward, quickly, like a man possessed, letting out an almighty screech of pain. Bone and muscle grinded as he smashed his way round the curve in the track.

They were in touching distance now.

He stretched out his hand to meet them and collapsed as the darkness swallowed him whole.

20

Slowly, he became aware.

Whiteness. The smell of antiseptic. The sound of coughing and curtains being pulled. The beeps of machines, the squeaks of wheels. Voices, and then a face looking down at him. A plump, pretty, brown face.

“How are you feeling?”

“I… I…”

“Here, take this.”

She popped a pill in his mouth and held a glass of water to his lips. Some spilled on his chin but she wiped him dry with a tissue.

“There, that’s better.”

Decker looked around. He was in a small hospital ward, full of elderly people. Both his legs were in plaster and up in traction. He felt drained but light, floaty – the effect of morphine, he guessed.

“What happened?” he croaked. “The last I remember I was on the road.”

“Don’t you remember coming in here?” said the nurse. “Well, that’s not surprising – you were in a bit of a state. You’d have died there if that driver hadn’t seen you.”

“But I didn’t get to the road?”

“She spotted your outstretched hand in her headlights. You were lucky – very lucky!”

Laura, Zoe. They had pulled him that extra few feet. He’d been saved by own madness. If madness was what it had been…

“What were you doing? Crawling around the countryside at your age.”

“I had no phone – it was in the attic.”

“You should be more careful. Get yourself an emergency buzzer or something. Anyway, they patched you up – you’ll be alright if you take it easy. No more fussing, like you did last night.”

“Fussing?”

“Oh, yes. You kept on going on about some silly picture.”

Decker remembered. “The picture! Where is it?”

“Relax, it’s down here.” She reached inside the bedside cabinet and handed him Zoe’s last picture – the spiky black figure next to the flowery wallpaper. Thanks to the plastic wallet it had survived the downpour, with only one edge wetted.

“Oh, thank you. Thank you.”

“That important, is it?”

“Very. My daughter drew it, a long time ago.”

“It’s a good likeness,” she joked, as she straightened his sheets.

“Oh, it’s not me,” he said.

“But it says ‘Dad’.”

He shook his head. “No, that’s not what it says. This isn’t a picture of me.”

“Oh,” said the nurse, thinking perhaps that he was a little senile, but wanting to humour him. “Who is it then?”

He stared down at the picture. He had looked it a thousand times but only yesterday had he seen it for what it was. The answer that had been in his possession all along.

“This,” said Decker, “is a picture of the man who killed her.”

It was the final stretch, but this time he was going to walk not crawl, albeit with a heavy limp and a stick. The fracture in his right leg had proved far more serious than that in his left, and the resulting pain and difficulty would be with him for the rest of the life. But otherwise he was okay. In fact, the doctors had been amazed at the speed of his recovery, which was remarkable for a man of his age. But they didn’t know what was driving him on. The same thing that had made him take an agonising crawl through the forest: the thought of this day and what it would bring.

Every minute of the past few months, he had dreamed of this reckoning, but he knew he couldn’t face it until he was strong enough to walk. He was going to face his destiny standing up, not in a motorised wheelchair. It wasn’t just a matter of pride – he was going to need some degree of agility in what lay ahead.

There had been the persistent worry, given his age and condition, that he would suddenly die before this day came. If that had happened, a private detective had been instructed to act on his behalf, and do all he could to bring the killer to justice. But that way Decker wouldn’t see the man pay for what he had done. So, despite his apprehension about what lay ahead in the next hour or two, he also felt a huge sense of relief to be here at all.

It was a curious place for a denouement – this average little street on the outskirts of Sketby. At the end of the 1960s this estate had been the height of modernity, with its rows of neat little brick houses equipped with all mod cons. Laura had wanted to move here, when they had the money, but Decker had always thought it slightly soulless. The years had given it more character but not in a good way. The place was run down: litter lined the gutters, paving stones were cracked, and for every garden that was well kept, there was another overgrown and full of junk. Tracksuit-clad kids hung around on the corner, looking bored and eager for trouble. There was an air of decay about the place that would have filled Decker with despair if he hadn’t been so focused on the job in hand.

He swatted open the gate, hobbled up the path and rang the bell.

The door opened, revealing an old, familiar face, now heavily lined and bloated. Thinning hair had been awkwardly combed over.

“Hello Dave.”

“John?”

“It’s me, alright,” he smiled, shaking his old friend’s hand. “How are you doing?”

“Oh, not too bad, John. Not too bad. What you doing back in Sketby?”

“Just passing though and I thought I’d pop round. Not disturbing you, am I?”

“No, no. Come on in, mate. I’ll make us a cuppa.”

Decker followed him into the living room. It was dull and cosy, lined with silly little ornaments, framed family portraits and police certificates. Dave nodded to the photo on top of the TV.

“You know about Wendy?”

“Yes, Dave, I heard. I’m sorry – she was a lovely woman.”

“Aye, she were. I can’t tell you how much I miss her. Still, my kids do her proud and they look after me. Right, let’s get the kettle on. Make yourself at home.”

Using his stick for support, Decker sat down on the sofa. Dave went into the kitchen and returned shortly with two mugs of tea.

“There you go, mate. Well, this is a surprise! I weren’t expecting this today.”

“No.”

Dave plonked himself down in an armchair. “It’s great to see you again. I know last time we met I said I didn’t want anything more to do with you. But you have to understand what it was like, being in the force. You had to be so careful.”

“Of course. I totally understand, Dave.”

“And I really regret it. I really do. Anyway, how are you doing?”

“Oh, I’m okay. A bit of trouble with the old legs, as you can see. But apart from that I’m alright.”

“Still living down in Bournemouth?”

“No, nearby in the New Forest.”

“Really? Oh it’s nice there isn’t it? Never been there but a friend of mine goes quite regular. Is it just you or did you marry again?”

“No, it’s just me. Well… me and my ghosts.”

“Oh, right,” said Dave, shifting uncomfortably in his chair. “It’s all such a shame. Such a terrible shame That information I gave you was no use, I take it?”

“No, no use at all. But you knew that would be the case, didn’t you?”

Dave frowned. “What do you mean? It was all I could do. I told you it probably wasn’t any of those people.”

Decker took Zoe’s last drawing from his coat pocket and handed it to him.

“Look at that and tell me what you think.”

Dave unfolded it.

“A kid’s drawing?”

“Zoe’s. The last one she did. On that very last day.”

“Oh, right. Sad… so sad… But it doesn’t tell us anything.”

“It tells us everything.”

“How? It’s just a scribbled picture of you.”

“No, it’s not me. All these years I thought it was, but then I realised – it couldn’t be. You see, she used a black crayon, and I never wore black, not then before she disappeared. I only wore those bright, colourful shirts, didn’t I? And she was a smart girl, she wouldn’t have put me in the wrong colour. She got the colour of the wallpaper right, so why would she get that wrong?”

“But it says ‘Dad’.”

“No, it doesn’t. For a start, she never called me Dad, she called me Daddy. And look at that last letter. It’s all lopsided and not joined up. Could be almost anything, couldn’t it? An unfinished ‘o’ or an upturned ‘c’. But a ‘d’? No, more like a ‘v’. D – a – v. Perhaps it’s how she thought you spelled Dave, or perhaps she didn’t get a chance to write the last letter. And the reason she used a black crayon is because it’s a police uniform.”

“What? You’re saying this is a picture of me?”

“Yes, absolutely.”

He shrugged his shoulders. “Well, why shouldn’t she draw a picture of me? She’d met me. She knew I were a policeman.”

“Maybe. But she usually drew what was right in front of her. And she’s drawn a picture of you with that awful 1970s flowery wallpaper behind you. Wallpaper that had only been put up the day before. It’s a picture of you in our house that weekend. She couldn’t have taken a photo and done a better job. You were there, weren’t you?”

“What are you saying, John?” snapped Dave. “What are you trying to insinuate?”

“You always fancied Laura, didn’t you? That first night in the pub, you wanted her, not Wendy.”

“I can’t believe you’re saying this!”

“You went round to the cottage that day, while you were on duty. You tried it on with her and got carried away, didn’t you? Oh, I can see it now, as clear as day. I can imagine exactly what you did!”

Dave brought the panda car to a halt at the rear of the cottage. The spaces at the front were taken by John’s van and Laura’s car, and he didn’t want to park on the road as someone might see, when he was supposed to be on duty. He didn’t fancy another ear-bashing from the inspector.

He looked at himself in the car mirror and did his little male ritual: swept his hair back, checked his teeth and brushed down his uniform. He wondered how Laura would react if he made a move. With horror? With laughter? Or with a gentle disdain that he might slowly mould and pressure into something more willing? It would be fine, he was sure, as long as he played it cool. After all, what woman could resist a man in a uniform?

He got out of the car and knocked on the back door. Laura peered through the kitchen window to see who it was.

“Oh, hello Dave,” she said, unlocking the door. “Sorry, I didn’t hear you drive up – I’ve been listening to the radio.”

“Well, I was just passing, so I thought I’d drop in and see how you all are.”

She was wearing a rather old-fashioned long blue dress, which Dave found rather disappointing as it didn’t show off those lovely legs of hers. But she still looked fantastic. There was something hypnotic about her beauty. You could never quite get her out of your head.

“John’s not here I’m afraid. He’s gone out on his bike again.”

“Oh… right. Aye, I remember him telling me about it now. Sorry, I forgot.”

“That’s alright. Do you fancy coming in for a cup of tea?”

“Oh great, aye, I could murder one,” he said, following her into the kitchen.

“Or you could have something stronger,” she suggested, putting the key back on its little wall hook. “John’s got a couple of beers in the fridge if you want one.”

“No thanks, not while I’m on duty.”

She switched off the radio, cutting off Marc Bolan mid-chorus, and put the kettle on.

“It’s a beautiful day, isn’t it?”

“Gorgeous. I was hoping it might bring a few felons out. You know, drink drivers, speeders. But’s there’s been nothing. It’s been as quiet as the grave.”

“Really? Perhaps everyone’s just enjoying a quiet Sunday at home.”

“Aye, everyone but Dave.”

Laura laughed. “Well, it keeps him happy. I was worried about him for a while, you know. He seemed, well… quiet. Quiet for him, certainly. But since he started going on his bike rides, he’s been fine. Milk, one sugar, isn’t it?”

“That’s right. Well remembered. But it doesn’t seem right, him leaving you on your own all day.”

“It’s not all day, just a few hours. And I’m not on my own, am I? I’ve got Zoe. Hey, do you want some lunch?”

“No thanks, I’ve already eaten. Wendy makes me sandwiches. Mind you, I ate those hours ago, I was so bored.”

“Have some biscuits then.” She handed him a cup of tea with a couple of digestives resting on the saucer.

“Thanks.”

“Come and say hello to Zoe,” said Laura, leading the way into the living room.

Dave stopped dead on seeing the new orange and yellow wallpaper.

“Bloody hell, that’s bright enough, isn’t it? You can tell John lives here – it’s like one of his shirts.”

“Hey, this is the latest fashion, don’t you mind!”

“Sorry, it’s lovely. When did you put all this up?”

“Yesterday. John did it.”

“Oh. Right little man about the house, isn’t he? Hello Zoe.”

The little girl smiled at him and carried on scribbling with her crayons.

“Zoe, take all those toys off the sofa so Dave can sit down,”

“Oh, don’t worry, I can do it” He pushed the pile of dolls and teddies to one side and took a seat.

“I think the weather’s turned,” said Laura, shutting the window against the growing chill and looking at the black clouds forming outside.

“Aye, well, I suppose it was too good to last. That was probably all the summer we’ll have.”

While they chatted about Wendy, the kids and holidays, Dave had half a mind on other things. He was picturing Laura under that dress. The smooth, pale skin. The long shapely legs and pert little breasts. He’d wanted her on first sight, that night back in the Coach and Horses, but John had steamed in just because he’d met her before.

However, that hadn’t stopped Dave’s interest. The more he had known Laura, the more he had become obsessed with her. To the point where he knew he had to have her.

“I like your dress,” he blurted out, ending a lull in the conversation while Laura helped Zoe with her drawing

“Oh, thank you. Yes, I like it too. got it in the New Year sales.”

“It’s too long though – doesn’t show off those lovely legs of yours.”

“Well, yes,” said Laura, embarrassed. “But mini skirts are a bit out of fashion now.”

“Shame.”

“Yes, for you men it is. But given how cold it gets up here in the winter, I’m not going to miss them. Anyway, if you can just excuse me for a minute.”

She headed upstairs, leaving Zoe drawing while Dave sat there ruminating his next move. Ham-fistedly sticking compliments into the conversation would get him nowhere, it was clear. He needed to be more direct. Women liked men to be direct.

He was standing on the landing when Laura came out of the bathroom.

“Oh, Dave! You gave me the fright of my life.”

“You’re so damn beautiful you know.”

“Sorry?”

He reached out and touched her face.

“You, you’re the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.”

She pulled his hand away sharply.

“Dave, don’t be stupid.”

“Come on, you must know how I feel.”

“And what about Wendy?”

“Wendy’s lovely – but she’s not you, is she?”

“No, she’s not. She’s your wife. And I’m your best friend’s wife.”

“Aye, but John’s not here, He’s out on his bike again – or so he says. Maybe he’s got some fancy woman somewhere.”

“John wouldn’t do that.”

“You think so? He’s always had an eye for the ladies. Mind you, if you were mine, I wouldn’t stray.”

He strode forward and pressed her against the wall.

“Come on, let’s have a bit of fun. You deserve it.”

“Dave, let me go. Now.”

“Why? Don’t you want me?”

“No, I don’t.”

“I’m good you know. In the sack.”

“I don’t care if you’re a bloody acrobat – get off me.”

He was inflamed now, beyond all reason. He had to have her.

“Come on, don’t be like that.”

He tried to kiss but she turned her face away and all he managed to plant was pathetic slobbers on her cheek.

“Come on, don’t be like that,” he pleaded, running his hand beneath her skirt.

“Get off me!”

“Why?”

“You disgust me. Get off!”

“Oh, don’t be such a silly bitch.”

He pushed her into the bedroom and on to the bed. Before she could get up again, he was straddling her. She went to scratch his face but he grabbed her wrist firmly.

“If you make it difficult, I’ll hurt you – you understand?”

She said nothing but it was clear she understood. He threw off, his jacket, unbuckled his belt, tugged down his trousers and pants, then roughly removed her underwear.

She turned her head to one side and closed her eyes, only opening them again when he had finished. For him it was embarrassingly brief, but for her it seemed to last a hellish lifetime.

“Christ,” he panted. “Why did you have to be like that? Why couldn’t you have enjoyed it?”

She stared at him hatefully. Suddenly he felt small, weaselly, and that just made him angry.

“You don’t tell anyone, you understand?”

“What? You think you’re going to get away with what you’ve just done?”

“I’m a copper, Laura. No-one will believe you.”

“John will believe me. John always believes me. He won’t let it rest till you’re behind bars.”

“You think?” he said, but he knew she was right. He had gone too far, too soon. She wasn’t the type to just shut up, and John wasn’t the type to give up. Even if he could dodge a prison sentence, it would be the end of his career and his marriage.

Why couldn’t he have waited? Why couldn’t he have stuck to his original plan to win her affections slowly? Because she was too much, that’s why. Too irresistible, the prick-teasing bitch.

And now she was going to be bloody difficult. Why couldn’t she just take it, like that whore he had screwed in the back of his squad car? Just take her punishment and keep her mouth shut.

It left him with no choice. He wasn’t going to have his life ruined.

She had to be silenced.

As the thought dawned on him, it dawned on her too and her expression turned to terror. Before she could scream, he pushed a pillow down hard on her face, then put his other hand around her slender little neck and squeezed tightly. He knew exactly where to apply pressure and make this quick. She thrashed about for a while but then stopped. Her muffled cries became the faintest whimper and then nothing. It was done.

He took the pillow away and for a moment just sat staring at her. Even in death, even with that awful expression on her face, she was still beautiful. He stroked her skin and toyed with her hair, wishing she was still here so he could tell her again how much he wanted her.

“Mummy!” came a cry from downstairs.

He closed his eyes and put his head in hands, realising what he was going to have to do. That lovely little girl.

Taking a deep breath, he put his jacket back on and walked to the top of the stairs. Zoe was standing there at the bottom, peering up at him with a worried frown, sensing that something was wrong.

She couldn’t live as she would tell everyone that he had been here. It was as simple as that. He just had to look at it as one of those things that had to be done. Like when his Dad had taken him into the backyard as a boy and shown him how to kill the chickens by suddenly snapping their necks. At first it had made him cry, but he had soon learned how to do it himself, without flinching. You just had to know how to put all your emotions and sentiments to one side. It was an attitude that served him well in his job, when he saw people smashed up by car accidents, with bits of them lying all over the road. If he didn’t know how to suppress his feelings, he would probably go crazy.

“Where’s mummy?” asked Zoe.

“In a better place,” said Dave, heading down the stairs. “I’ll take you there.”

He picked her up, put a huge hand over her face and quickly choked her out of existence.

After it was done, he just stood there for a minute, holding Zoe, now as limp as one of her dolls. It was strange. In a matter of minutes his life had been transformed. He had done things from which there were no turning back. Acts that could never be undone, never forgotten.

There was no time for contemplation – John might be back at any moment. Quickly, he carried Zoe out the back and stuck her in the boot of his panda car, pushing her right into the corner to leave room for Laura. His prints would be all over both bodies, so he needed to dump them where they wouldn’t be found for a long time.

He hurried upstairs, picked Laura off the bed and hauled her out on to the landing. As he shifted her weight slightly, to get a better grip, her foot knocked the vase off the bookcase, smashing it to pieces.

“Shit,” he said, before realising it didn’t matter.

He carried her downstairs, squashed her into the boot and then slammed the hatch shut. All he had to do now was make sure there were no signs of his presence left in the house. There was the cup and a saucer he had used, which he quickly rinsed and put back in the cupboard, but apart from that there was nothing. His prints would be here of course but that could be easily explained as he was a regular visitor.

Satisfied, he turned to leave, but then an idea struck him. If he left via the back door, he would have to leave it unlocked, or locked from the outside with the key not in its usual place. It would immediately put all the attention on the rear of the house, where he had parked.

Why not put the focus on the front of the house instead? If he locked the back door, put the key back on the hook, and then left the front door open, it would change the appearance of things a good deal. After all, a stranger would call at the front door, not the back one.

Pleased with his little plan, he speedily carried it out and drove off. He was relieved to see the road and the surrounding moorland were utterly deserted. No-one would know that he had ever been there.

Now it was just a question of where to dump the bodies. He considered several places before deciding on a remote and well-hidden spot he knew on the other side of the moor. He was more than half way there when a message came over the radio to tell him that a bunch of kids had been reported starting a fire somewhere near Hallerby Point. With no choice but to attend, he turned the car around.

He found them soon enough. Their fire was a measly little thing that he put out with a few stamps of his boot. He gave them a lecture about the dangers of starting blazes on the moor and confiscated a packet of cigarettes from one of them, before sending them away. As they cycled off, they probably called him all kinds of things, but they would still have learned their lesson.

As he got back in the car, he realised that while delivering the lecture he had completely forgotten that the bodies of a woman and a child were in the boot. His self-detachment was absolute. Not only could he say one thing while doing another, but he could completely separate the two sides of himself. But why not? That was the way of the world, after all. Priests and politicians preached family values while sleeping around, or espoused equality while wallowing in their own wealth. They were no different to him. Everyone had to present a certain face to the world, while still fulfilling their own desires. That was human nature.

He drove on, to a narrow, half-forgotten lane in a particularly bleak and scraggy part of the moor. He paused for a moment to steel himself before opening the boot. The bodies lay curled around each other, in morbid tessellation, their skin already turning purple and blue. He lifted Laura out and carried her fifty yards to a small dell almost completely surrounded by bramble bushes. He knew the spot as some stolen farm machinery had once been dumped there. It seemed perfect.

But as he went to toss the body in, he had second thoughts. If that machinery had been found there, then so might the bodies, perhaps before they had a chance to decompose. Maybe this wasn’t such a good spot after all.

But where else?

A solution struck him. There was a place where they would never be found. However, he couldn’t leave them there just yet – for now they would just have to stay here, nestled behind the bushes rather than slung to the bottom. He carefully positioned Laura and then went back to get Zoe. Moving her was far easier though he was careful not to get a glimpse of her face as he did it.

By the time he had finished, it was the end of his shift. As he was on again early tomorrow, he drove back to his house rather than the police station. Wendy was there to greet him as usual with a cup of tea and a stream of gossip. Sarah and Kevin ran excitedly round him for a minute before going back into the garden to play.

“How’s your day been?” asked Wendy as he sat down in his favourite armchair.

“Uneventful,” he said. “One speeding motorcyclist and a gang of kids starting a fire on the moor.” He was sure that his manner gave nothing away. Perhaps he might seem a little quiet, a little morose, but he was often like that after coming off shift.

But then, as he watched his children gambolling and laughing in the garden, a sudden panic overcame him. He could lose all this. He could lose his beautiful wife, his kids and his nice new home on the estate. He could lose his career, his freedom, his reputation. All it would take is one little clue and it would be the end of him. His talent for detachment would be no defence then.

What if he had left some kind of evidence at the cottage? What if they looked at the tyre marks at the rear? He couldn’t explain those as he usually used his own car when he visited. What if there were marks from his police boots? And what about his fingerprints? Yes, he could explain those being in the living room, but what about all over the bed sheets?

He felt his nerves tighten and he almost jumped out of his chair when the phone rang. Wendy went out in the hall to answer it.

“Oh hello, John. How you doing?”

John. That was inevitable, he knew. At some point he was always going to have to speak to his friend. At some point he would have to look him in the eye and offer all the sympathy in the world. That would be the ultimate test.

Wendy shouted to him and he went to the phone.

“Hello mate. What’s up?”

“It’s Laura and Zoe – they’re not here. I came back from my bike ride and they’re just gone.”

“Oh… Well, they’ve probably just popped out.”

“But she didn’t lock the front door. She always locks the front door. And there’s a vase broken upstairs – like something’s happened here. Can you come round? I’m sure there’s something wrong.”

A huge sense of relief immediately washed over him. If he went back to the cottage it would explain everything. The tyre marks, the police boots, his fingerprints on the sheets. It was the perfect answer.

“Aye, okay. I’ll be round in twenty minutes.”

Dave drove straight there and parked the panda in exactly the same place as last time.

“Hiya mate” he said, striding into kitchen. He looked his friend confidently in the face, knowing it was something he had to do immediately or never again. “They still not turned up?”

“No. They’ve been gone at least two hours now. They can’t be out on the moor in this weather.”

“They’ve probably just wandered too far and got a bit lost. They’ll be back soon.”

“But why didn’t she lock the front door? And why’s that vase broken? She wouldn’t just have left it in pieces on the floor.”

“Let’s have a look.”

Decker took him upstairs and showed him the smashed china. Dave knelt down and inspected the pieces, knowing they were the result of nothing more than a random swing of a foot.

“Zoe probably knocked it off and didn’t tell Laura. You know what kids are like. Is there any sign of anyone else being here? Or is anything missing?”

“No, but there’s the bed.”

“The bed?”

Decker showed him.

“She always makes the beds first thing – so why are these blankets all ruffled?”

“It was probably just Zoe again, messing about.”

“Dave, something’s wrong here – I know. Can’t you sense it? Surely as a copper you realise that there’s something weird about all this? Not just the bed, or the vase, or the door, but the whole thing. It’s not right.”

“Perhaps,” said Dave, pulling back the sheets. For a moment he just stared at the bed, remembering what had happened there and that final sickening expression on Laura’ face. The way her tongue had hung pathetically out.

He shook the thought away. All that mattered now was that there was a good explanation for his prints being all over the sheets. He would probably get an ear-bashing for handling everything at a crime scene, but he could live with that.

“It’s probably nothing, but I’ve got the panda with me, so I’ll radio through to the station and ask if they’ve heard anything untoward.”

He headed downstairs with Decker tailing anxiously after him.

“I’ll get them to contact the hospital too. And if nothing comes of that, we’ll put out a missing persons alert. Can you remember what they were wearing?”

“Laura had a blue dress on. Well, it’s blue and white – this kind of floral pattern. Looks a bit 1950s.”

“Hold on, let me write this down.” He took out his police notepad and searched through his pockets for his pen. It wasn’t there. It had been there earlier when he took the motorcyclist’s details but he hadn’t used it since as he hadn’t bothered taking the names of those young fire-starters.

Where the hell was it? Had he dropped it here? Would they find it somewhere here, maybe by the bed, with his prints all over it? How would he explain that?

“Here, use this,” said Decker, handing him the felt tip lying by the phone.

“Ta,” said Dave, not showing any signs of his panic. “Right, blue and white floral dress, looks a bit 1950s. And what about Zoe?”

“Oh, God, what were she wearing? I can’t remember.”

“You can. Think.”

“I am thinking,” snapped Decker. “Oh yeah, I remember, it were this blue thing – not like Laura’s, a much darker blue – with straps at the top. I don’t know what you call it. A kind of dungaree thing. And she had a red top underneath. It’s hard to describe.”

“That’ll do, don’t worry.” He went to the kitchen, his mind racing over possible ways to get rid of his friend so he could look for his pen.

“Hey, I’ve just had an idea. There’s that copse isn’t there? A few hundred yards to the back of the house. Do they ever go there?”

“I don’t think so. I took Zoe there once but I don’t know that Laura has.”

“It might be worth a look though – they could be sheltering from the rain there.”

“Aye. You’re right. It’s a possibility. I’ll go and have a look.”

Decker hurried across the moor without even bothering to put on a coat. Dave went out the back to his panda car but he didn’t radio through yet. As soon as he was sure Decker was far enough away, he returned to the house and ran up to the bedroom. He looked under the sheets but he couldn’t see the pen there. Frantic, he began searching everywhere – under the bed, behind the bedside cabinet, in every corner.

“Shit, where are you?”

Finally, he found it, nestled right by the chest of drawers where it was hardly noticeable. He guessed the bloody thing had rolled there when he had thrown off his jacket.

Relieved, he went back downstairs and contacted the station from his car. He gave out Laura’s and Zoe’s details, with all due care and professionalism, as if he didn’t know their bodies were stuck behind some bramble bushes a few miles away.

Then he went back into the house and calmly waited for Decker to return.

“Well?” said Decker, as he hurried sopping wet into the hall.

“I’ve given the details to the station and they’re making a few calls. You know, hospitals and the like. But there’s been no reports of anything involving a woman and a little girl.”

“Right…” said Decker, instantly deflated.

“No news is good news perhaps.”

“Perhaps.”

Decker trudged upstairs, back to the bedroom, while Dave remained in the hall. He felt genuinely sorry for John, but what could he do? He had wanted Laura and she had been stupid enough to resist, sealing her fate and Zoe’s too. Perhaps he should have been more subtle and slower in his approach, but was easy to think with hindsight. There was no use looking back in regret at what had happened. It was done, and that was that.

Poor John. No doubt the police would make his old friend a suspect, as they normally did when someone’s wife went missing. But it was unlikely they would ever be able to find enough evidence to charge him, or anyone else for that matter. It would be just be another unsolved mystery – one of many in this world.

One thing was certain – the finger would never point at him, Dave Carter, the respected local bobby. He would efficiently dispose of the bodies and then it would all be over. He would carry on as he had always done: the good family man, bringing law and order to the community. Every now and then he might indulge his little peccadilloes, but he wouldn’t target any friend’s wives again. It would just be young slags, willing to do anything to avoid arrest.

No-one would ever know. He was safe, and always would be. Obviously, as the years went by, he would sometimes think about today. But he would just push the thoughts to the back of his mind, and continue as normal.

As if it was someone else who had done it, and not him at all.

Dave jumped out of the armchair.

“How dare you accuse me of doing something so vile! I were a policeman, not a criminal! Get out! Get out of my house now!”

“Okay.”

With the aid of his stick, Decker pushed himself off the sofa. But then, just while he was looking his frailest, he moved swiftly. He pulled the electric stun device from his pocket and zapped Dave on the arm. The man fell like a dead tree, smashing into the coffee table on the way down. By the time he recovered the feeling in his limbs, his hands were cuffed together and his legs were bound. And there was a long blade hovering an inch from his neck.

“An 18th century malacca swordstick,” explained Decker. “Maybe it’s illegal, I don’t know. The stun device definitely is, but it’s amazing what you can get on the internet.”

“John, you can’t do this – it’s insane.”

“Insane? Killing a defenceless woman and child is insane.”

“I didn’t kill them! Why would I?”

“Like I said, to shut them up. And because underneath that law-abiding exterior, there’s something rotten in you, isn’t there? Something vile. I wonder – was Laura the only one? Were there others? Women molested in the squad car or back allies? Did you threaten to nick them if they didn’t screw you?”

“No, I’ve never done anything like that,” he sobbed, his fat face staring up at Decker. “I didn’t do anything to Laura and Zoe, honestly.”

“You were my friend, my best friend. You were my best man! I’d have trusted you with my life. Yet you killed my wife and daughter, and then came around later the same day, offering to help. Then you gave me the names of a bunch of dangerous freaks, knowing full well not one of them had done it.”

“No, it’s not true. Believe me, John. I were only ever trying to help.”

Decker jabbed the tip of the sword against the flabby flesh of Dave’s neck. The temptation was enormous. Just one thrust and the man who had ruined his life would be gone. He could watch the bastard bleed to death in front of him.

“You know, I’ve fantasised so many times about running you through with this. Snuffing you out of existence.”

“Please,” begged Dave. “Please, don’t kill me.”

Decker glared at the pathetic creature in front of him. A simple push of his arm – that was all it would take. An eye for an eye, natural justice. For a moment he wavered, immune to the man’s sobs but wrestling with his own conscience.

Eventually he withdrew the sword a couple of inches.

“No. You made me so many things I didn’t want to be. You made me bitter, alone, distant. But you’re not going to make me a killer. But don’t think I’m being merciful. It’ll be a far worse punishment for you to rot in jail for the rest of your miserable life. It won’t be easy for an elderly former copper, will it?”

“But I didn’t do it, John. You’ve no proper proof – just a kid’s drawing. You think that’s going to stand up in court? It won’t, believe me. So just let me go, please.”

“True,” admitted Decker. “I don’t really have the evidence. Enough for me, but not for the criminal justice system.”

He stepped back and slid the sword back into the stick. Dave managed to push himself into a seated position.

“Tell me, Dave. What rank did you make?”

“Inspector,” he said, puzzled.

“Inspector! They make good money, don’t they?”

“Not bad.”

“You could have bought a really nice house with that kind of money. But yet you stayed here, on this rundown estate – why’s that?”

“It was home. We didn’t want to move.”

“No, Wendy would have wanted a better house, a bigger house. But you wouldn’t go, would you? You insisted on staying here, because you knew there was a secret you couldn’t leave for someone else to possibly find.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Did Wendy ever suspect, do you think? Did she go to her grave thinking there was something altogether wrong about you?”

“Wendy loved me.”

“Perhaps. But did she know that there was a woman and child buried under the garden shed?”

“What?”

“They’ve got to be there, haven’t they? You built it just after it all happened. You proudly showed me that shed, knowing full well my wife and daughter were buried under it.”

“No, no,” spluttered Dave. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Well, let’s find out if I’m being ridiculous. You can stay here, bound and gagged – and stunned again if necessary. And I’ll go down and empty the shed. Then I’ll pull up the floorboards and start digging. I’m quite frail now, but believe me, I crawled through shit with two broken legs to get here, so a bit of digging isn’t beyond me. How deep will I have to go? Not that far, I imagine.”

Dave started to cry.

“John, please… don’t. Don’t dig them up. I can’t go to prison. My family, my kids… they look up to me. They respect me.”

Decker stared at him with utter contempt.

“Really? It must be nice to have a family like that. To have years of cherished memories. To have them phone up and ask how you are. To watch them blossom.”

“I’m sorry… I’m so sorry. I couldn’t help it – she was so beautiful. I just lost control...”

“Will you confess?”

Dave nodded pathetically, snot mingling with his tears. Decker closed his eyes and gave a deep sigh, all his bravado vanishing in an instant. It was over. After so much hell, it was finally over.

He took out his phone and called the police.

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The sentencing was a brief affair and would have been even briefer without all the legal rigmarole. The facts were regurgitated in all their depressing forensic detail, but as Dave had pleaded guilty there was nothing to be challenged and nothing that could be seriously offered in the way of mitigation. Decker’s Victim Impact Statement was read out, but as heartfelt as it was, he couldn’t help feel that it was statement of the bleeding obvious. How else could he feel about the murder of his wife and child? The proceedings felt like a rite, a ceremony, rather than justice. He had seen to the justice himself, that day in Sketby. The court case was just the official seal of approval.

Decker looked hard at the defendant throughout but Dave’s eyes never met his, or indeed anyone’s. The man just stared into space, his face like a death mask. For him too, this was clearly just a ritual. He had already surrendered to his fate. Even when he stood to be sentenced, he gave nothing away, though as he was led away, there was a glance to his sobbing children, as if to say sorry for what he had done to them.

Despite the inevitability of it all, Decker felt a huge sense of relief. It was done with, at last. He put his head in hands and wept.

Disliking public displays of emotion, he soon regained his composure and shook hands with his solicitor and the investigating officers. Whatever his troubles with the police in the past, they had been brilliant, even to the point of overlooking his use of the stun device and swordstick. Perhaps they were embarrassed about one of their own being the killer, though Decker saw no need for them to feel that way. Dave represented nothing but his own rotten self.

Outside the court, Decker was met by a waiting press pack. Cameras flashed and questions rained down, all of which basically boiled down to “how do you feel?”, inviting further statements of the bleeding obvious. He gave them what they wanted, as eloquently as he could manage, and for a hectic moment it seemed as if no-one was interested in anything but him.

Then one by one they all departed, back to their newsrooms, chambers or police stations, to write what had to be written and file it all away. Decker knew that to them it was just another case. It was their job, not their life, their obsession, the culmination of decades of hurt.

If this was a film, this would be when he walked (or limped) into the sunset and the music soared up to a final rousing fanfare. The credits would say ‘The End’ and there would be nothing more to worry about. But this was reality: an overcast day in a Leeds street, with the noise of traffic and a rush of people passing him by, without any concern for what he had been through. To them he was nothing more than an obstacle, a human bollard. He wanted to stop them and tell them everything: all about his years of detective work, and that awful crawl though the rain. But he couldn’t; they would think him insane. They might read a report in the newspapers or see a brief clip on the TV, but they would never really know what had happened to him. He needed someone to listen, and to understand. And more than anything, to tell him what to do, because right now, he had no idea. Celebrate? Something so terrible could never be celebrated. But he felt the need to mark the occasion in some way.

In the absence of any better ideas, he wandered aimlessly around the city centre streets for a while, mingling with the office workers and shoppers. All living wonderfully oblivious lives, thought Decker. Tragedy would touch them, as it touches everyone, but most of them would never know anything like this. Even if he could talk to them, they wouldn’t be able to help him. As always, he was alone with his problems.

His legs began to ache after a while – he couldn’t walk for too long anymore. He should eat something too, he realised, so he headed into the nearest pub and bought a pie and a pint.

It was a pleasant, dull, half-empty place. He sat in the corner and tore nervously at the beer mats until his food came. The test match was showing on the big screen but he ignored it. All he saw was the morning’s events, played out again and again in his head. That dead face in the dock. The grim details about the remains underneath the shed. The judge’s denunciation of Dave before the wretch was led away.

“Was everything okay?”

“Sorry?”

“The food?”

“Oh… yes. Thanks”. He was so distracted that he had eaten the meal without even registering the taste. The barmaid cast him a curious glance and took away his empty plate.

He tried to focus his thoughts. What was it that Inspector Rodgers had said? “I hope this is some kind of closure for you.”

Closure? No, the horror of what had happened could never be undone. Maybe it would be even worse, now that there was no mystery to be solved, no justice to be pursued. His hunt for the truth had been the one thing that had kept him going. Now it was finished, what was there but painful memories? Was there even any point to it all now? It all seemed hopeless. Unless he could build something new, make a different life for himself. But at his age, how the hell could he do that?

“Same again?” said the barmaid, as she collected his empty glass.

He looked up and took notice of her this time. She was small and pretty, with black bobbed hair. She reminded him of someone he used to know. For once it seemed fate was being kind to him.

“No, it can’t be the same again, can it?” he said with a smile. “Let’s have something to savour.”

“Like what?”

“A fine wine, I think. Of an excellent vintage.”

“I’m not sure we’ve got anything like that. We’ve got an okay Merlot.”

“Don’t worry,” said Decker, grabbing his stick and getting up. “I know where to find it.”

He departed, leaving the puzzled girl with a more than generous tip.

“Hello Penny.”

She turned around from her weeding and saw him standing on the other side of the hedge. At first, she didn’t recognise him, not due to the ravages of time but because he was wearing a bright yellow shirt instead of his usual black.

“John!” Her face lit up when she realised who it was.

He came into the garden and she hurried over to meet him, placing a gloved hand to the side of his face.

“Oh, I read in the papers about it all. I’m so glad you got the answers you sought. But it must have been so traumatic.”

“Yes,” said Decker. “It was. But it’s over now, thankfully.”

He took a good look at her. Her hair was grey now, and she wore glasses, but she still seemed spritely. She had a beauty and vivacity that would never fade.

“Oh, excuse the gloves,” she said. “Weeding, weeding – I always seem to be weeding.”

“The garden’s looking good,” he said. “And so are you.”

“Oh, I’m a mess. Come on round the back, we’ll have a cup of tea and a chat.”

She led him round the side of the house to the back garden. He took a seat by the patio table while she disappeared into the house, emerging a few minutes later with a heavily loaded tray.

“I’ve got some carrot cake. I can’t remember if you like carrot cake.”

“I love it,” he said.

She poured him tea from the pot and he helped himself to milk.

“Well, this is a surprise,” she said. “When I read in the papers about it all, I did think about contacting you. But I wasn’t sure that you would want to hear from me. And I didn’t want to intrude.”

“You could never intrude.”

“Really? Well, I’m glad you’ve called. It’s so good to see you again, after all these years.”

“It’s great to see you too.”

For a while they made small talk but inevitably the conversation moved to the court case and all that had preceded it.

“I can’t believe you crawled all that way with two broken legs.”

“I had to. I had no choice.”

“Well, you always were a persistent bugger. It did you right in the end.”

“I suppose it did.”

“Are you content now, though? I know nothing can take away your loss and the awfulness of what happened, but are you at peace?”

“Well... I’m getting there.”

She clutched his hand supportively.

“I’m so glad for you, John. I really am.”

A tear rolled down her cheek and she brushed it away with a paper napkin.

“You never married then?” he asked, already knowing the answer as he had made efforts to find out. His last bit of detective work.

“No. There was someone for a while, but I never found my Mr Right.”

“Just Mr Wrong. Sorry.”

“You couldn’t help being wrong, John, after what happened to you. It’s enough to harm anyone. I don’t blame you for anything, but I couldn’t stay with you. I didn’t want to get to damaged too.”

“I know. I understand.”

“Do you?”

“Yes. I know I wasn’t an easy person. Life wronged me, but the truth is that I wronged it too. It offered me happiness and I pushed it away. I see that now.”

“Maybe that’s just the way it had to be.”

“Maybe.”

She smiled, awkwardly. Embarrassed, he turned to look at the garden, with its lush lawn and beds of wildflowers, their colours vivid in the May sunlight.

“They say it’s going to be a good summer.”

“I know,” she said. “Let’s hope they’re right.”

“There’s so much I want to do now. I want to sit on beaches, eat at good restaurants, have picnics out in the forest. And I want to go abroad too – I was thinking maybe Venice.”

“Sounds wonderful.”

Time to ask her, he decided. No point beating about the bush, not at their age.

“Would you do it all with me?”

She looked down into the dregs of her tea.

“I don’t know, John. I don’t know. I can’t say ‘yes’, just like that. It’s too soon to say.”

“I’m sorry.” He knew it was audacious, arrogant even, to just turn up here and expect to just pick up where they had left off, as if the hurt had never happened. But what else he could do? He felt the clock was against him, and perhaps against her too. Death or dementia could be just around the corner. They might not have that many summers left.

“Don’t be sorry,” she said. “I’m grateful for the offer – honestly. You know I care for you, and I’m glad you’ve finally found your answers. But I don’t know how much you’ve changed.”

“What can I say? I’m damaged goods, and I know to some extent I always will be. But I can be a better person, I’m sure of that. It’s just… well, everything I achieved I’ve done largely on my own. Built a business, caught a killer. I made my own way out of my house with two broken bloody legs. But this is the one thing I can’t do on my own. I need help, Penny. Your help.”

“I’ll help, don’t worry about that. But let’s take things one step at a time, shall we?”

“Of course.”

“Shall we start with another cup of tea?”

“That would be lovely, thanks.”

She picked up the teapot and went back into the house. Decker watched her as she went, observing how well she had kept her shape. He leaned back in his chair and smiled appreciatively.

He could be patient. He could wait.

Whatever time he had left, he would spend it making her happy.